

I'm Chris Surprenant, Associate Professor of Philosophy at UNO, and I'm back to answer your questions about philosophy and the academy generally. AMA! (Beginning at 3pm Eastern on 1/31)

chriswsurprenant ¹ and r/Science AMAs¹

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Abstract

I'm Chris W. Surprenant, Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of New Orleans, where I direct the Alexis de Tocqueville Project in Law, Liberty, and Morality. I am the author of *Kant and the Cultivation of Virtue* (Routledge 2014), editor of *Rethinking Punishment in the Era of Mass Incarceration* (forthcoming, Routledge 2017), and co-editor of *Kant and Education: Interpretations and Commentary* (Routledge 2011) and *Kant and the Scottish Enlightenment* (forthcoming, Routledge 2017). My current projects apply knowledge gained from studying the history of philosophy to contemporary issues in criminal justice reform, including the ethics of punishment. I'm also interested in business ethics and examining the connection between human well-being and entrepreneurship. During my first AMA in fall 2015, I was asked a number of questions on issues in moral philosophy; practical ethics, such as our approach to animals, the poor, or adjuncts in the academy; and how to be a successful graduate student and have a better chance of being a successful academic. I've been invited back to answer questions about my current work, our for-credit high school program in philosophy and political economy, the academy generally, and anything else that you want to talk about. Ask me anything! Well, almost anything.

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Reposted per request:

Hi, Professor, thanks for joining us again. I have three questions.

In your last AMA you suggested that history will look back unfavorably at our current treatment of non-human animals. You went on to say:

So why don't I change my own diet and actions? So, look, if I'm being honest it's probably because I think the costs are too higher. I really enjoy eating meat and it would require a radical change in my diet and lifestyle to move to something that I didn't think was morally problematic. Beyond that, there is little to no external pressure for me to do so. No one but people we identify as crazies would think any less of me because I choose to eat meat. But imagine I traveled to a place where people did think less of me because of my diet (or our society changed in this way). I think I'd be far more likely to conform my moral views to my actions under those circumstances. So, again, this is not a very satisfying answer, but it's something that I think about relatively frequently and I'm not terribly satisfied with my current views on it or how I live my life in light of those views.

1) Have your views changed at all since writing this? 2) Do you find Kantian arguments that entail vegetarian/vegan conclusions (or "veg*n friendly", pro-animal conclusions) to be convincing? And

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relatedly: 3) Do you believe we have direct Kantian duties to non-human animals?

Thank you!

[sensible knave](#)

No, my views on this topic haven't changed. I still like eating cows and pigs. I also still know that if I had to kill a cow or pig myself in order to enjoy my bacon or burger, I wouldn't be able to do it unless I had no other options for food. There still seems to be something going on in their heads and the more research that comes out the more it seems like we're doing something wrong with how we're treating them.

On #2, no, I don't find those arguments persuasive and there will never be a good, Kantian argument for why someone should be a vegetarian or vegan. It's very clear that for many of the animals we eat, there's not much going on beyond instinctual responses--none of these animals even come close to passing the tests for personhood. Some other animals--cows, pigs, etc.--may be there. They're the problematic ones.

As for #3, my answer would be yes if those animals possessed semi-developed faculties of reason. Apes, cows, pigs, etc., may all qualify.

I apologize ahead of time if my question seems ignorant, never having actually studied philosophy in a proper academic setting and only having read whatever triggered my curiosity. What would you tell students in high school or even younger, is the greatest applicable lessons to be garnered from philosophy studies? Even for people NOT going into a related field in the future.

Edit for grammar/punctuation.

[Kytedog](#)

Intellectual humility. When you study philosophy, you very quickly realize that all of these neat things you've been thinking about not only have been thought about often for the last 2000+ years, but that the discussion and development of these ideas is rich beyond your wildest imagination. Once you realize that, yes, you may be wrong or otherwise hold a deficient view of the world, you can better engage people in productive conversations about all aspects of life.

Hi Chris, thanks for joining us here.

I'm a philosophy PhD student getting perilously close to the job market, and I was hoping I could ask some advice. As you know, most grad students, if they get any job at all, will likely get one at a so-called "teaching institution" rather than a place similar to where we did our dissertations. You're obviously very interested in philosophy education, between your work with high school students and Wi-Phi, but I'm interested in what you note on your website:

They include being recognized by Princeton Review in 2012 as one of the "Best 300 Professors" in the United States, and by Cengage Learning as one of their "Most Valuable Professors" of 2014, awarded to three professors in the United States who "have made lasting impressions on the education and lives of their students."

I would love to put myself in a position to earn teaching awards and prove to potential institutions that I, too, am worth a hire. Could you say a little bit about your favourite teaching methods, or what has led you to be a successful teacher?

