Eastern Michigan University

Undergraduate Conference in Philosophy

2026 Schedule

Emma Jones **November 14th | 9-9:50 | Tower Room 348**

Social Epistemological Themes in the Film Sinners

The 2025 film Sinners directed by Ryan Coogler takes place in the Mississippi Delta during the Jim Crow era of the early 1930's. We follow a musician and sharecropper named Sammie "Preacherboy" Moore; the son of a plantation pastor and the cousin of the notorious gangsters, the SmokeStack twins. The twins are opening a juke joint, which is essentially a rural bar, and they want Sammie to perform for the opening night. Unbeknownst to them, Sammie's powerful blues music summons a dark entity who wants to use him. This essay argues that Sinners depicts epistemic injustice through the systematic marginalization of Black cultural and spiritual ways of knowing within a dominant white, Christian epistemic framework. Specifically, the film illustrates hermeneutical injustice through the suppression and misrecognition of hoodoo and the blues as legitimate interpretive resources, and testimonial injustice through the repeated dismissal of Black and marginalized knowers whose testimony is devalued due to racial and cultural prejudice.

Daniel Shitandi **November 14th | 9-9:50 | Alumni Room 342**

The Right to Make a World: Communication, Social Facts, and the Limits of the Cosmopolitan Right

This paper explores the acceptance of extinction in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It examines whether Georges Cuvier's and Charles Lyell's demonstrations of extinction based on paleontological and geological evidence alone were sufficient to secure its acceptance, or whether additional intellectual work was required. Employing archival research of Cuvier, Lyell, the Bridgewater treatises, and scholarship in history and philosophy of science, especially extinction and deep time, I argue that the fossil-based case for extinction had a significant gap: the problem of the origin of species. I show why this problem arose as a challenge to extinction's credibility and in what sense it came to be comprehended as a theological issue. I further argue that natural theologians were crucial figures in addressing this gap, focusing on William Buckland and Thomas Chalmers as case studies. This paper highlights the significance of accommodating multiple intellectual perspectives in securing the credibility of scientific concepts.

David Harris **November 14th | 10-10:50 | Tower Room 342**

Counterexamples Against Revisionary Ontologies: What Is and What Should Never Be

This paper argues that Kant's cosmopolitan right grounds a right to communication that extends beyond the freedom to speak or move freely between political communities. Because human beings share a world, I argue that the cosmopolitan right entails a right to participate in the relations through which that world is constituted. Drawing on John Searle and Brian Epstein, I develop an account of communication as a practice through which social facts are established and maintained. Communication, on this account, is not merely the transmission of content. Through performative utterances, it is a means by which social realities are constituted. The paper examines how this capacity can be constrained by institutional structures. Communicative exclusion does not always take the form of preventing a person from speaking, nor does it arise from an inability to understand or articulate an experience. A person may possess concepts, express them, and communicate sincerely, while lacking the conditions necessary for that communication to acquire constitutive social force. Drawing on Judith Butler's account of vulnerability and Sally Haslanger's analysis of institutional oppression, I argue that social structures can determine whether communicative acts receive the recognition and anchoring necessary to establish or transform social facts. Using Butler's analysis of vulnerability following September 11, 2001, I illustrate how conflicting social structures can constrain what forms of recognition can be communicated. I identify a form of communicative deprivation in which the restriction is not on what can be said, but on what can be made socially real through saying it.

Justice Dunn **November 14th | 10-10:50 | Alumni Room 342**

Counterexamples Against Revisionary Ontologies: What Is and What Should Never Be

Daniel Z. Korman (2015) defends conservatism about ordinary objects through arguments from counterexample: revisionary ontologies entail strange objects (like trogs, the mereological sum of a dog and a tree), but common-sense intuitions stand against such objects. Meg Wallace (2020) objects that intuitions cannot support Korman's counterexamples. Because intuitions and beliefs can come apart, intuition alone cannot ground belief that trogs do not. In this paper, I argue that Korman's argument from counterexamples can survive Wallace's critique if its key premise is regrounded in Hasok Chang's (2022) operational coherence rather than intuition. I reconstruct the Korman-Wallace debate, then show that the conservative's everyday practice is operationally coherent without requiring trogs. Intuitions are not eliminated; they are relocated within that practice as products of coherent activity. I then consider two objections: that the intuition-belief gap merely reappears at the level of practices, and that the regrounding defends a different conservatism than Korman's own. I show that Chang's framework has resources for the first, and that Korman has signaled openness to the second.

