

I'm Stephen Puryear (NC State) and I'm here to answer your questions about philosophy (and whatever else). AMA

smpuryear<sup>1</sup> and r/Science AMAs<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

Hi Reddit! I'm Stephen Puryear, assistant professor of philosophy at NC State University. I'm interested in the history of philosophy (esp. early modern philosophy and the German philosophical tradition, Leibniz and Schopenhauer above all), and in metaphysics and ethics. I've written a number of articles in these areas, which you can download for free from my PhilPapers page. I'm also working on a book on Leibniz's idealism and a number of articles, including one on the idea of a moral law and another on consent theories of political obligation. I'm looking forward to this, so let's get started. Go ahead, ask me anything!

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SMPURYEAR [R/SCIENCE](#)

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As a historian, what do you make of how Schopenhauer is treated in anglophone departments, as compared, say, to its treatment of Hegel and Nietzsche? What has made us pay more attention to the latter?

[coffeeandbitters](#)

I think it's odd, because Schopenhauer is very much like an "analytic philosopher". He prizes clarity and puts forward arguments for his views that can be reconstructed and analyzed. And he criticizes the obscurity of people like Hegel, much as the early analytic philosophers did.

With Hegel, I suspect that many philosophers like the challenge of trying to make sense of his works. I also suspect that interest in Kant is starting to lead people to his successors, and will eventually move beyond the German idealists (Fichte, Schelling, Hegel) to Schopenhauer. I think his time is coming.

As for Nietzsche, I can't explain his appeal, except perhaps that he stands out as one of the few amorality in the tradition, a sort of real life Thrasymachus or Callicles (<-- refs. to characters in Plato's *Republic* and *Gorgias*, respectively).

It seems we have an overlapping interest in issues in moral law and what participating in a political society is like. On that topic, I'd like to ask you a question about the extent to which individuals in a political society need to know about that society in order to be able to participate fruitfully in it.

Our paradigms of action are where people do something with a particular end in mind and some conception of how that action is a means to the specified end. But very often when we engage in large social structures this isn't the case. It's dubious in the extreme that most people engaging with the government meet anything like this standard of having an effective chain of means-end reasoning in

mind when they do so, involving all the steps between their political action (voting, say) and their desired outcome (better work prospects, say). And by our paradigm, if they don't know which of the means-end chains would be effective to improving their work prospects, they don't know which vote to cast. And clearly the vast majority of people don't have this kind of knowledge: it's possible, given how large and complex the forces in action are, that nobody has epistemic access to a complete such means-end reasoning chain.

Here's a simple example: I make use of the mail system, including sending things overseas, and I know what I need to do to effect that: put the letter in the right envelope, put the right address on it, the right stamps, and put it in the right box. But I don't actually know much at all about how the letter gets there! I know what it looks like at the two ends of the process, with the mail service picking up the letter from the box, taking it to be sorted, etc., and at the destination it coming to the right post office and being delivered to the address. But I don't know about the steps in the middle--I don't know how international mail freight gets organised, I don't know how the handover between different postal services work, etc. I certainly know nothing like enough to be able to tell whether my posting the letter will be effective. But I do it, and it is effective!

So, it seems that if the process is complex enough our paradigm breaks down, and in social cases we can have strings of people who don't really know what the other people in the process are doing. What does this mean for the possibility of political consent? Heck, given that the predominant views of social action depend on a particular kind of intention to engage in a process together (e.g. Gilbert's holist and Bratman's individualist theories), what does this mean for the possibility of social action *tout court*? I have no idea who handles the mail between my posting the letter and it arriving at its destination, not any real idea of what they are doing. But the mail gets there, and clearly we engage in social actions. How do you think our theories should react to these large lacunae in what we know about the processes (especially social processes) in which we are ineliminably participating in?

