

Dear Prospective MA Student,

Choosing one's future program of study is not easy, I know — especially because it is difficult to have insight into the lived commitments and everyday functioning of particular departments, professors, and potential supervisors. To help you a bit with that, let me tell you a bit about my philosophical interests, teaching and supervising commitments, and what I think is special about our MA program.

*The Formation of my Philosophical Commitments and Research*

I came to philosophy because I wanted to understand human reality more fully — how it is that we learn and develop, or undergo existential transformations; what a self is such that those transformations are possible; what it means to really achieve a sense of agency and freedom in one's life; and, especially, how the social world and interpersonal relationships can enable or disable such agency, freedom, and transformation.

I had a career, before going to university, as an athletic coach and competitor, and I had been a student of several top trainers and athletes in North America. I encountered there the subtle (and not so subtle) workings of power, and was keenly aware of how one could be drawn into social and affective dynamics that lead one into prejudiced and socially unjust forms of life, that isolate one from influences that might question those dynamics, and that can undermine one's own sense of agency and conscientious responsibility. I was unhappy there, and wanted both a better life, and a better understanding of social reality, individual freedom, and... well, the meaning of life! I initially thought I might find answers in psychology. But it was a course on phenomenology that really spoke to those issues, and gave me hope for an ever-deepening understanding of those issues — and ultimately led me into a life of philosophy.

Phenomenology might seem to some a strange place from which to think about social reality, and to interrogate critically its interrelations with human agency and existential well-being — for phenomenology is often popularly understood to be a description of *first-person* experience, and thus neither socially nor critically oriented. But in fact, phenomenology is an essentially critical form of inquiry: it seeks to recognize the prejudices at work in experience, and it does this in order to open us up more fully to the being of transcendent realities that announce themselves within experience — whether these transcendent realities are other people, things, nature, or being itself. And phenomenology's interrogation of experience leads it to a recognition of the ways in which experience — indeed, even mathematical knowledge and our experience of truth and objectivity — is always already (and necessarily) informed by the embodied orientations, practices and gestures of others. This leads, on my reading, to a call to understand the ways in which our experiences, orientations, and personal and institutional practices both are informed by, and actively inform, social reality, and to grapple with resultant questions about the nature of personal agency and existential becoming on the one hand, and social justice on the other. Within this frame, my past research has focussed in particular on the affective and intersubjective nature of experience, and how this affectivity and intersubjectivity give rise to existential becoming; and my current research is especially concerned with the temporality of

that becoming, and with phenomenological analyses of social injustices that occur at subtle, affective and intersubjective levels. (You can see [my CV here](#); the titles of my articles, edited volumes and talks offer a more fine-grained articulation of the foci of my philosophical thinking.)

Phenomenology drew me into philosophy, but once there, I found that thinkers beyond the phenomenological tradition had much to teach me, and offered many rich resources for further articulating and answering my questions. My thinking has been influenced especially by Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, Freud, Sartre, Beauvoir, Heidegger and (most of all) Merleau-Ponty. Ryle, Collingwood, Dewey, Winnicott, Freire, Laing, Fanon, and feminist thought have also played important roles –and Foucault and Deleuze are increasingly having an effect.

But just as important to my education have been the philosophical communities in which I've been able to explore and discuss, in serious and meaningful ways, the ideas of these authors. These are communities of people with a genuine sense of wonder, a commitment to charitable interpretation of each other and the texts, the courage to be open and answerable to reality, and a conviction that learning is something that we do better together, in holding ourselves accountable to the demands of honest expression, clear communication, and rigorous communal inquiry.

### *Teaching*

You won't be surprised to hear, then, that there are three main things that I attempt to do in my courses: (1) foster a genuine sense of community and communal inquiry; (2) articulate and address questions that make a difference to how we live (which I take to include metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological questions); and (3) read texts that offer us rich resources for realizing what these questions are, and how we might best address them. Since, however, I take philosophy to be relevant to how we lead our lives, and who we are, it is not only in the classroom that I think these things should happen. I try to organize and support initiatives that allow these three things to happen in many forums beyond the classroom –including informal reading groups, seminars with visiting professors, public lectures, discussions with people beyond academia (e.g. healthcare-givers, people with chronic illness, people who are or have been incarcerated, students in elementary and high schools, people with philosophy BAs but non-academic careers, etc.), or simply conversations over coffee or beer.

### *Supervising Graduate Students*

As a supervisor of MA projects, my aim is to help students (a) realize what it is that they believe and care about, philosophically, (b) deepen their insights through transformative engagement with philosophical texts and other interlocutors, and (c) articulate those insights in rigorous, honest and communicative ways. I believe that, whatever one's career plans after doing an MA, that MA work should be rewarding in itself by virtue of securing philosophical insights that can be carried forward in one's life, developing a sense of oneself as a meaningful participant in community, and learning about oneself through learning about what one cares about. I think that requires many things of me, as a supervisor: expertise in my field so that I can be a good

philosophical guide; thoughtfulness about teaching and supervising; professional involvement so that I can connect students and help them navigate well the territory of professional philosophy; a recognition of obstacles that arise in undertaking serious philosophical thinking; strategies for overcoming those obstacles; and compassion and encouragement for people who are involved in that overcoming and becoming. (You can find a list of the projects that I have supervised, and the doctoral committees that I sit on on [my CV, here.](#))

#### *Ryerson's MA Program*

Since I value philosophical community so highly, what I like best about our MA program at Ryerson is the sense of community amongst graduate students. Students who move on to other programs—or even to non-academic jobs—regularly come back and say how much they miss the sense of community that they had here. That sense of community is probably in part due to the fact that MA students all go, together, through the trials and joys of teaching critical thinking tutorials. Probably it is also due to the philosophical and pedagogical strengths, diversity, and friendliness of the philosophy faculty (we are one of the few departments in Canada, and even North America, with strengths in both Analytic and Continental philosophy; and we are lucky to have an unusually high number of faculty with interests in Continental philosophy). Perhaps we're also good at admitting nice people! Whatever the case, it seems that Ryerson's department tends to have a philosophical spirit that brings MA students together in happy, meaningful ways.

I hope this conveys something more than one can find on CVs and internet pages. If you find yourself with remaining questions, please communicate them: just email, call, or schedule a visit—whether with myself or the graduate program director. All the best in your difficult but important decision of where to do your MA.

Kym Maclaren