Nerea Vidal Arrieta **November 14th | 11-11:50 | Tower Room 348**

Democracy and collective well-being

This paper analyzes the process of de-democratization in the Basque Country and investigates its impact on collective well-being. Based on a conception of democracy that maintains citizen involvement as a necessary condition for life satisfaction, a sense of belonging, and mutual recognition, authors such as Tocqueville, Mill, Rousseau, and Rawls are studied. Their political theory is integrated with Basque politics, from the integration of the territory into the Crown of Castile and the Franco dictatorship to the current status of an autonomous community. It argues that the structure of Spain, the distance between rulers and ruled, contemporary individualism, and the two-party system undermine Basque democratic citizenship. In turn, it explores the "Catholic model," an example used to show how to generate emotional bonds and active listening, proposing that a renewed democracy must rebuild emotional and community ties to prevent their progressive erosion.

Penelope Sanchez **November 14th | 11-11:50 | Tower Room 348**

On Human Rights and the Necessity of Open Borders

The currently accepted form of border politics in the global west is one of closed borders, exclusion, and democratic canon. Alongside this, there is a contradictory advocacy for human rights work and guaranteal. However, with a rising number of stateless individuals in areas of South West Asia and North Africa, these closed border policies are contraindicated and actively stripping millions of their so-called inalienable rights. I argue that philosophers Hannah Arendt and Joseph Carens provide strong evidence that open border politics should be considered as a theoretical step in guaranteeing the existence of human rights and statehood to all persons. The current understanding of human rights is based on a human that exists in isolation, yet the social nature of humanity indicates that there is no such thing as an inalienable right as they all must be enforced by a polity. By this reasoning, human rights cannot exist and are truly civil and state-sanctioned. Opening national borders would cause a forced membership of all humans into nations that can ensure the protection of their human rights. In tandem, Arendt's "Perplexities of the Rights of Man" and Carens's "The Case for Open Borders" provide a theoretical framework that allows us to acknowledge the travesty that is facing stateless persons and the unprecedented change required to dismantle it.

Yushi Bai **November 14th | 1:30-2:20 | Tower Room 348**

The Unfinished Case for God

This paper examines three of its most prominent arguments — the Kalam Cosmological argument, the fine-tuning argument, and the contingency argument — and argues that each fails to provide conclusive evidence for God. Against the Kalam argument, I argue that the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo violates the Principle of Material Causality, so that a purely efficient, non-material cause of the universe is incoherent. Against the fine-tuning argument, I raise three objections: it commits a fallacy of composition in treating a small habitable region as representative of an overwhelmingly hostile universe, it sits badly with the apparent inefficiency of a design meant to cultivate creatures who love God, and it gives no reason why an omnipotent being would need to fine-tune anything at all. Against the contingency argument, I grant its conclusion for the sake of argument and show that its own premises generate a trilemma: either no fact is genuinely contingent, some contingent fact is left unexplained, or the explanatory chain regresses infinitely, and each option violates one of the argument's premises. I conclude that none of these three arguments succeeds in establishing God's existence on logical grounds.

Mason Sanchez-Lassos **November 14th | 1:30-2:20 | Alumni Room 342**

An Unwilling Subjugation: Alien Disclosure and the Crisis of Higher Reason

This paper examines the ethical consequences of alien disclosure as a conditional problem: if aliens are real, and if their rational capacities exceed humanity's, then human moral hierarchy faces a crisis. Western moral and political thought has often placed humans above animals and nature by appealing to reason, moral judgment, political life, and deliberation. Aristotle's hierarchy of living beings and Stoic rational cosmopolitanism both help show how reason has historically functioned as a marker of higher moral standing. But the possibility of non-human intelligence reverses this structure. If aliens possess a higher form of rational life, humanity may no longer stand at the top of the hierarchy she has used to justify dominion over lower-rational beings.

