Letter from the Chair
Robert Pasnau

So far as I know, this is the first time our Department has produced a newsletter. Why start now? Because now, as never before, those of us working to make this University a great one need to speak out about the great things that are going on here in Boulder. In the Philosophy Department, these are indeed very good times. We currently have a record number of majors, well over 300, which is far more than the number at comparable schools. Our recent PhDs have had a great deal of success obtaining tenure-track jobs. And although we have had a number of departures among the faculty, we were able this past year to hire five new tenure-track faculty members, with several further hires scheduled for the coming year.

At the same time, as you doubtless will have heard, this has not been the best of times for the University at large. First and most seriously, at least in the long run, the University’s financial situation is precarious in the extreme. While our in-state tuition rate is one of the lowest in the country (around $4400/yr), the state of Colorado’s financial support for the University is comparably low – now less than 10% of our operating budget. There is simply no hope for the University’s carrying on as a first-rate research university if this pattern continues. That we have carried on as well as we have is due almost entirely to our ability to attract a large number of students willing to pay a hefty out-of-state tuition (around $22,000/yr). But it is fairly clear that this figure is as high as the market will bear. And though the University has its advocates within the state government, the current state tax system ensures that state funding will continue to decline. Unless Referendum C passes this fall (temporarily overriding aspects of the TABOR Amendment), we will find ourselves in the absurd and untenable position of being a state university without state funding.

Other recent events need less comment from me. The recent disclosures about the football program have been appalling and distressing. It is no consolation to know that rape, prostitutes, and drugs are endemic to big-time college sports, but it is at least some consolation to see that, if the University has not quite acknowledged the seriousness of its problem, at least most of the responsible individuals have lost their jobs. The controversy over Ward Churchill, professor of ethnic studies, has perhaps been even more harmful to the University’s reputation. Although many of us on the faculty are sympathetic with some elements of Churchill’s politics, his work suggests over and over a sympathy for violence that almost everyone here finds appalling. Yet even at Churchill’s most extreme, his words and his job are protected by the First Amendment. The Supreme Court has ruled that even speech advocating violent overthrow of the United States is constitutionally protected, so long as it does not advocate action at a specific time and place. But this means that, as a state institution, CU cannot fire Churchill, or even sanction him for his remarks – not because he has tenure, but because of the First Amendment. So although Churchill is an embarrassment to many of us on the faculty, and although he is still under investigation in connection with a long list of plagiarism charges, it looks as if we will have to live with his continued presence on campus.

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Faculty Notes

David Barnett, who joins the faculty this fall, has written a paper on counterfactuals, on the word ‘if.’ (“How much more exciting does it get?” he asks.) He reports that he has moved to Boulder, visited Costa Rica, and inherited Luc Boven’s office and Chris Shields’ mountain house.

David Boonin has been developing two articles, one on famine relief and the other on Parfit’s non-identity problem. He also continues to research his book on punishment.
Carol Cleland presented a session, “Why it is a mistake to try to define ‘life,’” to the Dihner Institute’s Annual Seminar in the History and Philosophy of Biology in May. She also gave a talk, “Answering the question ‘what is life?’” at Harvard University and to a meeting of the International Society for the History and Philosophy of Biology, in Guelph, Canada, on July 16.

John Fisher - Other than trying to recover from sinus surgery, I have been conducting a research project on theories of aesthetic value with our graduate student, Matt Seacord. I’ve also started to explore collaborating on a textbook, which I outlined three years ago, on environmental aesthetics with one of our PhDs from the past, Ned Hettinger, who is a professor of philosophy at the College of Charleston.


Interview with John Fisher

Over the summer, Bob Pasnau interviewed John Fisher - the longest-serving member of the faculty - about his academic history and current interests.

Bob: You came to this Department in the late 60s. Have you noticed the students changing much since then?

John: They keep changing. I think students were less professionally oriented in the 70s. I remember when students tried to close down the campus. I remember when I first started here, the SDS was active. They were led by Philosophy graduate students, by the way.

Bob: You mean Students for a Democratic Society?

John: Yes, the same things that happened at UC-Berkeley happened here. There was a riot on the Hill and they took over 28th Street, shutting down the freeway.

Bob: And this was during the Vietnam War?

John: Yes. They tried to have a strike against it, to close everything down in protest of the Vietnam War. That’s when it started, that kind of activism where students were taking over buildings. I think that that generation of students was really very curious and not professionally orientated at all.

Bob: And it was graduate students in Philosophy who were leading the way?

John: Some of the leaders, yes. And I think that over the years attitudes have continually changed. Especially over maybe the last ten or fifteen years, students have come to view a college education as more of an entree into working in business, you know a career of some sort or other, which isn’t necessarily a bad thing. I was raised at a time when over buildings. I think that that generation of students was really very curious and not professionally orientated at all.

