

A Snapshot of Philosophy in Geneva

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About the Author: At the time of writing (2020), I am a Master's student in philosophy at Stanford University. Nowadays, my interests lie primarily in philosophy of mind and of biology, but I concentrated in philosophy of literature as an undergraduate. My coming to Geneva was in part to take a break from school and in part to finish two papers, one on how we learn concepts and the other on the global neuronal workspace model of consciousness. I am thankful to the philosophy department at the University of Geneva for opening their doors to me and, despite my inexperience, allowing me to write this little snapshot.

Geneva, I have found, is an excellent place to do philosophy. The air is refreshing, brought down as it is from the Alps, and while it rains often in the winter such days can productively be spent reading and writing. On drier days, Chamonix is close, Lake Geneva is closer, and Paris is only one train ride away. Summer, I am told, is downright delightful. I came to Geneva in the winter season on a quarter off from Stanford University and over the course of three months enjoyed its many pleasures. The following sketch is intended as a reflection on my time spent in Switzerland and, perhaps, as a first impression for any persons interested in pursuing philosophy therein. I begin with some general comments on my experience in the city itself, before exploring its philosophical faces.

There is much to Geneva that could be new to an American. Its central location, as I have already remarked, is striking. For anyone used to long distances reached by car, the rapid public transport connecting Geneva both internally and externally seems a great boon. From my attic room outside the city center, it was a two-minute walk to a train station, a twenty minute train ride, and a five-minute walk along the Boulevard des Philosophes to arrive at a seminar on biological causality. By comparison, students living in San Francisco commute upwards of *two hours* by train both ways. Hence, most students (grad and undergrad) in the US choose to live quite close to campus; whereas in Geneva, I regularly met students and professors who would

travel from Zurich, Lugano, and Paris to attend our weekly meetings. This is of course no news to any European, but it is practically ordained that visiting Americans marvel at European public transport.

What is unique to Geneva, however, is the incredible placidness of it all. There is apparently no “hustle and bustle” or at least none that stuck out to this visitor. The trains are mostly quiet and orderly—people actually let passengers disembark before embarking themselves; the only commotion I experienced was the fault of the French who are constantly on strike and making the good Swiss late to work (or so I am told). Not once did I hear a raucous party, a sports march, or a protest, all of which are familiar to your average urbanite on the West coast. There are very few young persons’ activities available, such as public tennis and basketball courts, skateboard and bike parks, state parks for hiking and swimming, laser tag, escape rooms, and the like. In fact, I saw none of these. Or perhaps I just missed them. I was kept thoroughly entertained by the dozen climbing gyms encircling Lake Geneva. They are world class. Overall, I would say that Geneva certainly lived up to its reputation of catering to serious, career-minded professionals. The food is fine but preposterously expensive; so is the rent; it’s an excellent climate to get work done, if only by necessity.

As for philosophy at the University of Geneva, I am tempted to draw an analogy to the city’s character. Philosophy in Geneva is indeed orderly, serious, and professional, and it is none too raucous either. But it does not follow that the philosophy there is placid. *Au contraire*, it is progressive and thriving. While the former qualities derive from what those in the question call their *analytic* commitments, the latter qualities, I conjecture, stem from two sources. First, a sense of pride in having Switzerland’s top school of philosophy, and second, a deeply held belief in the importance of philosophy as a discipline. I shall return to the second point as it relates to philosophy in the US. Before then, however, I would like to discuss one of the most intriguing and enjoyable aspects of philosophy in Geneva—the five research groups around which work in Geneva on philosophy and its history is structured.

The five groups are as follows: *Thumos, eidos, Inbegriff*, the *Biological Interest Group* (BIG), and *the Geneva Symmetry Group*. Each group is run by a professor or two at the University

and specializes in a different subject. *Thumos* is the research group on emotions, values and norms; *eidōs* is the center for metaphysics; *Inbegriff* is a research group devoted to understanding and evaluating Austro-German philosophy; the *BIG* is a forum for discussing biology from a philosophical, scientific and historical perspective; and the *Geneva Symmetry Group* is the epicenter of philosophy of physics on campus. I will remark on each group briefly, and even more briefly on those where my experience and insight are particularly limited.

The first research group I visited, and the group to which I returned most frequently, was *Inbegriff*. Like many of the research groups, its members include a couple of graduate students, post-docs, and professors hailing from far and wide. Communication occurs primarily in English and secondarily in French (in both of which I am thankfully competent). Not content with bilingualism, the members of *Inbegriff* also speak German, read Latin, and comment in Italian. *Inbegriff*, I learned from the group's website, is a German word whose standard meaning is "epitome", but when used philosophically means "aggregate", "plurality" or "set." I am truly jealous of the ability to read source material in its original language.

