

# Philosophers in Jesuit Education

Annual Newsletter



## *In This Issue*

**Announcement: PJE  
Inaugural Lecture  
John Cottingham, May 26**

**Go Forth into the World!  
Karen Stohr**

**Member Spotlight:  
Matthew Shea**

Philosophers in Jesuit Education is a network of philosophers teaching in Jesuit-sponsored institutions of higher education in the United States, together with philosophers in other institutions or elsewhere who are interested in Jesuit education.

e: [jesuitphilosophers@gmail.com](mailto:jesuitphilosophers@gmail.com)

w: <https://pje.blog.fordham.edu>

## President's Welcome

Greetings! Welcome to the inaugural newsletter for Philosophers in Jesuit Education. This newsletter is put together by members of the executive committee for PJE, and our hope is that it will help to foster greater community among philosophers working in Jesuit education. One way we hope to foster connection is through a PJE “member spotlight” each issue. In this issue we are featuring an interview with Matthew Shea (University of Scranton). We also want to provide a space for mission reflection by our members so that it can be shared with our community for edification and encouragement. In this issue Karen Stohr (Georgetown University) offers her wisdom on living out our Jesuit mission while teaching during the pandemic.

I am also pleased to share some upcoming events that PJE is sponsoring. Each year we sponsor a satellite session at the meeting of the American Catholic Philosophical Association, which this year will take place in Saint Louis from November 18-21 and is sponsored by Saint Louis University. Starting this year, we are also excited to sponsor an annual lecture via Zoom. Our inaugural lecture will be by John Cottingham on “The Religious Dimensions of Descartes’s Thought” on May 26th (see announcement on Page 2 for more details).

With all good wishes for everyone's work in carrying out our Jesuit mission,

David McPherson  
President of Philosophers in Jesuit Education  
Associate Professor of Philosophy  
Creighton University  
AMDG

## Philosophers in Jesuit Education

### *Inaugural Annual Lecture*

John Cottingham (Professor Emeritus at University of Reading and Honorary Fellow at St. John's College, Oxford ) will deliver the Inaugural Philosophers in Jesuit Education Annual Lecture on May 26th, 12pm Eastern Time. The lecture will be titled, "The Religious Dimension of Descartes' Thought." All are welcome! Join us over Zoom at:  
<https://creighton.zoom.us/j/95116033180>

## Member Spotlight

Matthew Shea, University of Scranton  
Interview by Naomi Fisher

NF: What projects have you been working on recently?

MS: I'm currently refining and expanding my dissertation project, which was developing a relationship-centered account of human nature and human flourishing to serve as the basis of a somewhat new approach to natural law and virtue ethics. The mainstream views in Aristotelian-Thomistic ethics tend to prioritize intellectual goods and virtues, like contemplation and practical wisdom. My approach makes personal relationships and charity primary in our understanding of the good life. A related project is defending a perfectionist approach to well-being that grounds goodness in the fulfillment of human nature. Another is bringing together natural law ethics and virtue ethics to counteract the divorce that's occurred between these two theories in contemporary moral philosophy.

NF: What do you believe is distinctive about a Jesuit education? What aspects of your teaching or research intersect with the Jesuit identity of your institution?

MS: One distinctive aspect of Jesuit education is the integration of faith and reason. A Jesuit education encourages the full range of questions that human beings ask, which is important for students who are trying to make sense of how all the parts of their lives fit together...

*Continued on Page 4*

## Go Forth into the World!

By Karen Stohr, Georgetown University

"Go forth into the world!" This exhortation, in its many forms, is the unofficial motto at many Jesuit colleges and universities. Except this year, of course. "Actually, stay home!" has been our mantra during these past months. The pandemic has created a world in which Jesuit education seems both more difficult and more important than ever. How do we get our students to turn their gaze outward to the world, in all its beauty and brokenness, while also pleading with them to confine themselves to the solitary spaces of their homes and dorm rooms? How do we reach through our laptop screens or around our plexiglass barriers to become present to our students, and enable them to be present to one another? And perhaps most importantly, how do we go forth into the new and unfamiliar world unfolding before us? *Continued, page 3*



