Spotlight: Asian Religions and Cultures Major

The Asian Religions and Cultures major is a WKU program on the rise. Appealing to a wide range of students with varying interests and goals, the major offers rich immersion into Asian traditions, histories, and cultures. Two Asian Religions and Cultures students testified to the uniqueness of the program. Brandon Kerr explained that he was “drawn to the program because [he] was already studying the Chinese language with the Chinese Flagship Program.”

Joseph Southworth said that the excellence of faculty members made the program appealing to him. Southworth explained that the professors “are very inviting, supportive, and eager to discuss material.” Southworth is attracted to the program because he feels it offers everything the college experience should. It provides new insights into a way of life that are foreign to the traditional westerner and classes are focused around research. He also pointed out that “although the classes are styled in lecture, the material holds rich opportunity for debate.” For such a multi-cultural major, study abroad and independent study are essential components. Southworth has performed independent research into the Tang dynasty, and this intensive study has produced in him a vibrant understanding of a distant era. Such projects bring life to the foreign culture and prepare students for future study and travel.

It will be exciting to watch this program flourish at WKU, giving students an appreciation for societies intersecting with their own. Brandon Kerr reiterated the major’s importance when he noted that, “as we move into the future, our politics, economics, and culture are becoming more and more intertwined with those of China and the rest of Asia. This program offers students a chance to broaden their perspectives.”

To learn more about the Asian Religions and Cultures major, visit: <http://www.wku.edu/philosophy-religion/asian_religions_cultures.php>.
Wonderstudents Teaching Students

While it is true that philosophy students spend an enormous amount of time sitting in classrooms pondering metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical issues, it is also true that these students sometimes depart from Cherry Hall to invade the classrooms of local high schools. These philosophy students, about twelve in all, are part of the Wonderstudents Teaching Students program, established in Spring of 2012 by Dr. Audrey Anton. Dr. Anton (known to her wonderstudents as Wondergirl) provides a level of commitment and energy that motivates the group toward excellence.

Inside and outside the classroom, most wonderstudents refer to each other with self-chosen wondernames, such as Bogey, Double Decker Becker, Baby Brown, Trinity, and God of Something More. Although some use ‘real’ names like Jim or Dan.

The use of wondernames allows wonderstudents to hold a sense of ownership of their identity and a sense of community throughout the program members. A name like Trinity was chosen out of admiration for Trinity from The Matrix and gives Trinity the student a feeling of metaphysical power when participating in philosophical study or discussion.

Wonderstudents hope that, by teaching surrounding high schools, they can encourage younger people to think critically. The group hopes to inspire Platonically ‘cave-dwelling’ highschoolers to leave the confines of the worlds in which they were raised and work toward a higher understanding of life and experience. This teaching exercise also serves to recruit future philosophy students.

During their short first semester together, the wonderstudents had two opportunities to reach out. On March 30, a group of forty middle schoolers ventured to Cherry’s third floor to have wonderstudents explain to them reasons for going to college. Those provided were beyond the typical reasons (i.e. jobs, money, etc.) and, rather, the wonderstudents focused on the intrinsic goods of the college experience, such as knowledge, understanding, friendship, and passion.

In order to illustrate types of intrinsic goods, club member Bumhustler filmed wonderstudents participating in their favorite activities. Pope soared over hurdles and jumped nearly six feet straight up into the air onto a platform, Wondergirl and Bogey played with philosopher puppets in a coffee shop, IC saved the Invisible Children, and Jim used an entire chalk board for one single proof.

On April 11 and 12, the wonderstudents traveled to Logan County High School to teach a Junior honor’s English class. The group discussed the philosophic ideas found in Willa Cather’s My Antonia. The first group, Bogey and Trinity, primed the students with concepts and vocabulary, such as teleology, aesthetics, and feminism. The next day, Bogey returned with Dan, Baby Brown, and Wondergirl to divide the students into groups and to lead discussion of Aristotle’s friendship, virtue, and vice. After the second session, both groups reported feelings of elation, excitement, and delight in being able to assist in the development of younger students’ free thought.
Dr. Ingrid Lilly is engaged in ongoing research of Bob Marley, Reggae, and Rastafarianism. With two papers in progress and a short report currently published in the Spring 2012 issue of Potter College’s Arts & Letters magazine, Dr. Lilly is examining Marley’s lyrics in their contemporary political contexts with an eye toward comparison of his messages with the messages of ancient Hebrew prophets.

As part of her research, Dr. Lilly went to Kingston, Jamaica in February, planning her trip to coincide with the nation’s ‘reggae month;’ a month filled with music and anything reggae. She visited Jamaican newspaper archives to search for information on Marley’s career, attended reggae-related lectures and events provided by the University of West Indies, and reviewed archival news collections at the Bob Marley museum.

Dr. Lilly is examining the ways in which Marley’s lyrics engage in a sort of ‘social critique and salvation-speak’ comparable to that found in the prophetic rhetoric of Hebrew tradition. Through a detailed, context-dependent analysis of Marley’s lyrics, she is coming to understand the ways in which such rhetoric is shaped by cultural forces and suggests that Hebrew prophetic texts may be viewed in similar fashion – with the prophets standing not only as mouthpieces for the divine, but also as Marley-esque cultural reactionaries.

Further, she is examining Jamaican biblical interpretations during the 1976 Jamaican elections, a time in which the country’s political climate was turbulent. She’s considering biblical referencing in contemporary reggae and political advertisements and examining the relationships between 1976 Jamaica’s religious and political-cultural climates.