I'd especially be interested in hearing about your teaching of non-practical or theoretical philosophy

(e.g. metaphysics, logic, philosophy of language). I myself find it far easier to teach ethics than I do the topics of my dissertation (logic and metaphysics), because I find it difficult to get the students attention. Any tips on that front?

[A Definite Description](#)

The best teachers are the ones who care about the success of their students, defined in terms that are important to the students themselves and not by the standards of the teacher. Most students we have in our philosophy courses will never go on to take another course in philosophy. Most of our majors will not go on to graduate school. What does success look like to them? What kind of life do they want to live? How can we help them identify and obtain the goals that they think are valuable?

Every single one of our students has his or her own idea for what a good life entails. They're all in our classes and at our universities because they believe (rightly or wrongly) that somehow being in that seat will help them to achieve these goals. While we can and should help to shape this idea about what it means to live a good life, it's important that we don't try to put our thumb on the scale too much.

Why make these comments about teaching? Because I think when it comes to being a successful teacher it's not so much about how I approach the material as it is about how I approach the students. In many cases, the material itself is irrelevant.

When I was at Tulane for 4 years, I taught two sections of logic almost every semester. I really enjoyed it because none of the students wanted to be there (they were taking the course to satisfy their math requirement) and so the bar was super low in terms of their expectations. I tried to make it as much fun as I could by trying to be as personable as possible. It seemed to work reasonably well. I'm not sure how I'd approach a course in metaphysics. Perhaps I'd try to focus it on questions that should be interesting to 18 to 22 year olds. But I never found any of those questions particularly interesting, so I'm almost certainly the wrong person to ask about that.

I have noticed a decrease in the number of analytic philosophers, particularly in logic, and an increase in other areas, particularly Kant. Is this a trend that you have noticed, and do you have any insight into why there is a resurgence of interest in Kantian philosophy, and a waning of interest in the kinds of work done by Quine, Kripke, and Lewis, to make things specific?

[faoiseam](#)

Undergraduate students I've encountered seem less interested in those questions and more interested in questions of ethics and politics, broadly understood. It could be that it's a function of changing values in our society or that these questions seem more familiar and so more accessible. I never was terribly interested in questions metaphysics or epistemology, so it's tough for me to think about why there's been a decline in those areas.

Where I do think you're seeing a significant increase in this area is with philosophy of mind and neuroscience, but that can be connected to those social questions that folks seem more interested in now. If I were trying to build a program that was trying to continue interest in analytic philosophy, I'd focus it in those areas.

Hi, Professor. Thanks for taking the time to do this.

I was wondering, what relationship do you see between morality and friendship? I suppose the question I'm thinking of can be split up into several questions.

- Do you find that someone's moral judgement has a place in who is your friend and to what degree,

a bit like the Aristotlean idea that we should befriend those who are an extension of our virtue to have true friends?

- Do you find it is easier to associate yourself with someone or befriend someone because of the framework they subscribe to or because of the conclusions they come to? You mentioned that you're a Kantian and that, while you don't have the will to do so, you consider our treatment of non-human animals morally problematic. Would you find it easier to befriend a Kantian who is indifferent to non-human animals or befriend someone who cares very much for the rights of non-human animals but is not a Kantian?
- • Whichever answer you pick, do you think that's more justifiable? For instance, I'm a Kantian vegan, and I find it easier to consider another vegan a friend than it is to consider another Kantian a friend. Would you say there's some justification that can be made for that? Or did you answer the first question with moral judgement having no place in who we have as our friends, and therefore both of these seem to have no advantage over the other in justification, *ceteris paribus*?
- Is there any reason to think any of our duties should apply to those we know and those we have an emotional connection to, such as our friends, especially?
- Who's someone you know of in any field you study that you'd like to be your friend?

[thedeliriousdonut](#)

It depends on what kind of friend they are. If you're talking about deep and meaningful friendships that are only possible to have with a very small number of people, then, yes, the virtue of that person seems to be very important, if not the most important thing. But if it's a friendship of convenience (say we play tennis together and occasionally go out to get drinks), that person's virtue seems to be less of a concern.

Yes, I find it much easier to be friends with people who are similar to I am, either due to their background or their interests. It's not really a surprise that many of my friends play golf or are academics. To be clear, although I work on Kant, I'm not a Kantian in many ways. In terms of morality, I think Hume basically got it right. That's basically blasphemy coming from someone who studies Kant, but so it goes.

It would depend on what type of vegan you are. If you're one of those annoying vegans who is going to tell me what a terrible person I am for eating Babe and Bessie, then we probably won't be friends. I also worry about anyone who is truly a Kantian when it comes to morality. It's a wonderful theoretical position but it strikes me as being very difficult to operate on in practice.