As for the point professor of *Inbegriff*, that position is occupied by the head of the philosophy department at the University of Geneva, Laurent Cesalli. As I understand it, Prof. Cesalli received a substantial sum of money from the Swiss National Science Foundation in return for two research projects: one on the Swiss philosopher Anton Marty (whom I had never heard of) and the other one on various forms of realism (of universals, of relations, of states of affairs) in the Austro-German and Medieval Traditions. Clearly, his is a difficult task. Nonetheless, Prof. Cesalli and his colleagues seem to have made significant progress, since I am told their five-year research project is soon coming to an end and a book is to be published at that time. Thus by the time I arrived the group was discussing Marty, Brentano, Albertus Magnus, and Ockham. Passages were meticulously dissected, precise distinctions were made on the whiteboard, and ambiguities over Latin meanings were tentatively resolved. It was all well over my head, my knowing nothing of Medieval philosophy – it's hardly taught at all in the US – and next to nothing of Brentano despite his renown. Still, I enjoyed every minute of it. There was a great liveliness at *Inbegriff*. The philosophy was old and unfashionable, meaning every member had a genuine interest in the subject. One fellow specializing in logic explicitly said so. Another fellow told me

that philosophy was currently experiencing a crisis of method, but, he suggested, *Inbegriff* was the real deal. I am inclined to agree.

One of my personal favorite philosophy groups in Geneva is *Thumos*, and not only because their headquarters are located in a billion Euro, state-of-the-art architectural marvel, although that does help. *Thumos* is directed by two professors, Julien Deonna and Fabrice Teroni, who got their start working for the same research project they now lead. *Thumos* unlike the other research groups is actually part of a much larger program called the Centre Interfacultaire en Sciences Affectives (CISA), in English the *Swiss Center for Affective Science*. Founded in 2005, CISA's mission is to understand emotions and their roles in cognition and behavior. When it was first being envisioned, the director of CISA had the foresight to integrate philosophy into their program. Although I am informed that this integration occurs less now than in the beginning, my experience attending lectures and talks at the Center revealed a healthy distribution of scientists and philosophers in the audience. It is quite exciting, in fact, to be so surrounded.

Eidos means essence, but it is also the name for the premier metaphysics group in Geneva, a group whose influence extends well beyond the city lines. It was co-founded in 2007 by Kevin Mulligan, the godfather of contemporary philosophy at the University of Geneva and a hardcore analytic philosopher with a remarkable resume, and Fabrice Correia, co-editor of *dialectica* and chair of analytic philosophy at the University of Geneva. Unfortunately, my time in Geneva did not overlap significantly with *eidos'* programming, as I arrived during their winter break. That being said, my impressions from what sessions I did attend were as follows. First, of all the groups, *eidos* was the largest in terms of population. Up to twenty people might be in attendance at any given time. Second, *eidos'* discussions were among the most technical of the five Geneva groups, at least in terms of philosophical jargon. I recall a postdoc proposing to research the *unity relation*, being careful to distinguish this relation from, say, the *identity relation* (which I am told is utterly simple and unproblematic). My unfamiliarity with anything metaphysical made such discussions difficult for me to follow, and although my ears perked up at the phrase, "...and for the scientific content of my proposal," I was unable to identify anything *per se* scientific. Of course, these comments belie my own philosophical weaknesses more than anything else. For those interested in serious metaphysics, I recommend checking out the *eidos*

website ([here](#)) and emailing Prof. Correia. In fact, that is precisely how I first got in contact with the University of Geneva's philosophy department.

The last two groups, *the Biological Interest Group* (BIG) headed by Prof. Weber, and *the Geneva Symmetry Group* headed by Prof. Wüthrich round out the Geneva philosophy research group experience. It seems to me that such groups are representative of a movement in philosophy as a discipline away from studying Philosophy of *Science* and towards Philosophy of *Insert Particular Scientific Discipline Here*. I am happy to report that the BIG and the Geneva Symmetry Group are trail blazers in that regard. Attendees of the two research groups are deeply in touch with their distinctive scientific practice. For example, rather than discussing causality *tout court*, the BIG would focus on the nature of biological causality. Indeed, it gets significantly more nitty-gritty than that. I attended a talk given by Prof. Weber on the causal and epistemic status of [morphogens](#). Likewise, the Geneva Symmetry Group engages in both classic philosophy questions like, *do physical entities exist contingently?* as well as highly domain-specific issues like the conceptual cogency of quantum field theory on curved spacetime.

This is as it should be. However, it is consequently difficult to follow such discussions without considerable subject knowledge. For example, while I could rely on my bachelor's degree in Biology to keep afloat in BIG discussions, my lack of practical and historical knowledge of quantum physics seriously hampered my understanding of the Symmetry Group. Once again, I suggest taking a look at their website ([here](#)) to get a better idea of the actual content.

