

Letter to Prospective Graduate Students

January 2023

I am a Canada Research Chair (tier 1), Director of the Bertrand Russell Research Centre, and Associate Professor of Philosophy at McMaster University. I am interested in supervising student dissertations on the history and philosophy of science (especially psychology), early pragmatism, and analytic philosophy. Students who wish to employ methods from the digital humanities are also encouraged to be in touch.

My own research focuses on the history and philosophy of psychology, with a special emphasis on interactions with early analytic philosophy and pragmatism. William James has been a central focus. I have a monograph forthcoming with Oxford entitled *Consciousness Is Motor: Warp and Weft in William James*. That work has led me to an interest in Russell in his naturalistic phase as well.

A hallmark of my work has been the analysis of experimental results, often in physiology and psychology, that have been thought to have philosophical significance. My book on James is an example of this emphasis. It presents James's evolutionary account of consciousness as a contribution to a controversy in physiology over a series of startling vivisection experiments. The controversy was over incompatible mechanistic and vitalistic interpretations of experiments on living, decapitated vertebrates (most typically frogs). Participants included T. H. Huxley, Eduard Pflüger, and G. H. Lewes, a founder of British emergentism. They were fundamentally divided over the extent to which physiology could be a fully mechanical science, or whether it must sometimes appeal to minds, souls, or other nonphysical factors. The argument stretched back through Marshall Hall, La Mettrie, and Georg Stahl, ultimately to Descartes. James's intervention involved bringing distinctively Darwinian considerations to bear on the matter, considerations that even the likes of Huxley had overlooked.

Although philosophers remember Bertrand Russell's pointed attacks on pragmatism, he was in fact positively influenced by James's more empirical work in psychology, and after about 1919 by James's more purely philosophical account of the mind-body relationship as well, an account Russell dubbed "neutral monism." Other figures in the history of (often scientific) philosophy on whom I have written include Ernst Mach, W. V. Quine, C. S. Peirce, H. Helmholtz, T. H. Green, Kurd Laßwitz, George Berkeley, and Francis Galton.

Another interest is in computational tools developed in the digital humanities. I am in the process of establishing the Digital Philosophy Laboratory, whose mission will be to cultivate new methods for employing computational techniques like topic modeling and sentiment analysis in the study of philosophy, particularly in the history of philosophy. Our connection with the Russell Archives (housed at McMaster) puts us in a special position to apply these digital methods in the study of early analytic philosophy.

The Russell Archives are enormous—we hold about 25,000 documents written by Russell, 50,000 letters, 80 books, 2,500 shorter papers and essays, four journals, draft manuscripts of unpublished books, along with about 3,300 volumes from his personal library. We are currently

working on digitizing this material, in phases. A long-term research project is to then adapt a computational technique called “topic modeling” for studying Russell’s vast output in particular. A major goal is to help cultivate computational techniques for historical scholarship more generally.

Please feel free to be in touch if you have questions about studying with me at McMaster.

Sincerely,

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