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many others felt that way too. There was a group of them that really had a great respect for the great thinkers. A lot of the tenured faculty when I arrived had taken their degrees at Columbia and Northwestern, and for them it was Kant and Aristotle and Plato, and John Dewey was important to Gary Stahl and Beryl Lang.

Bob: And then you were hired to fit into one of these three groups?

John: I suppose, sort of analytic. I did philosophy of language then. I wrote my dissertation on Chomsky and Wittgenstein and on rules of language. When I started writing I thought that I was going to give a Wittgensteinian refutation of Chomsky. But, along the way I became fascinated with Chomsky’s transformational grammar and on the other hand, I found ways of interpreting Chomsky’s claims about our having internalized the rules of language, having an innate grammar of language and knowing the rules of language, that were favorable to it—essentially by taking the relevant knowledge not as Cartesian (propositional) knowledge but as some other sort of practical knowledge of rules. Instead of giving a refutation I ended up giving a Wittgensteinian defense of Chomsky! But then I drifted away from the philosophy of language. For a while in the 70s I tried to keep up with Quine and some of the reference theory literature. But then interest in Kripke took over the field and I wasn’t that interested in reference theory. I was more interested in other aspects of language: rules of language and meaning more generally construed.

Bob: So you weren’t a philosophy major?

John: No. I have a Bachelor of Physics degree, but in getting that I made a mistake. I didn’t realize when I was signing up to be a physics major at the University of Minnesota that I was actually signing up for the tougher Institute of Technology, which is their Engineering school. I should really have been in the Humanities somehow or other. The courses that I liked the most were the few English and Humanities classes that I was allowed to take, Camus and that sort of thing, some poetry courses. I was really good at that, at interpreting poems, and I enjoyed it much more. Eventually I converted my mistake. The Institute of Technology is a five-year program and so in the fifth year, having met all of my requirements somehow, I took nothing but philosophy courses. The first course I took was Introduction to philosophy with Gareth Matthews, which gave me my idea about philosophy as based on philosophical problems, their motivation, and different ways of solving them. And I read some J.L. Austin. Almost the first things I read were Austin and Descartes, and so for a long time I felt that there were all these mistakes in Descartes of a linguistic sort.

Bob: Which I suppose was quite the up-to-date thing to do

John: Yeah it was, and you know I might still think that it’s the right thing to do. I remember having to drop out of a graduate course on Plato from Ernan McMullin, who was visiting from Notre Dame, because of my orientation. I was supposed to write a paper on The Apology and I couldn’t see anything of philosophical interest in it! I wouldn’t now feel that way, but at the time I just didn’t see how you could write a proper philosophy paper on it, so I dropped the course. I was an analytic philosopher of the Wittgensteinian sort and so as philosophy of language became more technical and almost totally obsessed with reference, I lost interest in it. I kept up an interest in philosophy of mind and epistemology.

Bob: So what happened to Boulder is that the continental group has shrunk to ...

John: To nothing

Bob: Do you think that’s unfortunate?

John: I don’t know. I think that the Department is now so much more cohesive on the graduate level than it was. I think that most important departments, maybe even the top 40 or 50, for better or for worse, are more directed or controlled by the graduate program than the undergraduate program. Faculty are hired in order to fit into a picture or theme of graduate study. And I think here in the 70s and early 80s there were all these ongoing conflicts involving historians of a different stripe than the ones we currently have.
you might say anti-analytic philosophy historians. And the people sympathetic to or actually practicing continental philosophy here are on one side and analytic philosophers were on the other, and that tended to divide the graduate students. Although we had some great undergraduate classes and great graduate classes here, I do think there wasn’t the kind of cohesion in the graduate program that has been achieved over the last ten years. On the other hand I have to say that it does scare me a little bit how potentially narrow the interests of the graduate students have become.

Bob: Do you think that this reflects philosophy as a whole and the interests of philosophy as a whole becoming narrower?

John: Yes, it’s becoming more specialized. I mean philosophy is just huge now. There are so many different parts of philosophy, fields and problems now, but I do think that maybe people become isolated from each other in doing these different things. To me it’s become more like science. You have these working groups and specific problems where people get together and they make great progress in some direction, but it becomes almost impossible to synthesize all this and maybe come to some more important conclusions.

Bob: Do you think philosophy ought to be more humanistic?


John: Concerned with the big questions? Bob: To say it’s becoming more scientific suggests to me that it’s losing a focus on the big questions; it’s focused on little problems that can be solved without any regard for the big picture.

John: The thing about these little problems is that they aren’t necessarily solved; they are just amplified. It just seems to create more work and more publications and more conferences for metaphysicians to go to and disagree with each other. I think that they are making progress, but are they losing sight of the big picture? I struggle, myself, with the idea about how to bring in some of these big questions even into my Intro to Philosophy.

Bob: At what point did you become interested in aesthetics?

