

Dear prospective grad students,

Much of my teaching and research has focused on learning from, and building upon, the insights of continental European thinkers from the 19th and 20th centuries. To me, one of the founding insights of the continental tradition is the idea that human reality cannot be understood independently of the world in which we actually live, and, correlatively, that what we ultimately mean by “the world in which we actually live” cannot be understood independently of our lived experience of it. A second, related, insight is that both our lived experience, and the world we live in, are fundamentally historical in character, which is to say that they change and develop over time, and can’t ultimately be understood independently of an account of this process of development. To me, these insights are fundamentally metaphysical, or ontological, in nature—that is, they concern what it is to be human, and what it is to be a world—and as such they have implications for all other topics in philosophy.

While my central focus has been on these ontological questions concerning the nature of human reality and its relation to the historical world, I have also explored some of the implications of these questions for issues in aesthetics, politics, the philosophy of time, and the philosophy of action. For instance, since actions involve a movement of “externalizing” into the world intentions that were formerly subjective in character, I am interested in the way that actions put into question any easy separation between subjectivity and objectivity, or experiencing self and world. Socially and politically, I am interested in the ways that actions, and especially collective actions, shape the character of the world we live in, and so make it difficult, if not impossible, to separate what is purely natural in this world from what is cultural or historical. My focus on the correlation between experience and world, along with the historical character of both, has also led me to pay special attention to the nature of temporality, which is at once a condition of experience and a condition of the historically-mediated, worldly phenomena we encounter in experience. More recently, drawing on my longstanding passion for art, I have become interested in understanding what beauty is, and in particular in how the appreciation of beauty factors into our overall relation to the world and to our sense of our place in it.

The particular figures who I have worked on the most are Hegel, Bergson, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, and I can supervise students working on most aspects of any of these figures. I also have developed interests in Kant, the other German Idealists, Marx, Nietzsche, de Beauvoir, Arendt, Gadamer, Foucault, and Derrida, and can offer supervisory support for many projects dealing with these figures, or can at least serve as a second reader for such projects. As a supervisor, I encourage close and careful readings of the primary texts. My concern first of all is to help students establish a solid understanding of the texts, and on working out some of the interpretative controversies they present, along with their philosophical implications. Then, once

a solid basic understanding is in place, pursuing more original lines of thought in response to the texts can take place.

Most of the philosophers I study are themselves students of the history of philosophy, and have developed their own unique insights through an ongoing engagement with the great texts of the past. As a result, my studying these philosophers has come hand in hand with a great appreciation of the inexhaustible wealth of the great texts in the history of philosophy, and I think contemporary philosophy still has much to learn from turning to its past, and risks losing touch with itself when it forsakes this past. While I imagine I will continue to expand my knowledge of the history of the philosophy for the rest of my career, the particular historical figures I have engaged with the most are Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine, Machiavelli, Descartes, and Kant.

While I think philosophy is useful in various ways, at bottom I think of the practice of philosophy as an end in itself, as an important and irreplaceable way in which we can realize some of human thought's highest potentials. However, I also think philosophy does not for that reason direct us away from life and its existential struggles, but serves in many ways to offer us greater perspective on their meaning and profundity. In that sense, I generally encourage students to link their philosophical interests with the sorts of issues they are working on in their own lives, so as to prevent their philosophical work from losing touch with the things that matter most to them.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions about my interests or about the sorts of projects I can supervise.

Best,

David Ciavatta