Dr. Joseph L. Trafton and his wife Paula are planning a study tour to Rome in 2013, with an optional extension to Florence. They will visit all of the major sites of Rome, including the Colosseum, the Forum, the Catacombs, the Sistine Chapel, St. Peter's Basilica, and St. Paul's Basilica, and will take a day trip to Pompeii. The tentative dates are May 18-29 for the Rome trip and May 29-June 2 for the extension. For more details contact Dr. Trafton at <joseph.trafton@wku.edu>.

Dr. Arvin Vos came to WKU from the University of Toronto in the early 1970s after completing his dissertation on St. Augustine. During Dr. Vos’s employment at WKU, the Philosophy and Religion Department has been greatly ‘perfected,’ as Aquinas would say, because of Dr. Vos’s effort, extensive knowledge, and excellence in being the midwife for students’ knowledge.

Over the years, Dr. Vos’s favorite classes have been Love & Friendship, Immanuel Kant, and, of course, Thomas Aquinas.

While Aristotle and Kant will always be paramount influences for him, through studies of Aquinas, Dr. Vos became evermore impressed with Aquinas’ analyses, careful nuances, ingeniously structured arguments, and ability to express opponents’ arguments better than they themselves.

Dr. Vos’s impact on Philosophy and Religion students has been significant in assisting them in their learning. We thank Dr. Vos for his efforts and applaud his success. May he find the best of all possible worlds in whatever future activities he pursues.
Dr. Audrey Anton submitted the final edits for her paper, “Does Technology Make Old Age Obsolete?,” which will appear in the 2012 issue of Morality and Spirituality in the Contemporary World. Another of Dr. Anton’s papers, “Socrates’ Religious Experience” was accepted in Socratic Dialogue, an edited collection being published through the International Plato Society. In March, Dr. Anton presented her paper, “Leibniz on Divine Freedom and Rational Choice” at a conference on Divine Agency in Houston, TX. In April, Dr. Anton presented her paper “Flexible and Fixed Character States: Aristotle on the Permanence and Mutability of Distinct Types of Character” at the American Philosophical Association Meeting in Seattle as well as a meeting of the Kentucky Philosophical Association. She also presented “Must Indeterminate Rational Actions be Random?” at the 38th Conference on Value Inquiry: Free Will, Moral Responsibility, and Science in Salem, MA. Dr. Anton was appointed the organizer of the 39th Conference on Value Inquiry, which will be held next year here at WKU.

Dr. Bella Mukonyora coordinated the public screening of the documentary “Journey of the Universe” on February 17, 2012. She has also continued work on her next book on African perspectives on religion and ecology. She converted one chapter of her book-in-progress into an article for publication in Worldviews this summer. She presented more material from her book at the regional conference held by the American Academy of Religion in Atlanta, Georgia, and submitted material for presentation at the annual meeting in Chicago where she is scheduled to speak later this year. Recently, Dr. Mukonyora signed an agreement with the University of Bergen in Norway, allowing her to do new research toward a book titled “Affective Displacements: Rethinking Gender, Race and Sexuality in a Multicultural Society” and travel to Norway as a member of an international research workshop.

Dr. Jeffrey Samuels was invited to give a talk at the Asia Center Spring Speaker Series on “Buddhism: Tradition, Health, Arts” at the University of Kentucky. His talk was titled “Inspiring Buddhist Ways of Being: Monasteries in Contemporary Sri Lanka.” He also published a book chapter “Merit is in the Heart: The Role of Emotions in Merit-Making Practices in Contemporary Sri Lanka” in Embedded Languages: Studies of Sri Lankan and Buddhist Cultures. Finally, he co-published (with Dr. Hun Lye) “Malaysian Buddhism” in Oxford Bibliographies Online: Buddhism.

Dr. Michael Seidler delivered an address titled “Early Modern German Liberalism?” at the University of Memphis on March 23, 2012. The talk was part of a funded series on “Nature, Law, and the Emergent ‘I’: Stoicism, Egoism, and the Foundations of Morality,” sponsored by the Charles Koch Charitable Foundation. During his visit, Dr. Seidler also lectured to a Philosophy of Law class on the subject of “Varieties of Natural Law Spelunking.”

Dr. Ian Schnee presented a paper on the metaphysics of reasons for belief titled “The Explanatory Argument for Factualism” at the Central Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association in Chicago, IL. He presented papers titled “Who is Disadvantaged by Standard Approaches to Teaching Formal Logic?” and “Philosophy Writing as a Progression” at the Pacific Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association in Seattle, Washington in April.

Philosophy Club

A love for conversation, good food, and Philosoraptor unite philosophy majors and non-majors at Mickey’s once a week.

A Note from the Editors

This edition of the Department of Philosophy and Religion Newsletter was produced by students in Dr. Jones’ Editing and Publishing class. The editors include Shanna Downey, Chris Clark, Erin Kenney, and Brooke Schreiner. They would like to thank contributing students and faculty for their input and guidance. Creating this newsletter has been an amazing learning experience, and they hope this publication captures the dynamic WKU Department of Philosophy and Religion.

As you consider your contribution to the New Century of Spirit campaign for Western Kentucky University, please remember that you can designate your gift to the Philosophy and Religion Department. Your contributions are critical to the life of the department and its students.

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