John: I think it started when I got a phonograph in the 1960’s. I started to collect records and got rapidly interested in classical music. I missed the whole era that I grew up in, the rock ‘n roll era. I missed the whole thing until at least the mid-sixties, but music was always central to my interests.

Bob: So you were interested in classical music before rock?

John: Yeah, I had to be taught by my friends about the preceding stuff. I mean by the time of Dylan and Beatles and so on I was totally on board, in the psychedelic era.

Bob: What about the prior generation, Elvis and the pre-Beatles stuff?

John: Yeah, I missed that. In Minnesota, I don’t know what we listened to, polkas I guess, Country and Western. I liked music and I played the oboe for six years, or more, but it was band arrangements of Dvorak, that sort of thing. I never had serious musical training. I grew up in a neighborhood in Minneapolis where nobody had an instrument, much less a piano, much less piano lessons. Just a working class neighborhood where music wasn’t important. Also, I grew up next to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and I used to play in the park around it. I always liked to go in and look at the artworks, even when I was young. Then I met my wife, Virginia Maitland, in 1970. Since she is a painter I have spent more than 30 years in the art world with artist friends probably more than philosophy friends.

Bob: Let me ask you some more about music. What sorts of music are you listening to these days?

John: Jazz and classical. I find myself not very interested in popular music: rock and rap.

Bob: What is it about new rock music that you don’t like?

John: Well I haven’t heard enough to really say. I don’t like the singing very much. And I don’t find that it’s musically very interesting although it’s more interesting than rap which I find completely uninteresting. It’s all so commercial.
A New Undergraduate Journal

Forms is an undergraduate philosophy journal that aims to foment an intellectual community among undergraduates by creating a conduit for philosophical expression that can provoke thought and inspire dialogue. Its first issue, comprised of five papers, was released this past spring. The founders of the journal, who are all philosophy majors, hope to expand the boundaries of philosophy by encouraging multidisciplinary contributions in diverse modes of expression and on all levels of participation.

Two of the papers from the first issue concern George Berkeley. The first, “Esse est Periphrasis,” is a dialogue between one of Berkeley's interlocutors initially uncover a devastating contradiction within Berkeley's argument concerning the nature of and the relationship between ideas, minds and God which is later resolved, integrating all three. A second paper, “The First Dialog Between Hylas and Philo- nous; Revised,” accuses Berkeley of building a straw man in place of his opponent, here considered to be Locke, and moves to counteract this offense by revising parts of Berkeley's first dialogue in order to give the anti-ideal-  

existence, however, including these books: Existential Psychoanalysis, An Existentialist Ethics, Humanistic Existentialism and The Story I Tell Myself: A Venture in Existentialist Autobiography.

The ceremony this spring brought current and retired faculty together with graduate students to honor Professor Barnes's career, and celebrate the naming of the Seminar Room in her honor.

Hazel Barnes Seminar Room

In a ceremony last spring, Hellem's 196 was officially dedicated as the Hazel Barnes Seminar Room. Professor Barnes, an emerita professor since 1986, spent most of her career teaching at the University of Colorado, first in the Classics Department and ultimately in Philosophy. She is the author of ten books, including most famously her groundbreaking translation of Sartre's Being and Nothingness, which remains the standard English translation. Publication of that book brought Professor Barnes to emi- nence as the leading American proponent of existentialism, and her subsequent publications cemented her stature in that field and others. She has written very widely over her career, on topics ranging from ancient literature and Flaubert, to the modern university and eutha- 

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Hazel Barnes at the reception with Len Boomin and John Carnes.

Forms is to be released bi-annually. Its latest issue can be found at the library or at http://www.colorado.edu/studentgroups/forms/.

Robert Pasnau has been named editor of the Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy.

Rob Rupert began his tenure as an NEH fellow on July 1. The fellowship runs for twelve months, during which time he will work on a book manuscript tentatively titled Extended Systems, Extended Minds. In addition, he reports a sailboat trip to the Straits of Juan de Fuca, which run between the Olympic Peninsula (the northwestern portion of Washington State) and Canada’s Vancouver Island.

Graduate Student Notes

Cory Aragon is teaching both a one-week and a five-week Trigonometry/Pre-Calculus course for the Pre-Collegiate Development Program, and is also teaching a GRE prep course for the McNair program.

Devon Belcher, after more years than we care to print here, defended his dissertation in May. The title is “On Words: An Essay on Belief, Belief-At- 

Oxford University Press. He also completed the entry on Metaphysics for the new edition of the Macmil- 

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Faculty Moves

The last few years have seen a fair amount of movement by faculty, reflecting a national trend in the profession. Here’s a guide to who’s in and who’s out:

Who’s In:

David Barnett began his philosophical education in CU/Boulder’s MA program, and eventually received his PhD from NYU. Now, after a few years at the University of Vermont, he’s back in Boulder as an assistant professor. He works on metaphysics and language.