[irontide](#)

Thanks for the interesting and thoughtful question. I would suggest that bodily action always involves numerous processes or events, of the details of which we are largely ignorant. Suppose I want to turn on the light in order to be able to read after dark, and so I flip the switch on the wall. Just as in your mail case, I have a general idea of what's going on here: something happens in my brain, which sends signals through my nervous system to my muscles, which then contract, causing the flip to switch, which allows the current to flow through the wires to the light bulb, and so forth. But I am ignorant of many of the details here, just as in the mail case: I don't know exactly what's going on in my brain, perhaps I don't know how muscles contract, or how the switch works, or how electricity is converted into light, or how light propagates from the source to my eyes, etc. It seems that in any case of bodily action, there are many details like this of which we are ignorant. Yet that does not prevent such actions from being consenting actions, nor does it eliminate moral responsibility for the actions. What matters, it seems, is only that the agent has a clear conception of the end.

It seems to be a Common joke that a degree in philosophy is useless and a waste of time. What do you have to say about this to a Young Guy who is very interested in pursuing such a direction ?

[Gaddid](#)

I would recommend to you [C.E.M. Joad's "Philosophy and Life," \*Journal of Philosophical Studies\* 3 \(1928\)](#). My favorite line from his article is this:

Bread and butter, and a good position in the world, are payment, certainly. But what about the capacity for clear thinking, the sympathy and tolerance that come from a lively understanding of the views and difficulties of others, and the habit of disinterested intellectual inquiry? Do these not add to the fulness and richness of our lives?

I would say that they clearly do, and that any activity that adds to the fullness and richness of our lives in these ways (and many others) is neither useless nor a waste of time.

I am a 2002 graduate of NC State, and took a number of English and other humanities in Winston-Caldwell, is that were your offices are? How are things on that side of campus.

[flyparrothead](#)

My office is in Withers actually; the department moved into new digs in around 2007. That side of campus is looking better than ever. Cheers!

Hi Dr. Puryear, thanks for taking time out to do this! I'm actually just down the road from you in Durham working on my (non-philosophy) masters.

I was wondering if you had any thoughts on effective altruism? I don't have a philosophy background at all, but EA really struck a chord with me. After reading Dr. Singer's *The Most Good You Can Do*, I now plan on donating at least 10% of my salary (after graduating and becoming employed) to demonstrably effective charities. I understand there are some philosophical criticisms of EA and Dr. Singer, but I was wondering what you thought?

Thanks again!

[mattyice87](#)

I think EA is great, and I applaud you for considering it. Anything one can do to ease the (net) suffering of others is a good thing.

I'm working on a project regarding the parallels between Schopenhauer and the ideas in Walt Whitman's poetry, with a focus on Whitman's 1st edition of *Song of Myself*. To what extent have those parallels been studied?

[twonumbers](#)

Good question. My impression is that they haven't been studied, or at least not much. If you see parallels there, that would be interesting. Good luck with your project!

Where's your favorite pancake place?

[Sansanvi](#)

Carter-Finley Stadium

Which type of Leibniz-Keks cookies are the best? As a metaphysician and an ethicist, are they the objectively best kind of cookie? Do we have any surviving reference to them in Leibniz's writings?

How does Leibniz's treatment of the PSR avoid necessitarianism?

Are ideas of colour, etc reducible to the alphabet of simple concepts (e.g. repetition) in Leibniz?

[willbell](#)

Perhaps [these](#) are the best, but I don't know. Alas, they are not vegan. (No, there are no mentions of these cookies in Leibniz's writings; however, editors have not yet produced a critical edition of his recipes. Stay tuned for that.)

How does L's PSR avoid necessitarianism? A: It doesn't.

Are ideas of colour, etc reducible to the alphabet of simple concepts (e.g. repetition) in Leibniz?

First, we must make some distinctions. Leibniz believes there is the confused idea of a color, and distinct ideas of a color, which are really just ideas of shapes and motions. He also distinguishes what he calls empirical reduction from intellectual reduction. I think he would say that distinct ideas of color are intellectually (though not empirically) reducible to simple concepts, whereas confused ideas of color aren't reducible to simple concepts in either sense. (However, they are empirically reducible to distinct concepts which are intellectually reducible to simple concepts.)

