

Owen Pikkert

CONTACT

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ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT

University of Toronto
Faculty Lecturer, 2018-20

EDUCATION

University of Toronto
Ph.D. in Philosophy, November 2018
Leibniz and the Principle of Sufficient Reason (winner of the David Savan Dissertation Prize)
Committee: Marleen Rozemond (supervisor), Donald Ainslie, Karolina Hübner, William Seager, Deborah Black (internal reader), Martin Lin (external reader)

Yale University
Visiting Assistant in Research, 2016
Advisor: Michael Della Rocca

McMaster University
M.A. in Philosophy, 2012
B.A. in History and Philosophy, *summa cum laude*, 2010

AOS/AOC

AOS: Early modern philosophy
AOC: Metaphysics, philosophy of religion, ancient philosophy

PRESENTATIONS

University of Bucharest, Natural and Revealed Theology in the German Enlightenment, 2019
“Leibniz on the cosmological argument”

American Philosophical Association (Eastern), 2018
“The modal status of Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason”
University of Toronto, Modern Philosophy Research Group, 2017
“Leibniz on God’s choice of the best”
University of Groningen, Berlin-Groningen-Harvard-Toronto Workshop, 2017
“The modal status of Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason”
Princeton University, Graduate Conference in Early Modern Philosophy, 2017
“The modal status of Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason”
Leibniz Society of North America, 2016
“Leibniz’s arguments from the PSR to the PII”
Leibniz Universität Hannover, Leibniz Doctoral Seminar, 2016
“Grounding Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason”
Yale University, The Society for Early Modern Philosophy at Yale, 2016
“Grounding Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason”
Erasmus University Rotterdam, Dutch Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy, 2016
“Grounding Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason”
University of Toronto, Modern Philosophy Research Group, 2015
“Leibniz’s arguments from the PSR to the PII”
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Berlin-Toronto-Groningen Workshop, 2015
“Grounding Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason”
University of Toronto, Modern Philosophy Research Group, 2015
“Grounding Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason”
Canadian Philosophical Association, 2012
“Two deflationary approaches to ontology”
Western Canadian Philosophical Association, 2011
“Multiple universes and the explanation of the physical constants”
University of Colorado, Boulder, History and Philosophy of Science Conference, 2011
“Multiple universes and the explanation of the physical constants”

COMMENTS

Québec-Ontario Conference in Early Modern Philosophy, 2018
C. Leduc, “Sophie of Hanover on physical influence”
University of Toronto, 2015
G. Rodriguez-Pereyra, “The identity of indiscernibles, atoms, and absolute space”

TEACHING

Teaching awards at the University of Toronto

As primary instructor: honourable mention for the Martha Lile Love Teaching Award, 2017
As tutorial instructor: nominated for a Teaching Assistant Excellence award, 2018

Primary instructor at the University of Toronto

402: Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy, 2020
311: The Empiricists, 2020
331: Metaphysics, 2019
310: The Rationalists, 2019
204: Philosophy in Everyday Life, 2019
235: Philosophy of Religion, 2018
210: 17th and 18th Century Philosophy, 2016, 2018-9

Tutorial instructor at the University of Toronto and McMaster University

200: Ancient Philosophy, 2017-8
210: 17th and 18th Century Philosophy, 2014-5
1D03: Philosophy and the Sciences, 2012
1E03: Problems of Philosophy, 2011-2
2CT3: Critical Thinking, 2010

GRANTS AND PRIZES

Government awards

SSHRC CGS doctoral grant, \$105,000 CAN, 2012-5
Ontario graduate scholarship, \$15,000 CAN, (declined in 2010 and 2012), 2011
SSHRC master's research grant, \$17,500 CAN, 2010

University awards

Balzan-University travel award, 2016
Michael J. Herman graduate fellowship in philosophy, 2015-6
The Avie Bennett award, 2012
Ten separate undergraduate awards, 2006-10

Essay prize

Student paper prize (second place), Canadian Philosophical Association, 2012
"Two deflationary approaches to ontology"

LANGUAGES

Passed reading requirement for the University of Toronto

French
Latin

GRADUATE COURSEWORK

History of philosophy

Spinoza (Della Rocca, audited)
Leibniz (Rozemond, audited)
Hume (Ainslie, audited)
Spinoza and Leibniz (Hübner and Rozemond)
Medieval Islamic philosophy (Black)
Early modern British philosophy (Sassen)

Core analytic philosophy

Propositions and numbers (Rattan and Yi)
Modal logic (Ganea, reading course)
Skepticism (Barney and Nagel, also covered ancient skepticism)
Metaphysics (Garrett)
Philosophy of language (Sullivan)

Other

Philosophy of religion (Howson)
Value theory (Sciaraffa)
The problem of evil (Gedge, reading course)

REFERENCES

Note: To obtain confidential letters of reference from any of the following persons, please email Mary Frances Ellison at placement.philosophy@utoronto.ca.

Marleen Rozemond	University of Toronto
Donald Ainslie	University of Toronto
Sergio Tenenbaum (teaching reference)	University of Toronto
Karolina Hübner	Cornell University
Michael Della Rocca	Yale University
Jeffrey McDonough	Harvard University

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Leibniz and the Principle of Sufficient Reason

Winner of the David Savan Dissertation Prize at the University of Toronto

Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason (PSR) is the claim that everything has an explanation. It rules out brute facts, inexplicable primitives, and purely random events. But what grounds the PSR itself? On the usual view, Leibniz grounds the PSR in purely descriptive truths. On my view, however, Leibniz grounds the PSR in this being the best of all possible worlds. God only creates the best, and a world in which the PSR is true is better than a world in which it is false. For the PSR ensures that the world has an explanatory structure, the investigation of which facilitates human happiness.

This way of grounding the PSR faces at least two problems. The first problem is that it presupposes that the PSR is a contingent principle, even though most commentators take it to be necessary. But I argue that Leibniz is indeed committed to the contingency of the PSR. I demonstrate this by showing how, for Leibniz, PSR-violating entities such as vacua, atoms, and indiscernible bodies are possible but not actual. I also argue that the contingency of the PSR does not conflict with Leibniz's other modal commitments. In particular, it does not conflict with the modal status of his principle of the identity of indiscernibles, nor with the modal status of his theory of truth.

The second problem with this way of grounding the PSR is that it seems to be circular. For the PSR cannot be grounded in God's choice of the best if God's choice of the best is itself grounded in the PSR. I argue that Leibniz avoids this problem by grounding God's choice of the best not in the PSR, but in God's aim to maintain his own happiness. A suboptimal world would compromise God's happiness, so he only creates the best. This constitutes a novel interpretation of Leibniz's view that God has created the best of all possible worlds.