Eric Chwang has a PhD from Princeton and an MD from Baylor, where he studied medical ethics. This year he holds a prestigious postdoc from the NIH; he will be joining our faculty as an assistant professor in January 2007.

Chris Heathwood is a brand-new PhD from UMass, where he studied ethical theory. He joins the faculty as an assistant professor.

Who’s Out:

George Bealer has taken leave from Boulder and is currently at Yale University.

Luc Bovens now holds a professorship at the London School of Economics.

Matti Eklund left Boulder this past summer for a position at Cornell University.

Steve Leeds is now teaching at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.

Elinor Mason now holds a lectureship in her native Scotland, at Edinburgh University.

Christopher Shields has left Boulder for a university lectureship at Oxford University.

CU Sweeps APA Book Prize

Two recent books by Philosophy Department faculty were honored this fall by the American Philosophical Association. Robert Pasnau won the APA Book Prize, and David Boonin took honorable mention. The Book Prize is awarded every other year to the best book published in any field of philosophy, anywhere in the world, by an author under forty at the time of publication. This first and second-place finish is a tremendous achievement for the Department, given that this is perhaps the most prestigious award in the profession. Pasnau’s book, Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature, offers a detailed philosophical analysis of Aquinas’s conceptions of such topics as the mind-body problem, the nature of sensation and thought, and personal identity. Boonin’s book, A Defense of Abortion, carefully considers the central arguments against the moral permissibility of abortion, and concludes that each of those arguments fails, even on the most generous construal.
The Philosophy Department’s Spring 2005 graduation ceremony, held on May 6, honored 52 undergraduate philosophy majors and eight graduate students, including some who will be completing degrees in the summer or fall. The formal event, held after the University-wide graduation ceremony, was presided over by Professor Robert Pasnau, with a graduation address by Professor Emeritus Forrest Williams, a member of the faculty from 1952 to 1993. The guitar and violin of Kevin Garry and Margarita Sallee provided opening music and a Pomp and Circumstance processional for the faculty and graduates. The Philosophy Department acknowledged the outstanding work by eight undergraduates who were honors graduates, as well as eight undergraduates who graduated with distinction and two inductees into Phi Beta Kappa. Our graduate students, including five doctorates of Philosophy and three Master-of-Arts students, were each presented with their diplomas by their dissertation chairs, who provided information on each student’s research. The formal ceremony was followed with a reception in the University Memorial Center.

Professor Emeritus Forrest Williams

Department of Philosophy 2005 Graduates

Bachelor of Arts
Joshua Alvizu
Jameson Bell
Amy Bredemeier
Joseph Brown
Christina Cavaleri
Samuel Cooper
David D’Alessandro
Alexander Dobbs
Siobhan Donlin
Jeremy Durham – magna cum laude
David Fischer – with distinction
Joseph Garcia
Daniel Gottlieb
Jeffrey Guzelian
Christopher Haddad
Richard Harris
Ryan Hickey
Joseph Hoover
summa cum laude
Errol Hughes
Marisa Hurwitz
Elizabeth Kaplan
Drew Knowles
Rustin Knudtson
Marc LaRock – with distinction, summa cum laude

Master of Arts
Edward Hafer
David Liebesman
Andrea Sullivan-Clarke

Ph.D.
Devon Belcher
Abigail Gosselin
Bryan Hall
Michelle Maiese
Theresa Weynand-Tobin

Ph.D.
John Lo
Amiel Markenson
Aaron Maslow
Jonathan Mason – with distinction
Andrew Miller
Scott Moorhead
Mary Mortell
Kara Noel – Phi Beta Kappa
James Noland
Will Paterson
John Plimpton – magna cum laude
Ryan Prchal
Yelena Rabinovich – with distinction
Nicholas Rogoff
David Sabala
Jonathan Severy – with distinction, Phi Beta Kappa,
magna cum laude
Sarah Studzinski
Catharine Snider – with distinction, summa cum laude
Margaret Thayer – cum laude
Stephen Tramer
Paul Yellin
Irina Zadov – with distinction, summa cum laude
Support the Philosophy Department

Philosophy is one of the most vibrant and engaged departments in the University. Help us continue with these efforts by making a tax-deductible donation. The items mentioned here are just a few of the many possibilities. For more information contact the department chair, Robert Pasnau, at 303-492-4837, or pasnau@colorado.edu.

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$500 – undergraduate scholarship
$1,000 – sponsor the annual faculty teaching award
$3,000 – summer funding for a graduate student
$15,000 – graduate student fellowship
$50,000 – endow an annual public lecture
$500,000 – endow the Center for Values & Social Policy
$1,000,000 – name a professorship
$2,000,000 – endow a chair of philosophy
$10,000,000 – naming rights for the Department

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