

Exploring the ethical challenges facing contemporary society, UC San Diego's Department of Philosophy presents a three-part symposium this academic year titled Ethics in the Public Sphere. The symposium opens Nov. 3 from 1 p.m to 5:30 p.m. with lectures and responses on the subject of "Our Duties to Distant Needy Persons." Arizona State University Prof. Douglas Portmore and UC Irvine Philosophy graduate student K. Violet McKeon will speak first, followed by Philosophy professors Aaron James and Richard Arneson, from UC Irvine and UC San Diego, respectively. We chatted with UC San Diego Department of Philosophy Chair Don Rutherford about the new series.

Why did you create Ethics in the Public Sphere?

There is often discussion and debate of topical ethical and social-political issues on campus, but Philosophy faculty and graduate students are only seldom involved. I am eager for the department and UC San Diego's Division of Arts and Humanities to have a more prominent role. Topics arose organically through discussion and proposals from people in the department. The series highlights exciting research being done by faculty and graduate students in our department and brings to campus visitors with special expertise in the relevant areas. We hope the symposia will be interesting and accessible to a wide audience. Undergraduates are one of our target audiences, as are members of the broader public.

Given the political and social unrest in our world, the subject of ethics seems particularly timely.

All the topics we have selected are timely. We all get appeals to contribute to charities, including those that work with people living in extreme poverty in the developing world. What kind of moral demand should we see such appeals as carrying? Some philosophers such as Peter Singer have made the case that each of us should, on moral grounds, contribute much more to the needy than we do. Our first symposium will be an attempt to better understand the arguments lying behind these demands. The second event in Winter quarter is a more ambitious conference on "War Ethics" organized by my colleague Sam Rickless. Given the past decade of U.S. history, no one can question that war raises serious moral questions: both the issue of whether to wage war and under what conditions, and the ethics that govern war itself. One of my colleagues, Saba Bazargan, is involved in research directed at revitalizing the tradition of Just War Theory, which remains one of the main prisms through which the morality of war is examined. The conference "War Ethics" will pursue this and other topics, led by a group of leading international scholars. Finally, in Spring quarter, we will discuss the "Aims of Education" in a symposium that aspires to bring together philosophers of education with local K-12 educators.

Are there aspects of your own work which relate directly to the symposia?

Not directly, though perhaps in the future. I am primarily a historian of early modern (17th and 18th century) philosophy, but I think a lot about the larger relevance of

philosophy and its role in a culture. Philosophy has always questioned conventional values and norms, but it has also sometimes played a vital role in public discussion of critical issues. I would like to see more of that happen. My role in EPS is to help catalyze this process.

How do you see the series heightening the department's profile, letting the outside world know what sorts of questions are being raised by you?

We are starting small, but I would like to see the series expand in the coming years and to be one of the ways in which the Philosophy department is identified on campus and in the larger community. As we move forward we hope to establish connections with other parts of campus such as the School of Medicine and Scripps Institution of Oceanography in which research and practice intersect with significant ethical questions.

Are you aiming for a particular outcome from the series? A position paper or report?

We see this as different from a standard academic conference, which often has a volume of collected papers as a product. This may happen in the case of the "War Ethics" conference, but that is not the model for the series as a whole. If we can get people thinking and talking about the issues, and get students excited about the possibility of Philosophy as a major, we will have met our main goals.