

In a turn of phrase repeated often and with wildly varying degrees of irony, Wilfrid Sellars once described philosophy as the attempt “to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term.” That’s a tall, wooly order, but it succeeds in giving a sense of the relatively unrestricted range of subjects that can be usefully philosophized about. Indeed, philosophy’s relevance to so many topics is a large part of what drew me to it in the first place, and some of that range is reflected in what I’ve been up to this last year.

Some of it was extending my past research in new directions. For instance, I continue to be involved with the Building Sustainable Communities: Institutions, Infrastructure and Resilience initiative, which brings together researchers from several Purdue colleges to address the tangled bundle of challenges presented by climate change. My collaborations there attempt to better understand the role that social norms play in individual and collective responses to emerging problems, either in guiding ameliorative action or by standing in its way by stabilizing the status quo. Pushing another element of my previous research into a very different area, I was an invited member of a panel at the Pacific APA on Negative Aesthetics. There I started with some ideas from my book on disgust, but used them to explore the similarities and differences between it and boredom, with an eye toward the different ways artists play with those two emotions, and the significance each one might have for art in general.

Other highlights from last year represented the crystallization of lines of thought that I have been developing for a while now. In the fall, and together with then graduate student Natalia Washington, I helped kick off a series of speakers sponsored by our department’s new Diversity Committee. In our talk ‘Responsibility from the Outside In: Shaping the Moral Ecology Around Implicit Bias,’ we described a body of recent psychological work showing that most people, often despite their best intentions and explicitly held views, harbor some form of implicit bias against members of certain social groups (races, genders, religions, etc.), and pointed to ways those implicit biases can aggregate and scale up to collectively influence trends visible at the level of institutions. We then argued that despite the fact that key features of implicit biases (e.g. they can operate without conscious awareness or intent) seem liable to absolve individuals of blame for behaviors influenced by them, the situation is rapidly changing, and in ways relevant to issues of moral responsibility. The wealth of psychological research itself is allowing us all to become more aware of implicit biases, and showing how their influence can be most effectively restrained. The epistemic progress being made in understanding how our minds work is paving the

way for moral progress, progress that we can make by adjusting the norms we use to assign blame, and by taking responsibility for injustices that we can now see are the result of implicit biases.

Elsewhere I was pushing in new directions. In the fall Purdue held the campus-wide Dawn or Doom conference on the impact of accelerating technological development, artificial intelligence, and coalescing worries about a near future when humankind has merged with, or possibly been supplanted by, its own creations. In my talk ‘Minds, Culture, and the Evolution of Intelligence: What’s Going To Happen To Us?’ I pulled out a strand of thought running through recent work in the evolutionary and cognitive sciences that holds the intuitive, salient boundaries between biological organisms and their putative external environments are theoretically much less important than common sense leads us to believe. In our own case, a particularly promising idea is that the unique evolutionary trajectory and extraordinary evolutionary success of *homo sapiens* has deep roots in the fact that we have been exceptionally active shapers of and contributors to the very environments in which we evolved. We humans continue to meticulously construct the niches in which we live and operate, from sprawling urban jungles to the ergonomic precision of a well-ordered kitchen to the individualized settings of your laptop computer. We are also distinct in the extent to which we create and fill our environment with artifacts, tools and other forms of cultural information that we pass between ourselves, transmitting knowledge and skills through populations and across generations. Moreover, we carefully calibrate the very setting and methods by which this transmission takes place, engineering our own informational environments, and enriching the cognitive ecologies in which we raise our children. Our species’ long immersion in the informationally and technologically rich environments that we ourselves create has, in turn, continued to produce brains that are bigger and better able to understand, use, invent, and integrate information and technology. From this perspective, to worry that intelligence that is extra-biological is “artificial” or that we are losing touch with human nature in a blizzard of technology is to lose sight of our own history, and to misunderstand the nature of our own intelligence. We’ve been trafficking in socially transmitted information, actively shaping elements of the world around us, and integrating all of it into our lives for as long as we’ve been human. In fact, it’s probably how we got here: in a very concrete way, culture and technology are what have allowed us to accumulate as much knowledge and become as intelligent as we are, and thus are a big part of what continues to makes us distinctively human.

