

THE CENTER FOR ETHICS

Newsletter

Fall 2007

The University of Montana

Technology and the good life An interview with UM Regent's Professor Albert Borgmann

Last spring, Albert Borgmann, UM Regent's Professor of Philosophy, joined over 130 audience members in a conversation about his philosophy and his recent book, *Real American Ethics*.

Professor Borgmann and his guest panelists discussed the responsibility we all share in creating our values. Professor Borgmann agreed to join us again for a follow-up interview with Ali Tabibnejad, a recent graduate of UM's philosophy program.

Ali Tabibnejad: *Is there a rule of thumb that one can use in deciding what kind of technology to use or not use?*

Professor Borgmann: Well, I think technological devices that provide a definite benefit in health, safety and survival are unproblematic. And beyond that, we often don't have a choice whether we want to use technological devices or not—they're just inflicted on us. In this town, you almost have to have a car; you certainly have to have a bicycle; and these days you've got to have a computer otherwise you're just not accessible to lots of things; you also must be reachable by telephone. So the question is not using them or not using them but how to use them... The answer is "the ones that enhance focal practices and communal celebrations, and do not diminish or replace them." That would be the rule of thumb.

T: *One's resolve to pursue excellence and lead a good life can always be confused or countered by cultural forces. [What] can*

we resort to in dealing with these situations?

B: Most of us have experienced the good life and we are not ignorant about it— and if we haven't experienced it, we certainly have dreamed of it and hoped for it and

aspired to it. So it's not a secret. The problem is, once you have this focal experience of the good life, how to give it a secure position, a secure and central position in your life. To do that, you have to know what you are up against: the temptations and the seductions of the life of consumption. Typically the liabilities of the technological culture oscillate between sullenness

and hyperactivity. Sullenness is bad—you are just a passive consumer and have given up on excellence. A driven kind of hyperactivity is also bad, although not as bad. And so there is a kind of schooling we have to give one another, the benefit of our experiences. And philosophers, of course, have an important task in thinking through and articulating in helpful language what for most people is a confusing mess with flashes of insight and quite often a frustration in not being able to put it all together and make it cohere.

T: *In another interview you mentioned that if you had a choice, you would instill generosity, and then a sense of humor, and finally intelligence in your students. Why is that? And, since you can't demand generosity from others, how can we hope to instill it in others?* (Please see **Interview**, page 5)



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Update: NSF Debating Science 2007

In the first week of August, 34 graduate students from across the country joined three University of Montana professors and 3 co-teachers from Iowa, South Carolina, and North Carolina for a four day National Science Foundation sponsored workshop called "Debating Science." The workshop was designed to introduce the students, $\frac{3}{4}$ of whom were studying for graduate degrees in the natural sciences, to some of the skills necessary for deliberation about complex issues in science policy.

The students were divided up into 3 interest groups focusing on climate change, nanotechnology and agricultural biotechnology.

The Center for Ethics created a program of study with lectures by national experts in each of the three interest areas in addition to seminars on more general issues of ethics and policy. The University of Montana's own Steven Running offered an informative talk on his experience working for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Vicky Colvin, of Rice University, gave students insight into the politics surrounding the creation of potentially harmful nanomaterials from her perspective as director of the Center for Biological and Environmental Nanotechnology at Rice University. Paul Thompson from Michigan State University regaled us with stories of the various twists and turns in the debates over genetically modified crops.

Throughout each day, there were break-out groups in each of the interest areas lead by Dane Scott (UM)

and Jim Costa (Western Carolina University) in biotechnology, Rebecca Bendick (UM) and Clark Wolf (Iowa State) in climate change, and Christopher Preston (UM) and Cathy Murphy (University of South Carolina) in nanotechnology. Lunchtimes and evenings were filled with additional talks on topics including biomimicry, forest restoration, economic policy, local food, and the philosophy of technology.



The 2007 NSF Debating Science students, during the August workshop in Missoula.

Throughout the workshop, the students kept up an incredibly high quality of questions and discussion, on some occasions staying up late into the night discussing the finer points of questions like "objectivity, advocacy, or both." Feedback has been very positive. One

student told us in the close of the workshop survey that this was "without question, the best workshop I've ever attended, and in fact far superior to the two-year fellowship I had for the science-theology debate at Princeton's Center of Theological Inquiry." Another student commented that the value of the experience lay in the "shelter from the daily demands of my research so that I could think all the way through these more conceptual issues regarding science - something that I've been desperately hoping for quite a while." A third congratulated the ethics center on "an incredible job," adding "I still miss the stimulation." The workshop will be held again next summer.

Christopher Preston is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at The University of Montana and a co-PI for the NSF Debating Science project. He is a co-instructor for the nanotechnology section.

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Special Insert

Fall 2007
Event Details

Evening Event: Roundtable Discussion

Please join Professor David Sherman and guest panelists to discuss the philosophical problem of political agency in the postmodern age. An associate professor of philosophy at The University of Montana, Professor Sherman is the recipient of the 2007 Dennison Faculty Award for Scholarship and the 2004 Cox Educational Excellence Award. This discussion follows Professor Sherman's recent publication, *Sartre and Adorno: The Dialectics of Subjectivity*, in which he argues that bringing these two philosophers into a productive tension provides new possibilities for making sense of the notion of subjectivity, and, thereby, the grounds of political agency.

This event will also feature guest panelists Fred McGlynn, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy; Ron Perrin, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and Political Theory; and Marianne Blau, 2007 graduate of the UM Philosophy BA program.

