

Statement of Purpose

My research interests have focused primarily on the fields of phenomenology and critical theory, while I have also found a recent interest in the work of various (neo-)pragmatists. In studying these various methodologies, I have taken a particular interest in the areas of metaphysics (especially ontology as it has been revived in continental metaphysics through the work of Alain Badiou), epistemology (on issues like supervenience and physicalist responses to the ‘explanatory gap’ in describing conscious experiences), and social/political philosophy (with the perennial focus on ‘what is to be done?’ but also questions about justice, civic engagement, and an increasing interest in debates over communicative rationality). I am applying to [insert university name] with an eye towards deepening and refining my interest in these and other topics.

My first publication focused on the theoretical similarities and differences between contemporary phenomenological and Marxist theories of philosophical critique – focusing on Graham Harman and Slavoj Žižek as exemplary figures. My second publication focused on the limits of critique as a philosophical form through an analysis of Bruno Latour’s essay on this issue. To some extent my research interests have found room between these two issues: a feeling that however accurate and useful analyses of textuality in various forms may be, there is still something suspicious in making the target of analysis an object so close to the daily life of academics – texts. But similarly, if there is a need to find a new form of philosophical inquiry that is less textual and more material – both in the sense of a focus on ‘actual social relations’ and in terms of the fleshy, dynamic ‘thingness’ of existing objects – then this new form must come out of the most useful elements of various theoretical disciplines. In other words, I’m drawn to the possibility of generalizing philosophical work in the sense of finding what is useful in various theoretical approaches (phenomenology, critical theory, pragmatism, new materialism, etc.) – what makes them all ‘philosophical’ – without reducing all those theories into the framework of another.

That statement is admittedly broad, but I find this project to be an important part of doing philosophy today. It is my suspicion that if any headway is to be made in generalizing these fields, then work will have to be done that tries to move between the phenomenological emphasis on the concrete, intimate ‘everydayness’ of the face-to-face relationship, and the more abstract, structural features of critical theory that tries to get at a ‘social totality’ within our historical situation. Towards this end, I have found Colin Koopman’s work on genealogy extremely useful. Insofar as it views (Foucauldian) genealogy as a non-normative methodology that gives us a sense of how things ‘hang together’ today, and insofar as it situates ethics as asking the question of how we should and can act within the space outlined through genealogical work, Koopman provides me with a way of conceptualizing how critical theorizing relates to political and ethical action. Further, I have found the writings of various feminist ‘New Materialist’ authors such as Jane Bennett and Nancy Tuana helpful in emphasizing philosophy as an embodied form of labor that is bound within various material economies (from the ‘object world’ of the lecture hall, to the environments universities are folded into and the role they play within those environments).

If Althusser is correct in saying that philosophy is, in the last instance, “class struggle in theory,” then it seems to follow that philosophy needs to be attentive to contradictions both within

and outside of it. That is, it needs to be dynamic and responsive to tensions within the field (in its various branches, e.g.) and to tensions outside the field (whether in various other academic disciplines that philosophy works alongside or in events outside the university). It seems to me that philosophy is not a closed discipline, and if we wish to preserve it in the face of many claims of its death – whether as a euphemism for the ‘end of metaphysics’, or as a direct attack from politicians that claim we need ‘welders more than philosophers’ – then we need to learn how to respond to those things that philosophy is opened up to. To me, this necessitates paying attention to how things like race, gender, ability, and class play into debates over seemingly neutral topics like epiphenomenalism or possible worlds.

In sum, I would like to continue to study the ways that the intersections between phenomenology, pragmatism, and critical theory give us a methodology and a theoretical outlook that helps cut through the various entanglements in philosophy today – especially when it is at its most ‘general’ and ‘abstract’ by looking at problems in ontology or metaphysics – while also giving us a rough rubric of how to act as academics concerned with the state of the world into which they were thrown.