Recently Newt Gingrich said that facts and figures are not as important as what voters feel to be true. I believe this speaks to what could be called a low "threshold for belief" among his unfortunate constituents. What would you say constitutes your threshold for belief, and do you think one of the goals of a philosopher should be to prostheletyze for what they view to be the appropriate threshold?

[nazispaceinvader](#)

Thanks--good question. I subscribe to Hume's dictum, "A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence." I would add that on my view, the threshold for believing something is that it seems more probable than not, and that the strength of our belief should be proportionate to the degree to which it seems more probable than not.

How do you respond to emotivism which states that moral propositions do not express propositions, but moral attitudes? For example, if you were to assert murder to be morally wrong, are you really not just asserting your dislike for murder, and that is all?

[Notsung](#)

I think my main concern with emotivism is that in myself, I perceive a difference between my disliking things and my thinking them morally wrong.

It also seems to me that one could earnestly believe that something is morally wrong, and yet not dislike it. For instance, I have met people who believe eating meat is morally wrong, yet do it anyway, and don't seem to dislike doing so.

Hey, would you help me with my homework If you got a chance to ask 3 questions too Professor Richard Dawkins, Richard Swinburne and Dr James Carleton Paget. What would they be ? - I have a school trip to go see them, and I have to ask some questions. Would you help?

[CallousCleric](#)

Dawkins: Do you have an explanation for the striving to live that suffuses the plant and animal kingdoms, and which ultimately drives biological evolution?

Swinburne: What's the one objection to Christianity (or Christian theism) that you find the most difficult to answer?

Paget: Who are you?

I have always been intrigued by philosophy since my first philosophy class in high school. Want to learn more, but don't know where to start. What do you recommend?

[morancl2](#)

Plato's dialogues (maybe start with a collection of the more prominent ones), Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Hume's *Selected Essays*, and Schopenhauer's *Essays and Aphorisms*.

Could you tell us a bit about your book on Leibniz's idealism? Is it primarily historical, or do you think it's a defensible metaphysical position? Would you consider yourself an idealist?

[7143231](#)

Thanks, good question. I am interested in idealism, and for me it remains a live option, but I do not currently consider myself an idealist in any strong sense. I am still working my way through various arguments for idealism, and that is what this book is about. The idea will be to try to reconstruct what Leibniz's argument for idealism was, and to evaluate that argument (at least up to a point). He didn't write a magnum opus or a definitive and complete statement of his philosophy. So the idea of the book is to piece together the various arguments he gave for more specific positions to see what his argument for idealism would have looked like, had he fully explained it himself.

Thank you very much, Mr. Puryear, for doing this! :D

My question is a little bit more practical. I'd love to know how do you approach a paper that you want to do.

Currently I'm studying laws and recently I made a little paper for a Congress on Bioethics (I talked about the place that law has on the discussion of bioethics). What I realized doing this, my first work of this nature, is that it can be quite difficult to start investigating, and then to have an idea about the topic that feels like was actually thought by oneself. I also found out that I felt pretty satisfied while doing it, and I'd love to be able to do decent papers in the future, even as a hobby if my career path doesn't end in academia.

So I'd love to know how do you do it. What are some keys that you follow to make a decent paper?

Finally, because I just thought about it, I'd love to know if you believe that Jorge Luis Borges was a philosopher as well as a writer, even though he never wrote proper philosophy, but only stories and poetry. Is it possible to do philosophy (good philosophy) being a writer of fictions (i.e. not doing any formal philosophy papers)?

EDIT: Added a couple of sentences to make it clearer, and spelling.