## Go Forth into the World, by Karen Stohr, continued

Like many people, I have conducted most of my professional life in the past year over Zoom. It is distancing but also surprisingly intimate. Each person is confined to a box on my monitor, and yet each box also brims with details that would never surface in a classroom. Concert posters and carefully nurtured houseplants in the background reveal the tastes and talents of the sleepy student facing the camera. The occasional roommate or parent drifts across the background, perhaps listening in or perhaps just looking for lunch. Boisterous dogs and younger siblings startle and amuse with their disruptions. Those boxes, confining as they are, allow us passage into worlds we would not otherwise see, worlds characterized by their ordinariness.

Philosophers do not often dwell in the land of the ordinary. We are trained to turn things on their heads, to take nothing for granted, and to look for avenues not yet explored. In this sense, philosophy seems like the perfect enterprise for a world gone upside down. We think of ourselves as the heirs of Socrates or Nietzsche or Douglass or Day or Marx. Our task is to unsettle our students, to uproot their easy prejudices and unreflective convictions, to shake them awake from their dogmatic slumbers.

But of course, our students have spent the last year in a world that is already fragmented and disoriented. We live in a country badly shaken by disease, racial strife, and political turmoil. The dark cloud of climate change poses an existential threat to humanity. The weight our students carry into our classrooms is heavy. In Ignatian terms, we might say that our current world is characterized by desolation. For this reason, it seems like a good moment to stop and consider what else philosophy can offer. In particular, it's worth considering whether philosophy can function as an antidote to the loneliness and despair that so many of our students seem to be feeling. How can philosophy console our students, and not simply unsettle them?

The idea of philosophy as consolation is hardly new. (Certainly Boethius took it to heart!) But in the busy day to day life of modern universities, it is easy to forget this aspect of our disciplinary heritage. In the last several years, there has been a renewed focus on teaching philosophy as a way of life. This has transformative potential if we are prepared to let it happen, if we are willing to give ourselves over to the wisdom of many sages across many traditions for a short while, if we are willing to linger among them to see what we might learn. We might be able to use this moment to show our students how philosophy can help us find our way forward out of darkness and create new ways of living in the world.

This has been a year in which we have done things like teach Plato from the laundry room, give professional talks while barefoot, and interrupt a lecture to tell a child not to put their headphones on the dog during social studies class. It can feel like we are constantly in motion while also simply standing in place, waiting for the pandemic to end and normal life to resume. When my daughters were young, I found it extremely challenging to wait patiently while a toddler spent a short eternity putting on a sock or walking ten feet down a sidewalk. Motion comes easily; it is the practice of standing still that requires self-fortification. But of course, standing still is the only way we ever come to notice things like sidewalk cracks shaped like bananas and bird nests taking shape in the branches of neglected Japanese hollies. The ordinary can easily elude us unless we force ourselves (or are forced by a toddler or a pandemic) to linger in stillness.

It seems too early and probably overly hubristic to say what grand lessons, if any, we will learn from this pandemic. But maybe it isn't too early to appreciate how philosophy can help us flourish, amidst both the stillness of the pandemic and the social turmoil brewing around us. The Stoics have tools to help us cope with our feelings of powerlessness. The Confucians have advice on self-cultivation through our ordinary daily rituals. Aristotle reminds us of the absolute necessity of friendship. Audre Lorde teaches us about the value of anger in generating insight and bringing about social change. Kant encourages us not to lose hope in the possibility of a more peaceful world and to have faith in the moral possibilities of flawed human beings.

If our students are to go forth bravely into this new world, they will need good companions. And perhaps philosophy's great consolation lies in its ability to provide us with ongoing companionship. Like all companions, philosophical figures have their flaws. They seem useless on some days, annoying on other days, and yet indispensable on still other days. Perversely, the more time we spend with them, the fewer answers they seem to have. But philosophical companions are sturdy ones, ready to take on present challenges and adapt themselves for future ones. It is the enduring gift of philosophy that it can lend stability to an unstable world, stability that makes it possible for us to cope with the strange combination of chaos and quiet that has characterized the past year. In providing our students with philosophical companions in this time of stillness, we help them become ready to venture forth into the world taking shape.

