

I'm delighted that you are considering doing an MA in philosophy at Ryerson!

Before I tell you a bit about my research and graduate supervision, I'd like to share a little bit about our philosophical community here at Ryerson.

### **OUR PHILOSOPHICAL COMMUNITY**

You've probably already read the [degree requirements](#) on our website, and maybe you've looked at the information about [our current students and graduates](#), and at these [frequently asked questions](#).

But this information does not fully convey the wonderful sense of community that our graduate students consistently tell us they experience at Ryerson.

One reason for this sense of community, I think, is the simple fact that it's a two-year program: as a result, students have more time to get to know each other, and the professors, than they do in other programs. Over this two-year period, there are plenty of ways to get involved, quite apart from competing the degree requirements. Our students regularly give presentations on their work to each other; they participate in or lead reading/discussion groups; they organize an annual graduate student conference; they attend lectures by visiting speakers, they take leadership roles in student government, they organize social events, etc. This involvement strengthens our community.

A second reason for this strong sense of community, I think, is that every MA student has the shared experience of working as a TA for our first-year undergraduate course in Critical Thinking. I'm heavily involved in this operation, since I typically teach several sections of this course each year. In this role, I have the privilege of mentoring a team of graduate student TAs. While some of them report finding it a bit daunting – initially – to grade tests and lead tutorials, they consistently say that it's an extremely rewarding experience overall. In fact, many tell me that it's one of their favourite parts of the program! They love helping the undergraduate students to learn the material, to think philosophically, and to find their way at university. And the graduate students tell me that they really enjoy doing this work together and supporting each other as they do. I think that being part of this teaching team fosters community in myriad ways.

A third reason for the strong sense of community, I think, is that the professors here at Ryerson deeply value, and actively promote, a supportive, engaged, and pluralistic philosophical community.

But don't just take it from me! If you are considering studying here, I encourage you to reach out to [our student leaders](#), or to other [students enrolled in the program](#), to ask what their experience in our philosophical community has been like.

## **MY RESEARCH**

I work primarily in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion. For an overview of what this field is all about, you can have a look at [this article](#) I recently wrote, which will appear in the *Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Religion*.

I've published on various topics within this field; you can find all my publications [here](#). And I'm interested in plenty of other topics in this area that I haven't – yet – published on!

Outside of philosophy of religion, I am interested in a wide range of topics in philosophy, especially in epistemology and metaphysics.

## **SUPERVISION**

### **Area Reading Requirement**

Students interested in working with me typically approach me in the second semester of their first year in the program. We generally start by discussing the student's overall philosophical interests and goals. We then work together to craft a topic, and collect readings, for the Area Reading Requirement. This is like a directed reading course, or independent study, that students do in the summer between first and second year. Students read core texts on their topic, and produce written work to show their mastery of the terrain. You can find some examples of reading lists and writing assignments [on our website](#), and if you want me to send you all the ones I've supervised, please feel free to email me. I meet with students regularly throughout the Area Reading Requirement process to discuss the readings and their own writing, and I always provide lots of written feedback on their work as well.

### **Major Research Paper / Thesis**

Along the way, I encourage students to consider what specific topic they wish to explore more deeply for their capstone project: the Major Research Paper (MRP) or Thesis. Typically this is a topic that they began to explore in the Area Reading Requirement. We collaborate to define, at least provisionally, the boundaries of the topic, and to set realistic goals for progressing through the work.

Students do most of the writing for their MRP or Thesis in the second year of the program. Throughout this year, I meet regularly with them to discuss their progress, and I provide lots of detailed written feedback on their work as it progresses.

### **Professional Development and Doctoral Placement**

If students aim to pursue a PhD after completing their MA, I help orient them to the application process, and I mentor them as they produce writing samples, statements of interest, and scholarship applications. I encourage them to seek out professional opportunities, like giving a presentation at a philosophy conference. On a couple of occasions I have also co-authored with graduate students.

I also run a lively [philosophy of religion work-in-progress group](#) for graduate students and faculty, and I always encourage students who are interested in this area to participate in this group's meetings. (Added bonus: the department always provides a free lunch at these sessions!)

