Recovering a Kantian Conception of the Highest Good in the Midst of a Sartrian World View

My thesis examines Kant’s moral project in the light of a culture that has bought into the idea that there is a lack of human purpose in the moral sense due to the irrationality of the world around us. Kant’s articulation of the highest good provides a way to recover a conception of moral purpose that articulates a congruent view of human teleology that has underpinnings in antiquity, especially the works of Cicero. The idea of rediscovering and rethinking the moral project has fascinated me since I first began taking classes that deal with these ethical questions.

Brendan Besh

- Major: Program of Liberal Studies
- Supplementary Major: Italian
- Adviser: G. Felicitas Munzel
Quantum Physics & Consciousness

Since Descartes first proposed his famous “cogito ergo sum,” natural science has largely been viewed as a hostile force against mind-body dualism. In my thesis, I argue that quantum physics defies this stereotype and reintroduces the notion that consciousness is something fundamentally distinct from physical reality. I chose this topic not only because of my interest in the philosophical implications of quantum mechanics, but also because I believe that the mystery of consciousness reflects the most fundamental questions about what it means to be human.
The Discipline of Harmony: An Examination of the Hope for Christian Unity Through Synesthesia, the Psalms, and the Saint John’s Bible

I researched the implications of color-sound synesthesia — in which one sees colors when they hear — in praying through the Psalms, and the composition of the Saint John’s illuminated Bible’s psalter in relationship to a renewed understanding of the possibilities and need for Christian unity. I have color-sound synesthesia, and my time at Notre Dame has instilled in me a passion for ecumenical dialogue. In a conversation with my adviser, he explained to me how the Saint John’s Bible is meant to be a synesthetic experience and embodies Saint Augustine’s theology of the Psalms.

Traveled to Collegeville and Moorhead, Minnesota, with funding from the Glynn Family Honors Program.
How Teachers Can Educate Virtue Through Friendship

In education today, there is often a strong emphasis on academic achievement. Although this is a worthy goal, it can distract from the other dimensions of students’ needs and capacities. In order to foster holistic development and happiness, teachers need a solid understanding of philosophical anthropology, which compels teachers to foster friendship in the classroom and with each student. In my own high school education, building one-on-one relationships with my teachers as mentors and being part of a school community that fostered generosity and care enabled me to grow significantly as a person.

Received the Neus Family Senior Thesis Grant to travel to Chicago and Washington, D.C.
Sophocles’ three Theban plays set the foundation for tragedy as a genre. In reading Shakespeare’s King Lear, I found that many elements of the Greek tragedy were imported into the play. Although the character of the Fool does not fit neatly into the Greek tragic context, I have found that he fills a similar role as the chorus of Sophocles’ tragedies. I wanted to study the character of the Fool for his irony, cynicism, parody, and prophecy. The Fool is a fringe character — both acting within the drama and operating beyond it.
School Choice: Voucher Programs

My thesis explores the effectiveness of voucher programs as a means of alleviating the disparity between students from low-income families and their more privileged peers. I firmly believe that poor education, above all else, perpetuates socioeconomic inequality. Children born into low-income families receive substantially inadequate schooling. If the chasm between rich and poor is ever to shrink, the education offered to society’s most disadvantaged must prove capable of granting social mobility. As the public education system currently exists, this is not the case.
Scourge and Minister: The Duty of a Christian Prince in Hamlet

My thesis explores how Hamlet’s sense of duty as a Christian prince — which is influenced by a variety of political texts from the Renaissance — affects his action (or lack thereof) in the play. I originally wanted to study some aspect of religion in Hamlet, but quickly realized that such a question would become embroiled in the politics of the play. I settled on the problem of exploring the role of the Christian prince for Hamlet to study the interaction of these two forces in the play.
The Changing Definition of Tyranny