"Political Agency in the Postmodern Age:
A Roundtable Discussion of David Sherman's *Sartre and Adorno:
The Dialectics of Subjectivity*"
Wednesday, November 14 7:00 pm
Dell Brown Room, Turner Hall
The University of Montana
Reception to follow

Fall 2007 Ethics At Noon Lectures

On October 3, Professor Donald McCabe of Rutgers University will present a lecture about academic integrity. McCabe recently completed a survey about academic honesty with UM faculty and students, and will present the results. This event will be held in Gallagher Business Building room 123 from noon to 1 pm.

On November 2, Dr. James Kroll, head of Head of Administrative Investigations for the National Science Foundation's Office of Inspector General, will speak about research integrity and ethical issues in research. Within National Science Foundation (NSF), the Office of Inspector General (OIG) investigates allegations of wrongdoing involving organizations or individuals that receive awards from NSF. Issues critical to NSF include, but are not

limited to, research misconduct, fraud, conflicts of interest, human subject protections and animal welfare concerns, peer review violations, duplicative research, retaliation and student/mentor relationships. Dr. Kroll will highlight the ethical expectations NSF places on its grantees and present numerous case studies regarding violations that OIG has investigated.

Finally, on November 29 the Center will hold a special panel as part of the Ethics at Noon series. "The Ethical Aspects of UM's Mission: A Panel Discussion with UM's President" will feature President Dennison. This event will be held from 11 am to 12:15 pm, location to be announced. Visit the CFE website at any time (www.umt.edu/ethics) for more information, or call (406)243-6632.

Continuing Climate Change Speaker Series

This semester the Center for Ethics is co-sponsoring a five-part lecture series on the ethical and spiritual implications of climate change. "Honest Community Conversations About Climate Change" includes presentations from UM professors and community religious leaders. Co-sponsored with the Western Montana Spiritual Development Council and Lutheran Campus Ministries, the series focuses on an inter-faith understanding of the obligations and responsibilities of global climate change.

The lecture events are on Tuesday evenings at 7 pm in the South Ballroom of the University Center at UM. Like all CFE events this semester, the lecture series is free to attend and all are welcome.

Three lectures remain in the series:

- October 9: "The Rhetoric of Climate Change: How Do We Talk About It?" Professor Steven Schwartz, UM Communications Department
- October 23: "Beyond Stewardship: Toward a Theology that Reconnects and Empowers Us" Reverend John Lund, Lutheran Campus Ministry
- November 6: "Climate Change as a Spiritual Crisis / Call to a Spiritual Life" Professor Albert Borgmann, UM Regent's Professor of Philosophy

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Director's Column: August Wrap-Up

There was a lot of productive activity here at the Center for Ethics this August: we held a National Science Foundation workshop and the second annual Environmental Ethics Institute.

The NSF workshop brought graduate students from around the country to UM; this year we received 126 applications for 34 positions, and the students admitted represented a highly qualified and diverse group. We would like to thank Montana EPSCoR for their support which helped make this event a real success.

Andrew Light, a leading environmental thinker from the University of Washington and former UM philosophy professor, returned for his second year to teach at the Environmental Ethics Institute. Students

and professionals came from around the country to take Andrew's course and attend the Institute. Professors came from Duke, Clemson, Wyoming and Indiana, along with graduate students from Alberta, Alabama and UM. In addition to Andrew's course, the Institute included nine noon and evening community lectures by national and area scholars. We greatly appreciate the support from Humanities Montana to help make these events a success, and are pleased to announce that Andrew Light will be returning next summer to teach at the summer institute.

Finally, Justin Whitaker, who has worked at the Center for the last two years, recently moved to London to pursue his PhD. Justin will be greatly missed and we wish him the very best.

Dane Scott is the Director of the Center for Ethics.

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B: We can do it in two ways, one is through teaching and, again, by providing the kind of confidence and consciousness of generosity that even generous people sometimes lack—make it clear to them that the great traditions, social science research and our intuitions all converge in showing that generosity is a good thing; it makes you feel well and puts you in proper relationship with people and things. The other [way], of course, is by example. Virtues are mildly transitive and they reverberate, at least to some extent, beyond our individual person to those whom we know and then from there to those who these people know in turn. That's a good thing about the virtues and setting an example.

T: *What are your ambitions with philosophy now, and what do you hope your legacy to be in philosophy?*

B: Let me start with my legacy. My legacy is my students. The most wonderful experience is when you meet them

again after five years and they tell you that you helped them to clarify their lives and make them better. The second legacy is my contribution to my readers and that legacy is wide and diverse but thin and more than I could hope for when I started—much more. It's of course not enough but then no one person can turn a culture around. At best they can make a small contribution to something—you know, it's like a little creek and it flows into other creeks and then it can become a stream. As far as my ambition is concerned, I would like to write a book about moral cosmology. ... I think what perhaps can be done is to show how contemporary culture, the daily culture we live in, provides unique obstacles but also unique opportunities for recovering something like a moral cosmology, that is to say, an encompassing worldview that has some effect on the way in which we think of ourselves and of what we do day to day.

Professor Borgmann had more to say; to hear the entire interview, visit the Center for Ethics webpage at www.umt.edu/ethics

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CFE information, please visit
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Upcoming Events

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Professor Donald McCabe, Rutgers University
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- November 14: "Political Agency in the Postmodern Age"
Professor David Sherman and guest panelists
7 pm, Dell Brown Room, Turner Hall, UM Campus
- November 29: "Ethics at Noon Special Panel: The Ethical Aspects of UM's Mission," *President George Dennison and guest panelists*
11 am, Location TBA

...more event information inside!