[hapiscan](#)

Thanks--good questions. I think of the writing process as akin to sculpting. The sculptor starts with a block of marble, then breaks off large chunks, then breaks off smaller and smaller pieces. In the later stages, she gets into the fine details and polishes the work. Similarly, I try to lay out the main structure and main ideas of the paper, usually with a quickly-written sketch. Then I go back through many more times, each time focusing on the largest of the remaining issues, but not worrying too much about whether everything is just right, which I get to only toward the end, when I'm polishing.

My other tip is just that this sort of writing takes practice--more for some than others. So keep doing it and you will see yourself getting better and better.

I have no beliefs about Borges.

I do not think it is easy to make contributions to academic philosophy in the 21st century through fiction, but one can certainly make contributions to the *dissemination* of philosophy to those outside of academia. We need more of that.

Hi Dr. Puryear,

I actually took a class from you in undergrad. It was either Ethics or Early Modern, can't remember which (or maybe both, now that I think about it). I do remember that it was a great class.

I remember you mentioning that you had transitioned from an engineering career into philosophy. So, from a career standpoint, where do you see the role of academic philosophy currently and in the near future? Are philosophy programs doing enough to prepare students for the "real world"? How much do philosophy professors hate hearing that question? Do you believe that there is still value in studying philosophy?

(From my perspective I do believe there is value, but I'm interested to hear your take on it.)

[AllenCoin](#)

Hi Allen! Yes, I remember you being in one of my classes some years ago (can't remember how long).

You recall correctly: I transitioned to philosophy from mechanical engineering, which was the subject of my bachelors degree.

I believe there will always be value in studying philosophy. We humans are philosophical animals, so why wouldn't it be valuable to *study* philosophy? (Similarly, if we are political animals, as Aristotle says, then isn't it valuable to study politics?)

Hello Professor Puryear, I was enrolled at NCSU as an undergraduate, and your classes were some of my favorite electives. You are an engaging and entertaining teacher. I don't really have any questions, but I was thinking about asking for Schopenhauer's Essays and Aphorisms for Christmas, can you recommend it?

[Telliamed](#)

Only if you want to have an *awesome* Christmas!!

P.S. Thanks for the kind words.

Dear Professor. I'd like to ask some questions about Schopenhauer. Is his philosophy still true? Some allege that his understanding of Kant was shallow, is that true? Does Nietzsche really refute his philosophy or does it still stand? And finally, is a naturalistic interpretation of his philosophy possible where Will is physical stuff? Thank you!

[badhombre69797](#)

Thanks for the questions, badhombre.

Well, if Schopenhauer's philosophy were ever true, then it is still true. The question is whether it was ever true. I am certainly inclined to think that there are many truths and insights in it, though probably mixed with many falsehoods too.

Those who allege that his understanding of Kant is shallow are probably thinking of his ethics, which is the part where he's most critical of Kant. Some of his criticisms are too quick or miss the mark, but fundamentally I think he is right about Kant's ethics, i.e., right about it being fundamentally mistaken.

I do not believe a naturalistic interpretation of Schopenhauer's philosophy is possible unless naturalistic is understood broadly enough. If will or striving is natural, then perhaps his philosophy can be considered naturalistic.

Do you believe that philosophical thought is gearing towards a certain trend in the future, or that philosophical schools will remain to be as diverse as they are today, perhaps even diversify even more among the scholars and general population?

[David Seelmann](#)

I would go with the latter disjunct.

Hi there! I'm just a passerby, but my question: do you think all men are created equal, and that we are a slate of infinite possibilities? Or something else?

[Jag326](#)

Thanks for the questions. There are many respects in which humans are not created equal, including, I would be inclined to say, morally, though from a political standpoint I do think there should be equality before the law for all humans. In other words, the law should treat humans *as if* they were created equal, even if they technically aren't.

What is your take on the compossibility relation in Leibniz's philosophy? Which interpretation has impressed you the most?

[donathantrump](#)

I must admit that I haven't studied the literature on that particular topic very closely, but the compossibility relation strikes me as extremely problematic for Leibniz. I don't see what would make any two possible substances, or at least any two qualitatively different possible substances, impossible. Do you have a preferred view?