I analyzed the evolving definition of “tyrant.” I argue that the transition from the Peisistratid tyranny to democracy in Athens caused the word tyrant to be maligned, as the new democracy was trying to establish its position by delegitimizing the previous government.
Augustine’s understanding of friendship develops alongside his intellectual and spiritual growth. Studying particular friendships in Augustine’s life and relying on his own system of sacramental theology, I found that friends, as signs, reveal and affect the Christian identity. Friendship itself becomes sacramental and, by friendship, God immerses persons in His grace and invites them into a sacramental way of being. My interest in the theology of friendship and my love for St. Augustine led me to ponder the role of friends in Augustine’s conversion, and a sacramental theology class in my junior year cultivated my own sacramental imagination.
Aesthetic Impacts: How the British Museum’s Justification for Keeping the Parthenon Marbles is Rooted in Initial Aesthetic Reactions

My thesis concerns the initial reactions to the marbles when they were removed from Athens and brought to London and how their impact on British society at the time influences the British Museum’s modern justification for keeping the marbles. I discuss the aesthetic and cultural role of museological objects as well as claims made for and against the repatriation of the sculptures. I am fascinated with the controversy that still surrounds the Parthenon marbles and wanted to investigate further. I am also very interested in the relationship between museums and their objects.

Traveled to London.
The Catilinarian Conspiracy and the Formation of Cicero’s Political Philosophy

My thesis explores the four orations Cicero delivered during the Catilinarian conspiracy of 63 B.C., the year of his consulship. I explore how his political philosophy was developed through this event and was later formalized in his writings, particularly in his *De re publica*. I read Cicero in a class and enjoyed his style and philosophy. After studying abroad in Italy my junior year, I also appreciated the culture and history of ancient Rome, so I decided to explore these two interests with my thesis.
The Aristotle Option: Virtue Ethics and Economic Practice in Alasdair MacIntyre’s After Virtue and Michael Novak’s The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism

I explored how the role of classical virtue ethics in modern capitalism helps to illuminate the divide between traditionalist conservatism and classical liberalism. Alasdair MacIntyre and Michael Novak serve as compelling representatives for their respective schools of thought because they both unite Aristotelian virtue ethics and economic practice with their larger political philosophies. I am deeply interested in the philosophical influences that inform modern American conservatism and the tension between traditionalist conservatism and classical liberalism. Additionally, I enjoy studying virtue ethics and its application to economic practice because it integrates my academic interest in political philosophy with my vocational interest in business.
**Philology and Poetic Inspiration in Poliziano’s “Manto”**

I investigated the contrasting notions of poetic inspiration in Neoplatonic and philological theory, particularly in a Neo-Latin poem of Angelo Poliziano, a Renaissance scholar. In his encomium to Vergil, “Manto,” Poliziano complicates traditional Neoplatonic ideas about the process of poetic inspiration, proposing a more subtle and nuanced vision. Working with Poliziano’s Latin poetry offered the opportunity to blend my studies in classics with my broader work in the Program of Liberal Studies. Poliziano’s unusual subversion of intellectual fields proposes a more holistic understanding of knowledge that is strikingly congruent with PLS’s approach to education.

*Received the Program of Liberal Studies’ Monteverdi Award to study in Tuscany, Italy.*
Power, Pity, and Death in The Iliad and The Lord of the Rings

My thesis is a comparison of Homer’s *The Iliad* and J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* in reference to the themes of power, pity, and death, as well as the philosophical differences in their worlds. Ever since I read *The Iliad* during my freshman year, I have been drawing comparisons between it and *The Lord of the Rings* and thinking about the fundamental differences between the works.
C.S. Lewis and San Giovanni Calabria: A Study in Ecumenism

My thesis investigates the epistolary relationship between English author C.S. Lewis and Italian saint Giovanni Calabria, focusing on their discussions regarding Christian unity and their differing approaches toward unification. I included an original translation from Italian to English of Calabria’s essay, “Ut omnes unum sint.” Lewis’ relationship with Catholicism fascinates me, so I was immediately intrigued by his personal relationship with an Italian saint. The focus on ecumenism developed naturally from researching their relationship, as it was the central topic of their letters.