The paper develops this dilemma through two prongs. First, if superior rationality grounds moral authority, then aliens may possess legitimate authority over humanity, even when their justice appears to us as domination or injustice. Second, if superior rationality does not ground moral authority, then humanity must reconsider whether her own rational superiority ever justified dominion over animals, ecosystems, and non-human life. Drawing on Kant, Singer, Bentham, Plumwood, and Bostrom, the paper argues that alien disclosure would not merely challenge whether humanity is alone. It would challenge whether humanity was ever justified in imagining herself as morally supreme. If humanity refuses to abandon her downward hierarchy, then she must confront the possibility of hierarchy above herself. The alien arrives not only as another being, but as an accusation against the hierarchy humanity built beneath herself.

Cici Zhang **November 14th | 2:30-3:20 | Tower Room 348**

Can Consciousness Change Reality? Manifestation and Yogācāra

Neville Goddard's account of manifestation holds that a desired state can be occupied in consciousness before receiving objective expression. This paper develops a metaphysical reconstruction of this process by bringing Goddard into conversation with Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Alvin Plantinga. Fichte's idealism provides an account of consciousness as participating in the constitution of objective experience, establishing the metaphysical relation between consciousness and objectivity required by Goddard's theory. Plantinga's modal metaphysics provides a structure in which the fulfilled condition can belong to a possible world and concern the same individual who exists under different conditions in the actual world. Building on these accounts, I introduce modal occupation, the relation in which a conscious subject takes the condition under which she exists in a possible world as her present standpoint of consciousness. Modal occupation gives a metaphysical interpretation of Goddard's instruction to enter the fulfilled state and connects consciousness, possible worlds, transworld identity, and objectification within a single account of manifestation. I conclude that the fulfilled state can be understood as a genuine possible condition of the same conscious subject and manifestation as the modal occupation and eventual objective expression of that condition. The causal mechanism connecting modal occupation to objectification remains outside the scope of this paper.

George Bowyer **November 14th | 2:30-3:20 | Alumni Room 342**

Empirical Adequacy Is an Incomplete Defence of the Proximate-Ultimate Distinction

Ernst Mayr's distinction between proximate and ultimate causes has been under sustained critique from the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis, which considers it poorly suited to reciprocal and developmental causes of evolutionary change. I argue this debate has stalled because two distinct issues have been run together. The semantic issue concerns the distinction's empirical adequacy; the stance issue concerns its wider explanatory and methodological implications. I settle the semantic issue in Mayr's favour by way of a doctrine extenders have largely overlooked: proximate bias. Supplemented by a substrate-neutral transmission-fidelity criterion for ultimate causation and a time-indexing procedure for causal loops, the distinction survives niche construction, constructive development, epigenetic inheritance and developmental bias. I then argue that this verdict is no defence of the proximate-ultimate distinction since empirical adequacy and explanatory value are orthogonal, and that a semantic victory is worth acknowledging precisely because it moves the wider debate forward.

Delaney McNear **November 14th | 3:30-4:20 | Tower Room 348**

Condemned to Be Free, Free to Have Hope: Optimism and Authenticity in Sartrean Existentialism

This paper demonstrates that despite the pessimistic reputation of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism, his philosophy offers a fundamentally optimistic outlook on life. Beginning with an examination of why many readers find existentialism to be despairing – given the burdens of freedom, the weight of responsibility, and alienation – I then show that these features are unfairly mischaracterized and lead to a profoundly optimistic interpretation. I analyze Being and Nothingness and Existentialism is a Humanism to highlight Sartre's foundation of existentialism in freedom, responsibility, facticity, and authenticity. I also evaluate the way that humanism contributes to his philosophy. The freedom and opportunity inherent to humanist existentialism allows individuals to define who they are based on their choices and actions. Furthermore, this freedom of choice enables both individuals and mankind to realize their authenticity via willful action. Ultimately, I argue that Sartre's existentialism proves itself optimistic by allowing a framework for hope, agency, and authenticity even in a difficult world.

Jonathan Huynh **November 14th | 3:30-4:20 | Alumni Room 342**

Syntax, Semantics, and the Impossibility of Strong AI

Proponents of strong artificial intelligence (hereafter, strong AI) advance the claim that "the programmed computer really is a mind" and that it is capable of genuine understanding. This dispute is frequently treated as an empirical challenge concerning the advancement in technology, development of algorithms, or some engineering achievement. In this paper, I argue that strong AI is not merely implausible, but logically and metaphysically impossible because it predicates its central thesis on a category mistake.