Of the students whose MRPs/Theses I have supervised, virtually all who wished to continue to doctoral studies were accepted into at least one PhD program – and in some cases several. For a complete record of our department's placement, see [here](#).

### Topics I've Supervised within Philosophy of Religion

Here are non-technical descriptions of the philosophy of religion topics on which I've supervised graduate students so far:

- **Religious/Mystical Experiences.** Many religious believers report having religious experiences, and some of these are called mystical experiences. But what sorts of experiences are properly classified as 'religious' or 'mystical'? Can such experiences ever make religious beliefs rational? Why or why not?
- **Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom.** God is often thought to be *omniscient* (all-knowing). Some think this means that God knows exactly what will happen in the future. But if God exists, and knows exactly what will happen in the future, can human beings be free? Why or why not?
- **God and the Multiverse.** Some people have argued that the fact that our universe is *biophilic* (life-permitting) supports the existence of God. Others have responded that this argument fails if our universe is just one of many in a vast multiverse: after all, if there are trillions and trillions of universes, it shouldn't be surprising if *some* of them are life-permitting. But still others say that a multiverse is precisely what we should expect to find if God exists. Who is right? Why?
- **The Problem of Divine Hiddenness.** Many people are atheists or agnostics: they don't believe that God exists. And it seems that many of those people are rational in taking this view. It has been argued that the phenomenon of *reasonable non-belief* counts against the existence of God. After all, if God were to exist, and were perfectly loving, God would surely want to have a personal relationship with all people. Now, in order to be in a personal relationship with someone, you have to believe that the other person exists. Given this, the argument continues, you'd expect God to make sure that everyone believes that God exists – but that's not what we find. Is this a good argument for atheism? Why or why not?
- **The Problem of No Best World.** Some philosophers, like Leibniz, think that there is one unique best of all possible worlds. Others, like Aquinas, think that there is no such thing, but that instead, there's an infinite hierarchy of increasingly better worlds. Suppose that the second view is right. Some have argued that given this view, God cannot exist. That's because no matter which world God might choose to create, God could have chosen a better one, in which case God would have *been* better – but of course God is supposed to be unsurpassably good. Is this a good argument for atheism? Why or why not?
- **Prayer.** Many religious believers pray, and some of these prayers involve asking God to bring about certain things (for example, healing a sick person). But if those are good things for God to do, then God already had good reasons to do them before the prayer occurred. And if they are bad things for God to do, God wouldn't do them, even if asked. So, is this sort of prayer pointless? Why or why not?
- **The Meaning of Life.** What is it for human life to be meaningful? Some say that life cannot be meaningful if God does not exist. Others say that life can be meaningful if atheism is true. Who is right, and why?

## Topics I've Supervised in Epistemology

Apart from the topics I've supervised in the philosophy of religion, I've also supervised two students who worked primarily on epistemology. Here are non-technical descriptions of their topics:

- **The Epistemology of Disagreement.** Suppose that two people disagree about some claim: one thinks it's true and the other thinks it's false. And suppose that both people are (at least roughly) equal in terms of intelligence, the evidence they possess, etc. *Conciliationists* say that in such a situation, both parties should become less confident that they are correct. *Steadfasters* think that neither party is rationally required to reduce their confidence. Who is right, and why?
- **The Problem of Unpossessed Evidence.** We believe lots of things on the basis of evidence. But in many cases, it's clear that we haven't considered *all* of the readily-available evidence that's relevant to whether our beliefs are true or false. We often haven't even looked at a *representative sample* of this evidence. Moreover, we often have good reason to suppose that if we *did* consider more of this evidence, we'd discover good reasons for thinking that our beliefs are false. Should this realization make us less confident in our views? Why or why not?

I hope that this information has given you a better sense of what our community is like, and of how I see my role as a supervisor, and about what the students I've supervised have done. Please feel free to contact me directly if you would like more information, or would like to discuss anything in this letter. I look forward to hearing from you!



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