Traveled to Verona, Italy, and Oxford, England, with funding from the Rome International Scholars program.
‘I Couldn’t Stop It From Starting’: The Child-Narrator in Roddy Doyle’s Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha and Claire Keegan’s Foster

My thesis compares two contemporary works of Irish literature, both written from the first-person perspective of a child-narrator, and their similar portrayals of family dysfunction and Irish history. Where these works differ is in whether they suggest that these children can overcome their circumstances. Spending eight months studying and working in Dublin was an integral part of my thesis research. Through my classes on Irish society and my relationships with Irish citizens, I gained a familiarity with different parts of Irish history, language, and culture that helped me understand the subtleties of these works.
Economic Inefficiency of Soviet Gulags: A Quantitative and Literary Analysis

Using statistical information and firsthand accounts, I compiled a comprehensive evaluation of the efficiency of applying Gulag labor to complete Soviet economic projects. I analyzed two case studies from both statistical and literary perspectives to assess the functionality of the system as a whole in order to explain the Soviets’ motivations and degree of effectiveness in their objective of industrialization. I chose this topic after reading Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s The Gulag Archipelago and noting the emphasis it places on the ethical problems of the Gulag. Unlike many other personal accounts, however, it also addresses the Gulag’s economic flaws.
In my thesis, I analyze the philosophical and cultural theories that drive the fictional and critical works of Tom McCarthy, as well as his treatment of literary sources and tradition. The relationship between McCarthy’s texts offers insight into his understanding of the connection between literature and theory. This topic allowed me to connect my primary areas of study. Drawing upon contemporary theory also exposed me to philosophers and writers that I may not have otherwise studied.
The Use of Neuroscience in U.S. Criminal Law

My thesis investigates the increasing use of neuroscientific evidence in American criminal courts and the implications of this change for individual rights. I chose this topic because it is a good synthesis of two of my interests — neuroscience and philosophy.
Augustine’s Dialogues As They Relate to Pedagogy

My thesis explores the pedagogical ideas of St. Augustine’s earlier writings. His first works, the Cassiciacum Dialogues, have a drastically different tone than his later, more religious texts. My analysis tries to discover what Augustine’s pedagogy was like during his early years and offer an explanation for his change (or lack of change) throughout his career. I fell in love with the prose and style of St. Augustine’s Confessions and knew he would be an enjoyable figure to learn more about. Upon researching for this project, I came across his lesser-known dialogues and found many shocking, yet insightful, pedagogical claims.
The Human Element: Death and Disney

My project is an exploration into the different aspects of death within and around the Walt Disney Company, including the Make-A-Wish Foundation, movies, theme parks, and other facets of Disney. I absolutely adore the Disney Company and what it stands for. I also wanted to use this thesis as an opportunity to learn more about the Disney Company as a possible future career path.
I examine the transition in liberal education from being elitist to truly democratic in the American Great Books programs, beginning with John Erskine at Columbia University. I explore how Erskine incorporated aspects of John Dewey’s pragmatism into his program, which broadened the scope of the project on the national level. I am interested in how America makes education accessible for all citizens. I believe education is absolutely necessary for a functioning democracy, since a democracy demands critical thinking and decision-making from all citizens. I also am interested in how liberal education could be used to heighten this critical judgment in American citizens.
Modalities of the Sublime in Wordsworth’s Prelude

My thesis examines the different modalities of the sublime as represented through different types of landscape features present in *The Prelude*. Through this examination, readers will come to understand more fully the way Wordsworth’s experience with the sublime changes over the course of his life. William Wordsworth has been my favorite poet since my sophomore year Lyric Poetry class. Examining this poem allowed me to not only spend more time with his work, but also learn about his life.
Literature and Contemplation: Platonic Aesthetics in Contemporary Thought

My thesis first explores contemplation and its importance. Then, I compare the recent decline in contemplation to the parallel decline in reading. Next, I investigate Platonic aesthetic theory to establish a metaphysical relationship between reading and contemplation. Finally, I pull this ancient theory into the contemporary through Heidegger. I think the decline in reading, though studied in the fields of psychology and statistics, has largely been ignored in contemporary philosophy. If reading inspires contemplation, as I posit, then it is important to understand how and why from a metaphysical perspective.
Montaigne and Skepticism

I explore the relationship between Montaigne’s skepticism and his religious faith to try to find the truth. He says one can find the truth only in God, but he also reaches some moral conclusions that he sees as true. I first read Montaigne during my freshman year and was immediately drawn to his writings. Many of his ideas seem modern, which is weird for an early Renaissance writer. I think there is much we can learn from him, but before any truth can be gleaned, we need to know where he finds the truth.
Exploring Artificial Intelligence Through Classic Texts on the Mind