First, I begin by examining the reductive methodology underlying strong AI, specifically Margaret A. Boden and her criterion of understanding, and demonstrate that reducing first-person phenomena to third-person phenomena commits the formal fallacy of affirming the consequent. Subsequently, I turn to John Searle's Chinese Room argument and show that the mistake of the strong AI position is in its conflation of syntax with semantics. Following Gilbert Ryle and Ofra Magidor, I show how attributing semantic properties to the mere manipulation of symbols constitutes a category mistake, which demonstrates a necessary falsehood rather than some empirical restraint due to the insufficiencies of a technological or engineering project. I then explain how this sort of demonstration overcomes the many responses to it. Finally, I mention two objections that provide a much stronger basis as counterarguments to my own position.

Deepthisri Paruchuri **November 15th | 9-9:50 | Tower Room 348**

The Role of Ancient Chinese Philosophies in Modern Medical Ethics

Medical ethics has transformed dramatically alongside the ever-changing physician-patient relationship, but Ancient Chinese philosophy can provide insightful perspectives on modern healthcare. By understanding and comparing the bioethics of the Chinese philosophies of Confucianism and Daoism, one can utilize their applications in contemporary medical practice. Modern medicine states that the most important qualities of ethical physicians include benevolence, justice, trust, and respect for the patient's autonomy. Confucianism emphasizes ren (compassion), yi (righteousness), li (proper conduct), and lifelong moral self-cultivation, which prepares physicians to navigate difficult situations through virtuous character rather than simply technical expertise. These principles encourage physicians to prioritize patient well-being, develop virtuous character, establish trust, and approach medical decisions with honesty and justice. On the other hand, Daoism emphasizes wuwei (non-action) and avoiding medical intervention. The Daoist principle of wuwei is particularly evident and crucial in hospice and palliative care. In Daoist philosophy, it is important for physicians to recognize when not to treat patients with aggressive medications. Rather, it is crucial to observe and respond carefully based on symptoms and risks for the patient. Both Confucian and Daoist philosophy offer valuable insight in creating a proper framework for physician-patient relationships. However, Confucianism provides a stronger ethical foundation for the physician's entire professional life rather than particular situations a patient can face. Together, these philosophies demonstrate how ethical medical practice requires not only clinical knowledge but also compassion, humility, and thoughtful judgment.

Nadia Jeelani-Socia **November 15th | 9-9:50 | Alumni Room 342**

Feminist Approach to Ethical Duties in Healthcare

Healthcare systems operate and reinforce Individualistic Hierarchical Models of healthcare over Feminist Egalitarian Models that actively promote equitable treatment and full epistemic belief of testimony of all patients regardless of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Compared to Feminist Egalitarian Models, Individualistic Hierarchical Models operate as a system that reinforces a dominant majority view of social norms and biases. First, I will explain how Individualistic Hierarchical Models in healthcare can reinforce and actively engage in oppressing minority patients which can increase their likelihood of experiencing epistemic injustice when seeking medical treatment. Second, I will argue why healthcare professionals have an ethical duty to reduce minority patients' experience of epistemic injustice in healthcare and actively promote Feminist Egalitarian Models over Individualistic Hierarchical Models due to the principle of non-maleficence. Lastly, I will propose epistemic trustworthiness as a solution for how healthcare professionals can employ feminist epistemology as a prevention tool to reduce minority patients' experiences of epistemic injustice in healthcare when assessing minority patients who may feel their testimony or knowledge is not being believed or taken seriously when they are seeking medical treatment.

Overall, my aim is to highlight and argue why healthcare professionals have a duty to reduce minority patients' experiences of epistemic injustice in healthcare by actively promoting a Feminist Egalitarian Models over an Individualistic Hierarchical Models.