One of things I was most excited about last year was my essay “David Foster Wallace as American Hedgehog” appearing in *Freedom and the Self: Essays on the Philosophy of David Foster Wallace*. With the book’s release, I made the transition from (merely) long time, mildly obsessed Wallace fan boy – I’ve read everything he published, most of it more than once – to Official Published David Foster Wallace Scholar. The book itself collects essays by philosophers discussing Wallace’s undergraduate thesis on free will and fatalism, which was published in the wake of his death in 2008. Rather than

adjudicating his debate with the fatalists, or delving into the technical aspects of the system of modal logic he designed to make his case, my contribution instead looks at Wallace's later work, particularly his essays and fiction. I argue that despite leaving academic philosophy, Wallace never really left behind the questions about free will and choice that he wrestled with in that undergraduate thesis. Instead, they make up the central theme running through his work; it is the "one big thing" that he hedgehoggishly knew. I trace out the way that thing weaves its way through stories, essays, and interviews, appearing explicitly in some discussions, as more of a subterranean current in others, and I map out the main images and metaphors he used to explore it. In making my case, I also pull together Wallace's scattered comments about the distinctive challenges contemporary American culture raises for choosing, and the way he thought those challenges infect our sense of ourselves as citizens, moral agents, individuals and selves.

Finally, as the spring semester wound down I gave a talk at Northern Illinois University entitled 'What are Narrative Theories of the Self Supposed to Explain?' This was a first foray into territory I've long been eager to explore. The idea that our selves and identities are intricately bound up with the stories we tell about our selves is not particularly new, but its profile has risen sharply in recent years. It is frustratingly murky (and artless articulations of it are, I think, plainly circular), but it is also intriguing, and I can't escape the sense that there is *something* right about it. My modest aim in this talk was to sketch a useful map of the logical geography of narrative approaches, identify the major theorists who appeal to the notion of narrative, and get straight on what sorts of phenomena each hopes to explain by appeal to it, what explanatory work narration and autobiographical storytelling have been recruited to do. The list turns out to be long and shaggy: there are narrative accounts of moral agency, personhood, selves, personal identity, social identity, consciousness, personality development, imagination, psychological change, and more. The larger project, of which this was but a small first step, is less modest than the talk itself. I hope to develop the most promising threads of these literatures, square them with the foundational commitments of cognitive science and naturalism more generally, and see whether and how they might be woven together into a coherent account of ... whatever it turns out they are best suited to account for. It's still in R&D, obviously. But one refrain that echoes through most of the work is that we use narratives to find coherence and render things intelligible, to construct meaning, and to make sense – of who and what we individually are, of our actions, of our relationships with others, of our lives, of our place in culture, in history, in the cosmos itself. It might take a while, but I'd eventually like to make sense of that.

Taken together, my list of endeavors from the last year might itself seem to be without much coherence; it would be easy to imagine someone with a lust for tidiness disapproving of it as being all over the place, random, unfocused. Unsurprisingly, I think there's a better way to think about it, namely as illustrating some of the core virtues of our discipline. Philosophy is a many splendored thing. Some of its loveliest

splendors are bound up in how it fosters intellectual confidence and a skeptical attitude, traits needed to question whatever it is that you think needs questioning. It also provides the critical and evaluative skills needed to assess different answers to your questions, and, if none turn out to be adequate, to come up with answers of your own. Of course not all questions are of equal merit; to paraphrase another modern sage, if they can get you asking the wrong questions, it doesn't matter what answers you come up with. But then philosophy can help you learn to ask better questions, too. Developing the capacity to think for your self in this way is really the point of a good education in general, but the tools and fortitude required to do it, rather than any particular subject matter, are essentially philosophical. Overly focused conceptions of what counts as genuine philosophy or what is worth philosophizing about seem not just to undersell what we have to offer, but to go against the restless and encompassing spirit of the enterprise itself. Philosophy can be relevant to virtually anything, and everyone, regardless of his or her interests, occupation or outlook, stands to benefit from it.

In any event, I've been having a rollicking good time philosophizing about what has seemed most urgent and fascinating and puzzling to me lately. And I'm pretty sure there are important connections between the things I've been thinking about over the last year, some obvious, some less so. Figuring out how all of those things hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term, however, is a project for another year.