Can machines think? My thesis explores this question through an evaluation of current debates and classic texts concerning the philosophy of the mind. From Aristotle and Augustine to Nagel, Turing, and Searle, I evaluated how the question of machine intelligence impacts our understanding of what it means to be human. My PLS natural science classes have sparked my interest in this field.
Beethoven’s Ninth: From Chaos to Elysium

My thesis explores Beethoven’s relationship with the writings of Kant, Herder, and Schiller regarding natural history and the theory of the sublime. I argue that an understanding of these texts and their influence on Beethoven deepens our understanding of his *Ninth Symphony in D Minor*. I’ve had a lifelong interest in music and the ideas it is capable of expressing. Beethoven is one of my favorite composers, and the first movement of his *Ninth Symphony* has always fascinated me.
Fame or Blame: An Ethical Evaluation of Major League Baseball’s Steroid Era

A large portion of MLB players used steroids from the late 1980s to 2000s, a time in baseball that became known as the “steroid era.” I evaluate those players’ decisions through two case studies, Barry Bonds and Roger Clemens, and their claims to recognition in the Hall of Fame. My evaluation was done through a dialogue between three philosophers — Aristotle, John Stuart Mill, and Immanuel Kant. I really enjoyed the ethics class I took in PLS, and combining it with my passion for sports made the research process even more enjoyable.
The Definition of Design Thinking: An Exploration of the Genealogy

In my thesis, I explore the recently popularized business buzzword “design thinking.” To find the best possible definition, I trace the historical use of the term, and its development over time from the 1950s to now. I also explore two primary contemporary texts to gain an understanding of the current connotation of the term. I took a Design Thinking course, and it was incredibly valuable for my problem-solving processes. I am also interested in pursuing further education or a career in fields where knowledge of design thinking will hopefully prove exceptionally valuable.
The Perspective of the Spectacle in Madame Bovary and Anna Karenina

Gustave Flaubert and Leo Tolstoy write two great novels that follow a very similar plot — an unhappy woman commits adultery and, ultimately, commits suicide. However, due to their unique styles and the way they use the idea of perspective, with Anna being looked at by society and Emma examining society herself, each novel has an entirely different feel. Thus, the plot proves secondary to writing style in crafting a compelling work of fiction. I have always enjoyed the works of Tolstoy, and a PLS professor suggested that I look into the relationship between these two similar works, written during the same time period.
Apocalyptic Optics: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Grotesque Fiction of Flannery O’Connor

I argue that O’Connor’s fiction can be interpreted as a literary, dramatic performance of Balthasar’s theological aesthetics, theo-drama, and theo-logic, on the grounds that both represent species of apocalyptic. Apocalyptic discloses hidden mystery through rhetorical strategies including hyperbole, violence, and visionary-sensory symbolism that shock the reader into a new way of seeing reality. O’Connor’s stories are apocalyptic parables that dramatically reveal the presence of God, before whom none can remain neutral. I was interested in exploring how Balthasar’s capacious Trinitarian, Christological aesthetics resonate with O’Connor’s fiction, which is noted for its violence and grotesque figures and may seem disturbingly ugly at first glance.

Traveled to Emory University, Andalusia Farm, and Georgia College in Georgia. Received funding from the Glynn Family Honors Program and a Neus Family Senior Thesis Grant.
Think Tank Involvement in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act

My thesis explores the role of think tanks in the legislative process, using the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act as a case study. In particular, I examined the efforts of the Brookings Institution and the Heritage Foundation to influence the stimulus legislation. Given the prevalence of think-tank experts in congressional hearings and on network news shows, I was curious about the extent to which think tanks influence decisions made by policymakers in Washington, D.C., every day.
Flann O’Brien’s Quantum Modernism

My thesis explores how Flann O’Brien’s novels *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman* use the language of quantum physics to illuminate something about reality, and as such, how this language makes O’Brien’s work distinctly modern. In the spring of my junior year, I read *The Third Policeman* and was struck immediately by the blatant scientific language it contained. There was something within the text that beckoned me, though I could not identify it. It was this elusive quality that hooked me.
Twelfth Night as Tragicomedy