Raymond Modregon **November 15th | 10-10:50 | Tower Room 348**

The Ontology of Non-Representational Art

It is critical to this paper to establish a pluralist definition of art. Restricted definitions of art would not recognize nonrepresentational art as art. I will analyze the debate between Davies, Thomasson and Hazelwood to affirm a pluralist definition of art. Davies argues for a restricted definition of art, where as Thomasson argues against approaching the ontology of art through the empiricist Lense of the discovery paradigm. Hazelwood builds upon this idea arguing towards a pluralist definition of art, namely the, “functional, procedural, and the intentional-historical" each definition can be true at various points in time.

In the second section I will answer what it means to be representative of reality? analyze the Gombrich Meditations of a Hobby Horse to determine what it means to be representative of reality. Gombrich writes on the idea that to be representative depends on how an object is used. This contrasts with Goodman’s Ways of World Making He writes upon the idea of relating art to symbolization, where many symbols may be important and utilized within art showing that, “these symptoms provide no definition, much less a full-blooded description or celebration” (Goodman 68). Where Gombrich applies meaning to the abstract, Goodman seems to deny the symptoms of the abstract giving meaning to non-representational arts ability to give greater meaning to the world. Oliver Dubouclez writes On the Lack of Reality: Ontology and anti-perception within Clement Rosset. Anti-perception differs from purely non-representational art, if even possible to achieve, but is useful in helping in understanding the gradient of the relationship between representations of reality and the ability to gain a better understanding of the world. He writes upon the paradox of the “nonexistent object”, and the “anti-perceptive faculty” to understand the negatives.

Thomasson and Goodman both seem to support a model in which art has aught to be grounded in a form of ontological meaning though a commonly understood symbolization, Dubouclez writing upon ideas of the negative where nothing exists seems to support this idea as well. If art is truly nonrepresentational then it will lose its ability to create an ontological meaning and turn towards a phenomenological meaning dependent on each person's experience with such art.

Matthew Roxas **November 15th | 10-10:50 | Alumni Room 342**

Does Artificial Intelligence Truly Reason? Embodiment, Reflection, and the Limits of AI

This paper asks whether artificial intelligence can genuinely reason if reasoning is understood not merely as formal computation, but as an embodied and historically situated engagement with meaning. Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty, I argue that reasoning depends upon two related forms of meaning: enacted meaning, disclosed through embodied interaction with the world, and reflected meaning, in which such experience is interpreted and appropriated from a first-person, historically situated perspective. Hubert Dreyfus's phenomenological critique of artificial intelligence establishes the importance of embodiment, while Glen Mazis's relational account complicates Dreyfus by suggesting that machines may participate in fields of meaning. Contemporary enactivist and embodied approaches further raise the possibility that sufficiently advanced artificial systems could achieve enacted meaning through sustained sensorimotor engagement. I argue, however, that enacted meaning alone is insufficient for genuine reasoning. Drawing on Calvin Schrag's account of rationality as historically situated and interpretive, I contend that reasoning requires the capacity to take up experience as meaningful, reinterpret its significance across time, and project that meaning toward future possibilities. Thus, even an advanced embodied artificial system capable of meaningful interaction would not thereby demonstrate genuine reasoning. Until artificial systems can reflectively appropriate enacted meaning within a first-person and historically situated perspective, the case for genuine artificial reasoning remains incomplete.

Samuel Lundy **November 15th | 11-11:50 | Tower Room 348**

Philosophy as a Poietic Endeavor: A Comparative Analysis of Martin Heidegger and Daoist Conceptions of Poetics

This paper argues that philosophical inquiry is fundamentally poietic: rather than functioning solely as an analytic procedure, philosophical questioning also operates as a creative and world-disclosing act. Drawing primarily from a comparative analysis of Martin Heidegger and classical Daoist thought, I contend that philosophy and poetry share a common structure of disclosure through which meaning is not merely represented, but brought forth.

The paper begins with Heidegger's account of fundamental questioning in An Introduction to Metaphysics. In it, Heidegger contends that philosophical questioning does not concern itself with pre-given objects, but rather the very act of questioning clears a space in which beings can emerge meaningfully — in this sense, philosophical questions don't describe but disclose. Further, I make use of Heidegger's understanding of poiesis and physis to understand how the disclosive character of philosophical questioning operates.