*Around me the trees stir in their leaves  
And call out, "Stay awhile."  
The light flows from their branches.  
--Mary Oliver, "When I am among the trees"*

## Member Spotlight: Matthew Shea, continued

MS: ...It offers a way of pursuing truth that encompasses all the academic disciplines and synthesizes them into a comprehensive vision. Philosophy and theology have a special role to play in this process. The Jesuit model enables me to teach philosophy in a way that's open to theological questions and is responsive to students' natural tendency to link their philosophical and religious perspectives. For me, it's liberating and valuable to be among students and colleagues who are committed to the integration of reason and faith.

The second aspect is a commitment to moral education and action. Jesuit universities aim to cultivate virtuous individuals who will go on to live good lives and who are devoted to serving those in need and working for justice and the common good. As someone who teaches lots of ethics courses, including medical ethics for future health care professionals, I feel a weighty responsibility to fulfill this goal. I try to encourage students to adopt the Jesuit practice of contemplation in action and to heed the Ignatian call to "set the world aflame," so that they can be salt and light in a world that sorely needs it.

NF: Is there anyone who has influenced the way you think about the purpose of philosophy in an education? How have your professional activities been shaped by this person?

MS: With all due respect to St. Ignatius, the people who've had the most profound influence on my view of what it means to be a philosophy teacher are two of my Boston College professors: Brian Braman and Paul McNellis, SJ. They sparked and shepherded me through a learning process that dramatically changed my understanding of education, the world, myself, and the good life. They awakened in me a desire to know the truth about the big questions. They communicated the message that philosophical questions really matter, not just for the intellectual task of gaining wisdom, but also for the existential task of living well. They were intellectual and moral exemplars who made truth, goodness, and beauty attractive. By personally embodying wisdom, charity, and the harmony of faith and reason, they had a huge influence in pointing me toward the path of reflection, faith, and moral commitment.

On top of all that, Brian and Fr. McNellis were caring mentors who took a vested interest in me as a person, not just a student. Through them, I experienced *cura personalis* in a life-changing way. They were role models and guides at a time when I really needed them. The intellectual, moral, and spiritual formation I received from them shaped me into the person I am today, and it was primarily because of their example that I chose to become a philosopher. I strive to live up to (and constantly fall short of) the example they set. My goal is to make it into their league someday.

NF: What is a favorite moment or experience you have had (so far) at Scranton?

MS: A moment that stands out is when one of my students stayed after class on the last day of the semester to talk with me. He told me that it had been an especially tough term for him, but my course had helped him find his way by giving him a newfound desire to pursue knowledge and virtue, a renewed sense of meaning and purpose, and a determination to learn and grow as a person. He thanked me and asked if I could continue being a teacher and mentor to him after our course ended. That conversation was extremely gratifying and encouraging to a new professor who often doubts his abilities. It was also a powerful moment of grace because it came with a sense of knowing that I was living out my calling and that I was in a position to do for others what my professors did for me. As every teacher knows, those are the moments that make it all worthwhile.

To join PJE or learn more, visit <https://pje.blog.fordham.edu> or contact: [jesuitphilosophers@gmail.com](mailto:jesuitphilosophers@gmail.com)

### PJE Executive Committee

President: David McPherson (Creighton University)

Vice-President: Thomas Cavanaugh (University of San Francisco)

Secretary-Treasurer: Joe Vukov (Loyola University Chicago)

Executive Committee Member: Catherine Peters (Loyola Marymount University)

Executive Committee Member: Naomi Fisher (Loyola University Chicago)

Executive Committee Member: Eleonore Stump (Saint Louis University)

Past President: Stephen Grimm (Fordham University)

Advisor: Joseph J. Godfrey, S.J. (Saint Joseph's University)

PJE Logo Design: Jeff Fisher (Loyola University Chicago)