Do you mean duties to them? If so, of course. Or do you mean that because I have certain duties, then they have certain duties as well? That doesn't seem unreasonable either, but it would depend on the duty. I have duties to my wife and child that my friends don't have.

This last one might win as the most interesting question of the AMA. If I could pick anyone? Maybe someone like Barack Obama. There are lots of things I disagree with Obama on, but it's always very interesting to be able to have frank discussions with people who are public figures and know how things work. I'm fortunate to have a handful of academic friends who are public intellectuals or presidents/provosts of colleges. I've learned an incredible amount from those people because they have access to the inner workings of things that I can benefit from but don't have the same access to. To know someone personally with that type of access to the political system would be fascinating.

Hi Chris, thanks for doing this AMA!

Where do you think most of the moral responsibility for cultivating virtue is today? Do you see

institutions such as education system or the family as being more or less influential today and, if so, is this problematic? I feel like when philosophers like Peter Sloterdijk, for example, claiming we are a "society of bastards" (I'm going off memory but something similar) he is also claiming that we are heading in a direction where institutions need to realise they are more responsible than ever in shaping and (re)producing general societal ethics. Also, do you see a causal connection between the movement of moral responsibility from home to institutions and what seems to be a fast increasing breakdown of public morality and, for example, the rise of Trump, or is that problem more indicative of some deeper issue in society? Coming from a social theory background, I see it as basically parallel to other reactionary movements which spring up as trying to offer solutions to crises of capitalism.

Your book "rethinking punishment..." sounds great and I am also curious if you have read much work by Giorgio Agamben? I feel like he builds a reasonable case that mass incarceration is not a mistake of modern disciplinarian techniques but rather intentional outcome of modern society and the dominant Western instrumental rationality. (edit: I'm extrapolating a bit but the argument isn't new)

[StWd](#)

I think much of the talk about how such and such is unprecedented or that we've never seen anything like this is overblown. Institutions have always played a role in shaping culture and individuals. Yes, those institutions have changed over time, but their function is still pretty much the same.

I have not read Agamben specifically, but I am familiar with arguments along those lines. I think the answer is simpler than that: Mass incarceration is a product of people trying to profit off of fear and government financial incentives. If you want to know why we incarcerate more people than any other country with the exception of the Seychelles, just follow the money.

(Copied from the announcement thread)

I love that you're interested in philosophy education! I think that teaching students to become better students and academics is extremely worthwhile.

Do any of your philosophy education interests lie in how philosophy courses are taught? Many students from non-philosophy majors take undergraduate philosophy courses and seem to be overwhelmed and do not retain/use what they've learned in the philosophy courses. Do you see yourself (or someone else) making strides in philosophy education in regards to how philosophy courses are taught?

[miloohmy](#)

It's important for teachers to identify their own strengths and play to them. But, generally, I think that the vast majority of people are interested in thinking about many of the questions we examine in philosophy. What they're worried about is "wasting time" thinking about those questions when they can be doing career preparation. As it turns out, most of what they think is "career preparation" in college really isn't doing much to prepare people for the careers that they think they're being prepared for.

It's also the case that much of what the students learn in all of their classes is very quickly forgotten unless those ideas or methods are continually reinforced. For me it doesn't matter whether or not a student remembers what Descartes or Kant said after s/he leaves the course. What matters is that they thought about the ideas, grappled with difficult texts, learned how to construct arguments, understood how to approach the positions of others sympathetically, and so forth. Many of these skills are useful and necessary for everyday human interaction. So if a student learns how to consider the positions of others sympathetically in my class and then this approach to the world carries over to how s/he lives his/her life, that's a win, even if the student doesn't remember any of the specifics about what was covered in the course.

What exactly do we owe to those in poverty, according to your interpretation of Kant's work? Or your own opinion?

[UmamiSalami](#)

There's a difference between what sorts of moral obligations people have and what should be done by the state when it comes to the use of tax dollars. On this latter point, briefly, Kant believes we have an obligation to provide individuals with the basics in order for them to stay alive, but not so much that they live comfortably off of public support. What, specifically, that would entail in 2016 for Kant is not clear. Certainly providing people with food or housing assistance, almost certainly some type of medical assistance, but probably not cell phones and internet access. I have a discussion of this topic in an article I published last year, you can find that here:

http://journal.apee.org/index.php/2016_Journal_of_Private_Enterprise_vol_31_no_3_Fall_parte3.pdf.