This framework is placed in direct dialogue with Daoist accounts of language found in the Dao De Jing and the Zhuangzi. Through concepts such as "spillover-goblet words" and generative emptiness, Daoism presents language not as a static representational tool, but as a flexible

medium of disclosure. By intertwining Heideggerian ontology and Daoist philosophy of language, I am to elucidate the hidden workings of philosophical questioning. To that end, the paper argues that poetic language is philosophically significant not merely because of its emotional force, but because it exemplifies a mode of revealing that philosophy itself depends upon at its most fundamental level.

Naina Krishnamurthy **November 15th | 11-11:50 | Alumni Room 342**

When Responsibility Disappears: The Harm Attribution Gap and Group Negligence in Public Health

Public health emergencies create a Harm Attribution Gap (HAG) in which harms do not register as moral violations because their causes are diffuse and collective. This paper argues that responsibility persists through a form of group negligence, where a population's collective failure to uphold a reasonable duty of care generates foreseeable and preventable harms. Drawing on debates concerning autonomy, the harm principle, collective action, and biopolitics, it is argued that individual moral judgment becomes an unreliable safeguard against collective risk under conditions of widespread transmission. Public intervention is therefore justified when collective failures of care create substantial, foreseeable, preventable, and externalized harms. Mandatory vaccination during severe public health emergencies is presented as a paradigmatic case of such intervention.

Max Gretchokoff **November 15th | 1:30-2:20 | Tower Room 348**

The Logic of the Animal State Suicide Born from Suffering, Absurdist Revolt, and an Ethics of Survival

This essay develops a first-person philosophical account of suicide born from suffering and its aftermath. Drawing on the original concept of the "animal state," I argue that severe psychological pain, numbness, and cognitive constriction can deform perception so thoroughly that self-annihilation appears internally coherent, while at the same time undermining the very conditions for full autonomy. From this vantage point, rationality-based models that treat suicide primarily as a permissibility or choice problem miss what the suicidal mind is like from the inside. I distinguish suicide born from suffering from lucid end-of-life self-determination, and I then turn to Absurdism as the framework that most honestly describes survival after catastrophic self-harm. Building on Albert Camus, I argue that survival does not reveal hidden purpose or redeem suffering, but it can ground a modest ethics of lucidity, self-trust, and usefulness. Incorporating the language of an "inner coalition" and a "creed of lucidity," I sketch an ethics of survival in which revolt takes the form of disciplined self-trust, solidarity with others in pain, and small acts of decency in a universe that does not answer.

Sanaa Taqvi **November 15th | 1:30-2:20 | Alumni Room 342**

Yours, Truly? The Ownership and Authorship of Desire

This paper asks what distinguishes a desire that is authentically one's own from one that has merely become part of one's psychology. Comparing ordinary desires, self-cultivated desires, adaptive preferences, and brainwashed desires, I argue that neither psychological realness nor internal consistency can adequately make this distinction. Both examine a desire after it has already taken hold, when importantly different desires may look much the same from the inside. What distinguishes them instead lies in the relationship a person bears to the process through which a desire became their own. I develop this relationship through an account of authorial standing, consisting of three conditions: non-covert formation, interpretive authority, and recursive revisability. These conditions distinguish a desire that is merely owned from one that is authored. Yet authorship does not fully resolve the problem. Adaptive preferences show that a person may author a desire while the alternatives against that desire could be questioned have already been constrained. I therefore argue that authenticity and freedom must be distinguished—a desire may authentically be mine even when I am not fully free in having it.

Andre Kolak **November 15th | 2:30-3:20 | Tower Room 348**

Cene without Me? But Anthro Makes Three! Structural Relations and Necessary Conditions

The Anthropocene is an epoch in which humanity assumes collective responsibility over the earth. Discourse centers on the claim's legitimacy and on its ethical and legal ramifications, instead of on the base material relations.

Using base triads from Peirce, I show two limits in Anthropocene discourse, first, an inability to go beyond dyadic relations, and second, an inability to go beyond what I term the first stage of thirdness. In Part 1, I develop my Peircean toolkit and briefly discuss Foucault's complementary discursive model. In Part 2, the toolkit is applied to Anthropocene discourse, showing a path to change from necessity.

Keywords: Anthropocene; Peirce; Praxis
