

Evan O'Donnell

Statement of Purpose

My philosophical interests are mainly in 20th-century French philosophy; social and political philosophy, especially focusing on feminist and race issues; and epistemology, especially focusing on Pyrrhonian skepticism. As I see it, these interests converge around an analysis of how our thinking is structured, along with the resulting questions of what the effects of that structure are, whether it would be preferable to change that structure, and how one might go about changing it. I hope to have the opportunity of joining the philosophy department at DePaul in order to pursue these interests and questions as part of a broader philosophical community.

What interests me in 20th-century French philosophy is its unique treatment of the conditioning and structuring of our thought in relation to historical and material factors. For example, both Frantz Fanon and Simone de Beauvoir provide phenomenological analyses of life under historical categories like race and gender along with what it might take to transcend those categories. Similarly, although more generally, I find Michel Foucault's analysis of "epistemes" as "historical a prioris" fundamentally structuring what is representable to thought and yet also being conditioned by their social and historical position very useful. These examples all speak to a French tradition of philosophy that keeps immanent, historical reality in mind in its analyses without losing sight of the fact that philosophy can take some positive actions in addition to merely analyzing the world around it.

One of the French philosophers whom I think best embodies this combines of rigorous analysis and creative speculation is Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze's work synthesizes an analysis of our current concepts and modes of thought (through his methods of "dramatization" and "symptomatology") with a theory of how we might change those concepts through the creation of a "new image of thought" and an application of those ideas to specifically political and social issues in his co-authored works with Guattari. This combination has been very influential on my thinking.

As briefly suggested previously, I am especially interested in the question of how concepts like race and gender are constructed and maintained through social and political processes, and what social and political changes might help us alter or abolish those categories. I have found Charles Mills' concept of the "social reality" or even "objectivity" (in a weak sense of the term) very useful in analyzing just how deeply ingrained these categories are into our thinking. On the other hand, I have turned to the writings of Simone de Beauvoir, especially *The Second Sex*, to argue that transcending those categories, while difficult, is nevertheless not impossible for us, even without a commitment to Beauvoir's transcendent ego. As for what this transcendence might look like, this is obviously an extremely difficult question that I look forward to working on more, but I have employed Fanon's analysis of blackness in *Black Skin, White Masks* to explore how racist ideas are created and maintained through both ideological and material means, and how any attempt to eradicate them cannot succeed through either ideological or material strategies alone.

My interests in epistemology are wide-ranging, but two of the main ones are transcendental analyses of our conceptual schemes and the prospect of modifying those structures, especially in a direction broadly similar to Pyrrhonian skepticism. Given this, I have been interested in figures like Kant and P.F. Strawson for their description of what our (current) mode of thought commits us to. I have also been developing an interest in Heidegger and existential phenomenology in general for its more existential, less abstract spin on Kantian transcendental analysis.

To address the prospect of changing the systems of thought/existence provided by the aforementioned authors, I have looked to Pyrrhonian skepticism. I should note that my interest in Pyrrhonism is not mainly about the movement as a historical phenomenon. Rather, I see the Pyrrhonian skeptic's dismissal of belief as a commitment to a life in which we are not essentially tied to any conceptual system. In the thesis on Pyrrhonism that I am currently writing, I argue that it is indeed conceivable for a Pyrrhonian skeptic to live a life without beliefs, although I also hold that such a form of life cannot be achieved on an individual scale, but must rather be a collective undertaking.

In addition to coursework and reading, I have also taken a number of other steps to further my philosophical education. In the Fall semester of my junior year I studied abroad at the Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, taking four courses in philosophy there. At Paris 1 I studied many of the French philosophers that interest me in the original French. More specifically, I was fortunate to be able to read and write about Deleuze (specifically, about his concept of "dramatization" and his relationship to Sartre's phenomenology) with the French Deleuze scholar Frédéric Fruteau de Laclos. In the summer between my junior and senior years I was accepted to and attended the Colorado Summer Seminar in Philosophy at CU Boulder, where I was able to study at the graduate level under a number of professors from the philosophy department at Boulder. The Fall semester of my senior year, I worked as a teaching assistant for my college's Intro to Logic course, helping to write quizzes and homework assignments as well as teaching some segments of the course to the class. Finally, in both a junior year independent study and an ongoing senior thesis, I have attempted to defend Pyrrhonian skepticism on the grounds that it is both possible and desirable. I hope to continue my commitment to philosophical learning and teaching at DePaul.