Through a comparison with the ancient tragedy *The Bacchae*, my thesis examines the darker aspects of Shakespeare’s last great comedy, *Twelfth Night*. The character of Malvolio is of special interest, as his exile and promise of revenge give the audience insight into the self-destructive chaos inherent in a society obsessed with irony and festivity. I had the great pleasure of playing Malvolio in the Notre Dame Shakespeare Festival’s 2017 production of *Twelfth Night*, and I wanted to further research his function. Malvolio is such a fully realized character that I could play him for the rest of my life and never be bored.
I compared the analyses of personal identity by David Hume and Acarya Nāgārjuna, centered around an explication of their work as “spiritual exercises,” defined by the French historian of philosophy, Pierre Hadot. A two-day presentation of Buddhist philosophy of mind in a class my sophomore year piqued my interest in this topic.

*Traveled to Kathmandu, Nepal, with funding from a Neus Family Senior Thesis Grant.*
A Capabilities Approach for Civil Society: The Capabilities Approach of Martha Nussbaum and the Creation of the Sustainable Development Goals

I explore the role for civil society in Martha Nussbaum’s capabilities approach to human development. The creation of the sustainable development goals is used as a key case study to examine the philosophical grounding for a deliberative, whole-of-society approach to global development and the necessity of such an approach for modern development processes. I have been interested in Nussbaum’s work since my first semester at Notre Dame because of the way her grounding in classical philosophy has led her to cutting-edge scholarship and practice in global development and human rights.
The Moral and Technical Limits of CRISPR

For my thesis, I studied the possible future uses of CRISPR gene editing in health care. I also considered whether public unease about the widespread use of gene editing is reasonable. Finally, I suggested a moral regulatory framework for the future of CRISPR gene editing. I wanted to combine my passion for writing and liberal arts research with my interest in medicine. I think my thesis will add depth to my studies in medical school next fall.
Historical Interpretations of the Islamic Prohibition of Interest

My thesis explores the historical, theological, legal, and philosophical foundations of the Islamic prohibition against charging interest, or “riba.” I focused on the interpretation of this prohibition in the early centuries of Islam in order to demonstrate the complex relationship between divine revelation (in the form of the Quran) and the economic and social realities of daily life. This multifaceted topic is the perfect conclusion to my undergraduate career. It required me to look at my topic through many different lenses, and it tied together my PLS and international economics majors. It also allowed me to use my knowledge of Arabic.
From Make-Believing to Being: How Lewis’ Literature Makes Mysticism Accessible

The idea that C.S. Lewis has of awakening, ascending, and becoming real stems from his reading of the Scriptures, the lives of Christian mystics, and works of Platonic and Romantic origin. My thesis focuses on what concepts interested Lewis, what people influenced him, and how he translated the themes and practices of his spiritual patrons into a form accessible to children and adults. I was inspired by two courses — one that explored Christian apologetics and mysticism and another that compared Lewis’ literature to Eastern Orthodox traditions — and wanted to explore whether mysticism informed Lewis’ writing.
Developing Effective and Inclusive Aid Programs: Outreach to Female Refugees

With 22.5 million refugees worldwide, limited resources require aid programming that is highly efficient and well targeted. Those most at-risk within their own communities are also most vulnerable to deficient aid and services. Female members of Arabic-speaking refugee communities are one such distinctly marginalized group. My thesis examines the hardships faced by these women and how aid organizations might work more efficiently and effectively. I completed interviews in Germany, Canada, and the United States through partnerships with local NGOs. Respondents emphasized the value of women-only spaces and the importance of considering the unique obstacles facing female refugees before and after they leave their home country.

Traveled to Eichstätt, Germany; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Saint Catharines, Ontario, Canada; with funding from the Kellogg Institute for International Studies.
An Ethical Judgement of American Football

American football is the most popular and valuable sport in the United States. However, recent research has shown the danger it poses to football players’ neurological health. My thesis summarizes this research and explores what should be done about the sport, at all levels, moving forward. I have always been passionate about football, but I have heard multiple reports of its dangers over the past few years. I wanted to learn more, decide how they could be combatted, and know if I could continue to support the sport.