What I can offer is a comparison of the Biological Interest Group and Stanford's Philosophy of Neuroscience (PON) reading group. Here are a couple observations that I would like to begin by pointing out. First, while the BIG has inherited a focus on experimental biology from Prof. Weber and the PON is interested primarily in computational approaches to the brain, both groups expect that its members possess a strong foundation in biology. Second, the BIG is significantly older than the PON. The PON was founded in 2019 by a grad student in Neuroscience with the sponsorship of two Stanford professors, Prof. Dan Yamins in the Computer Science department and Prof. Rosa Cao in the Philosophy department. By contrast, the BIG was founded in 2012 by Prof. Weber himself, and its success can largely be attributed to his continued

presence and investment in the group. This difference is also reflected in the “research group” and “reading group” monikers.

I wonder whether this latter observation is indicative of a larger difference between philosophy at Geneva and Stanford, and perhaps Europe and the US too. I don’t just mean that philosophy has a more storied history overseas, be that as it may, nor do I mean that research groups are absent Stateside. Rather, as a matter of degree, it seems to me that a commitment to *continuity* is more apparent in the University of Geneva’s approach to philosophy than Stanford’s. For example, there is hardly a philosophy group on Stanford’s campus that can match the consistency of any of Geneva’s five groups. At Stanford, many reading group members come and go each quarter, and then the reading groups themselves rise and fall yearly. I suspect that the PON reading group will dissolve when the graduate student who created it leaves Stanford. All that turnover is bad for deep dives—personally, I can’t imagine something like *Inbegriff* working at Stanford.

But turnover also has its upsides. Because it is so easy to come and go, philosophy groups at Stanford are rarely comprised entirely of philosophy students. Students in computer science, religious studies, biology, and comparative literature show up to philosophy meetings all the time. For better or for worse, the PON group actually has more members in scientific disciplines than philosophy. And even those who do study philosophy tend to have significant background in an entirely different subject, e.g. Prof. Cao herself has a PhD in Computational Neuroscience. I hypothesize that compared to the University of Geneva, Stanford places somewhat more emphasis on interdisciplinary knowledge and somewhat less emphasis on the history and culture of philosophy.

This is in no way conclusive; perhaps philosophy at both Geneva and Stanford is done at a highly interdisciplinary level despite anecdotal evidence to the contrary. Nonetheless, without drawing too fine a line, I believe there would still be a difference of philosophical *ethos* between the two schools: I am sure that one would never hear at Stanford what I once heard in Geneva, said to me in complete seriousness by a philosophy PhD student with whom I was having lunch—“Philosophers should know their place.”

This is, I reckon, a European sentiment. And it's a good one too.

You see, my interlocutor meant no disrespect. I take it he intended his comment as a celebration of philosophy done properly and a dig at philosophy done shoddily. Shoddy philosophy is characterized by a substitution of philosophical methods with scientific methods. Proper philosophy comes from recognizing that philosophy has its own place among the humanities and sciences, with its own methodologies and questions. In Geneva, apparently, that place is well respected. It is a place towards which people turn for guidance when creating million dollar research institutions like the Centre Interfacultaire en Sciences Affectives (CISA). And there is a *Boulevard des Philosophes* in the center of downtown Geneva, for goodness sake. If I may overstep for a moment, this strikes me as a major difference between philosophy at Geneva and Stanford: that philosophy in Geneva is done primarily with the progress of philosophy in mind rather than, say, the progress of biology or physics. At Stanford, there is always another goal in mind, an additional justification that is needed beyond the mere advancement of the discipline. I did not see this being the case in Geneva.

Rather, the Department of Philosophy in Geneva is spearheading a very focused type of philosophy, what they call *analytic* philosophy (always with extra emphasis on *analytic*), and the task they have appointed for themselves is to bring "hardcore analytic philosophy" to Switzerland. I am still not entirely sure what to make of these commitments. The remarkable fact that in Geneva there is little in the way of analytic political, moral, or aesthetic philosophy seems intimately related, but beyond that I cannot say precisely how so or why. Perhaps if the Department had a larger budget they would add those fields to their arsenal, but for now it is clear where their priorities lie (or do not lie). Feel free to check out some of the articles written by Prof. Mulligan on the difference between Continental and Analytic Philosophy for some background [here](#).

I see the department's commitment most clearly, however, in the simple idea that the professors at Geneva take philosophy *as a discipline* seriously. Indeed, seemingly more seriously than many American philosophers I've met. I cannot say whether this approach is better for philosophy or for the world than some other approach, but if I were to return to Europe to study

philosophy, it would be to rid myself of the nagging voices, both imagined and not, telling me that philosophy has no place, that it has been squeezed out by disciplinary specialization. Even while Geneva participates in a swath of interdisciplinary research projects, including but not limited to the Symmetry Group, the BIG, and even experimental philosophy ([here](#)), there remains at the core a most delightful and motivating commitment to philosophy as a discipline to be respected on its own terms.