

My intellectual itinerary

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How did I end up an American doing philosophy in the Francophone world? Here is a short(ish) account.

I chose to study philosophy while an undergrad at Tufts University. It seemed a discipline that could help us think more clearly on a wide range of meaningful topics. One of the first courses to capture my imagination was “Phenomenology and Existentialism,” taught by Nancy Bauer, a specialist in Simone de Beauvoir and feminism. (Bauer’s “Philosophy and Film” course was also a real inspiration.) However, I was dismayed to learn that a [schism existed in philosophy](#) between mainly Anglophone “Analytic” philosophy and the so-called “Continental” philosophy of Europe. This split has various aspects that are [not easy](#) to [sum up](#), but the results are straightforward: over the last 150 years or so, philosophers in each roughly construed tradition have tended to pay less attention to the work of those in the other, and struggled to communicate effectively with them. While many philosophers today recognize the need for [bridging the divide](#), as a practical matter, grad students are still usually obliged to take a side as they specialize. Rather than choosing one over the other, I felt that a fruitful dialogue between them was possible.

So I traveled abroad during my junior year to Aix-en-Provence to try my hand at philosophy in French. Having been to Paris previously, I was curious to get to know a different part of France and French culture. In Aix, I received a fascinating introduction to the history of French philosophy, while still having specialists in analytic philosophy to orient me. My experience in Aix was so positive that, after graduating from Tufts the following year, I returned to France to work as an ESL teacher in French public schools and to continue to improve my French language skills.

That preparatory work allowed me to take on the Masters at the Sorbonne, in the footsteps of the intellectual heroes of my youth, as it were. My aim was to learn to do philosophy beyond the artificial separation between phenomenology and analytic philosophy. I was fortunate that one of my professors, the phenomenologist Claude Romano, shared that goal and we quickly found intellectual common ground. My PhD topic was born out of discussions in his seminars. We studied the work of Richard Moran and Charles Larmore, two American philosophers, who, like me, thought that Sartre had something useful to contribute to debates in analytic philosophy of selfhood and self-knowledge. At the same time, under Professor Romano’s guidance, I was studying Sartre’s approach itself. To me, it seemed to have even more to offer than the circumscribed aspects that Mr. Larmore and Mr. Moran each appropriated. As I read him, Sartre not only theorizes our capacity to commit ourselves in practical reflection, as these authors emphasize, but also our ability to thematize our unreflective experience of the world, a form of phenomenological reflection. In my dissertation, I argued that this was the key to obviating some of the difficulties encountered by the analytic approaches.

My doctoral work led me to approach philosophical problems both rigorously and creatively, building on and constructively critiquing elements from different philosophers to develop a solution. I did so in dialogue with some of the authors themselves, since I was fortunate enough to be able to exchange with them, and even benefit from Mr. Larmore’s and Mr. Moran’s participation in my dissertation committee when I defended in Spring 2021.

I also had the opportunity to get to know a challenging and varied philosophical corpus in Sartre. This was facilitated by exchange with specialists as a member of the *Groupe d'Études Sartriennes*, with its annual colloquium in Paris, as well as numerous reading groups and seminars with a new generation of young Sartre scholars at the *École Normale Supérieure*.

The Philo'Doctes Association

Another formative aspect of my experience was participating in and eventually presiding over the philosophy doctoral students' association *Philo'Doctes*. *Philo'Doctes* is a group of philosophy PhD students at the Sorbonne who aim to promote dialogue between young researchers working in different traditions and sub-specialties. We organized both formal and informal academic events, allowing for grad students to present their work, exchange with their peers, and generally get to know one another better. You can follow *Philo'Doctes'* ongoing events and activities on [facebook](#), their [new website](#), or peruse the archives of the [old one](#).