Letter to Prospective Graduate Students

October 2019

I am a Canada Research Chair (Tier I) in philosophy at McMaster, where I also direct the Bertrand Russell Research Centre. My research focuses on the histories of analytic philosophy and of pragmatism, with a special emphasis on naturalistic philosophy of mind in that historical context (i.e., late 19th and early 20th century). William James has been a central focus, but through James (of all people) I came to be interested in Russell. I also have material either published or forthcoming on figures like T. H. Green, Quine, Mach, and Peirce. I am happy to supervise students working in this general milieu, or in the history and philosophy of psychology broadly construed.

In the short-term, I am completing a book on James on consciousness. The book emphasizes his extensive engagement with the experimental-physiological literature of his day, positioning his early psychological work as an important ancestor of naturalistic, embodied approaches to consciousness. In the medium-term, I am working on a related project concerning Russell’s philosophy of mind, which though it was in some respects inspired by James, ends up taking what we would now think of as much more of a representationalist approach. One can think of James and Russell as two neglected forefathers of the prevailing approaches to consciousness right now in cognitive science and philosophy of mind.

Finally, I also have an interest in using computational analysis for historical study, and I am particularly interested in supervising students who would want to get involved with such work in Russell’s archives. The archives, which are housed here at McMaster, 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written by Russell, 50,000 letters, 80 books, 2,500 shorter papers and essays, four journals, draft manuscripts of unpublished books, along with about 3,300 volumes from his personal library.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. My 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.

So, what is topic modelling? A topic model is a kind of algorithm that scans a (potentially enormous) corpus of documents and finds groups of words or phrases that frequently crop up in proximity to one another. These word-groups are called “topics.” Since similar linguistic patterns are often employed to express the same ideas or concepts, it should not be surprising to find that the topics these algorithms identify often reflect what appear to human readers to be distinct ideas or concepts in the text. So these models detect topics and then link them with documents. But documents can themselves be classified—according to year or geographical location, for instance. That means that a good topic model affords researchers a capacity to frame and begin testing quantitative hypotheses concerning the changing distribution of ideas—across time and space—as they are contained in massive troves of documents, troves that may be far too expansive to be closely read. In Russell’s case, we would then be able to tie our own more traditional, close readings of philosophical texts into a much larger, structural map that takes his broader career into systematic view.

One exciting prospect for this work concerns the archive’s 50,000 letters, which have not been systematically accessible to researchers outside of Hamilton. Studying the letters (a good number of which are quite philosophically substantive) stands to give us a unique window into understanding Russell’s dynamic relationships with others—into understanding the kinds of debates he was engaged in behind the scenes, what kinds of arguments he
might have been having with others, what works were inspiring him, repelling him, and so on.

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

Sincerely,

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