My own view is close to this in terms of when tax dollars should be collected and how they should be spent. In terms of the moral question, I think people have a greater obligation to help people who are worse off due to no fault of their own. How far this obligation extends I'm not sure, but almost everyone can and should be doing more. But just because I think we should be doing more doesn't mean that taxation to support something like this is justified.

What is your opinion on central planning by governments in general, and specifically economically?

I hope one day society advances to a minimalist state, as I see government (generally) as a large central plan.

From how I understand central planning as compared to market forces, let's take prices as a concrete example, there is a massive epistemic gap such that central planning is always playing epistemic catch up. One major factor is that the amount of information to be honestly reported, gathered, and processed. And this is before the quality of the plan, implementation of the plan, etc is even brought into the equation.

Thanks

[dontcare013](#)

If you're judging it from the standpoint of promoting individual well-being, then it's likely to fail. But the aim of most central planning is not to promote the well-being of the individuals who are subjected to that planning.

What do you think is the appropriate age to introduce people to philosophy? I think Plato said seven, Hegel fourteen, Schopenhauer thirties-forties.

[quick_a_crime](#)

Around high school seems best, at least in our society. You need to know something about the world before you start to rip that understanding apart.

What are your thoughts on our mutual friend James Bailey?

[Jurgioslakiv](#)

James is awesome! Great economist.

What is your favourite work of literature? What's your favourite work in the visual arts?

[waldorfwithoutwalnut](#)

Winnie-the-Pooh.

I have a minimal appreciation for visual art as that term is usually understood. I have a great appreciation for chefs who are able to make exceptional food into works of art, as well as golf course architects who are able to preserve the beauty of a piece of land while crafting a course that makes use of these natural features.

I may be late with this, but I will still ask:

My current projects apply knowledge gained from studying the history of philosophy to contemporary issues in criminal justice reform, including the ethics of punishment.

Is it difficult to take an argument or idea from history and successfully bring it into modern debates? Is there resistance to such ideas because of their provenance or originators?

Additionally, what would you cite if a layperson asked you for an example of such knowledge or argument from history that has relevance on modern criminal justice?

[Samskii](#)

There are very few original arguments floating around at this point, so using some sort of theoretical framework that was developed a few hundred years ago and applying in to a contemporary discussion is something done fairly frequently. You're right that often folks will respond with things like, "Oh, that's Kant's argument? He said things that were kind of racist so we should reject his position." But you can usually walk them through why this sort of objection is unreasonable.

Kant gives a pretty good argument to justify punishment. He says that it is through punishment we are able to recognize the law-breaker as someone who is a rational agent and responsible for his behavior. If I don't punish him, and, instead, excuse his behavior for some reason, I'm not respecting his agency. This is an argument for punishment generally and not what does or doesn't constitute appropriate ways to punish.

Thank you for doing this AMA. I am interested what you think about restorative justice.

Furthermore, do you think is it possible to justify punishment in a Kantian context without libertarian free will?

(copied form the announcement)

[paschep](#)

Restorative approaches to justice certainly have their place, depending on the offense committed, the attitude of the victims, etc. It seems really useful to take this approach with children when offenses are relatively minor and the offenders are still learning about right and wrong behavior. While some legal adults still operate like children in certain ways, it seems to me to be a bit tougher to use restorative approaches for people who know better. Now, if they should have known better but don't, then that's a different story. But trying to separate out the 20 year old who should have known better from the 20

year old who actually did know better is almost impossible. When it's done, you often end up with very unsatisfying judicial decisions like the one in the Ethan Couch case. So I'm torn on this. From the Kantian position, once you say things like, "Well, he didn't know better," you're either not recognizing the person as a rational being (bad) or there's something like a cultural misunderstanding that caused someone to perform the "bad" act (not bad). It's a challenge. So one of the questions I'm looking at right now is what should we do with people who have broken the law and caused harm to others, but no longer pose a real threat to others in society. Here we can think about perpetrators of both violent and non-violent crimes. I don't think you can just justify locking them up. So what do we do with them? I have no good answer to this question at the moment, beyond that I know our current approach in the US does more harm than good.

Kant's position on punishment, in part, is that through punishment you're recognizing the person as a rational being who is responsible for his/her actions. If the person isn't free in some meaningful way, then the person isn't justified in being punished. Now you may be justified in putting that person in prison if s/he poses a danger to others in society, but those prisons probably wouldn't look much like the ones we have now. If individuals lacked freedom in some sort of meaningful way, it would present a very significant challenge to punishment generally and would require a complete reshaping of how we approach the criminal justice system (understood broadly).

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Stay off Reddit. :)

Do you find that there's a growing demand among academics in your field to play a hybrid role as activists?

[Number6Foucault](#)

I sure hope not. Bas Van Der Vossen is correct here.

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09515089.2014.972353>