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The Unifying Power of Education

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The Unifying Power of Education

Panel presented February 2, 2017

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Jenji Learn is a master's student in philosophy, a writer and an activist whose interests in all three include queer liberation, understanding sexism, racism, and anti-LGBTQIA prejudice and its psychological, sociological, and historical origins. She also is interested in political and social theory, social epistemology, the mind, applied ethics, bioethics, and the metaphysics of identity. She has worked with several organizations with the aim of ending state-sponsored violence and discrimination and writes about health-care discrimination for Bioethics.net. She hopes to be accepted to a Ph.D. program next year and continue this work while pursuing a doctorate.

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The Unifying Power of Education¹

Without Expertise or Experience: Philosophizing When Your Students Know You Know Nothing

Keagan Potts

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Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy is timeless, multifaceted, and empowers people from many different backgrounds. In this panel, and in each talk, we decided to focus on what insight Reverend King's legacy can bring to education. In this section, I will discuss the goals and motivations of the panel. I will contextualize our project, show how it relates to the broader university wide theme, "The Transformative Power of a Unified Dream," and explore philosophy as a microcosm of the problems and potential of education in the US.

This year's celebration of Martin Luther King, Jr., was organized around the theme of transformation through unification. The panel theme, the unifying power of education, seeks to explore one tool in the arsenal of social movements. In collaborating on the panel Jenji Learn, Andy Marquis, Jon Milgrim, and I organized ourselves around a series of questions, one of which was: what is the purpose or role of education? The notion of directions of fit from philosophy of mind and philosophy of perception may be helpful here. According to this theory, our mind's sensitivity to the environment is bidirectional: our mind attempts to accurately capture and understand the world (mind-to-world), and our mind seeks to make the world con-

¹ The panel was moderated by Jonathan Milgrim and also included a presentation (not published here) by Andrew Marquis. Both are M.A. students in philosophy at Western Michigan University.

form to how we think it ought to be (world-to-mind).² Now that we are well equipped with this concept, we can do some work on our guiding question.

An intuitive answer to our first question is that education prepares people for careers. However, this response demands further exploration as it seems that there are better and worse careers, and many people want their education to prepare them for a career that contributes to society. These answers are still stuck in the mind-to-world direction of fit, the cultivation of which is an important step in the educational project. But we are not at the heart of the issue yet, as people do not want to just contribute, they want to have a say in the way society functions. So, education at its best seeks to prepare people to shape their society, and this entails developing students' ability to think and work along the world-to-mind direction of fit. This is where transformation happens.

Then we asked, where do we realize this dream and how are we unified in pursuing it? Given the theme of the panel, our answer to this question should be fairly clear. We think educational settings are the key environment where this dream is formed, and the realm where people acquire the skills and motivation to mobilize themselves in pursuit of the dream. More concretely, we want to focus on formal education, which is loosely construed as education taking place within traditional classroom settings. Despite the fact that education has the potential to formulate and realize a dream, education can also stifle progress and further entrench deleterious social practices. In proceeding, all of the panelists aim to recognize this reality and suggest a path forward that better actualizes the transformative and unifying power of education.

Up until now I have focused on the motivations and goals of the panel, but it is also important to talk briefly about the panel's makeup. All of our panelists are philosophy students, and in assembling the panel I was reminded of philosophy's own issues with accessibility and representation. Philosophy serves as an interesting microcosm of the issues with the education system we hope to discuss more broadly throughout the panel.

² Although many philosophers talk about direction of fit, Sabine Döring's work was formative in my thought. See especially, Döring, S. (2007), *Seeing What to Do: Affective Perception and Rational Motivation*, *Dialectica*, 61(3), 363-394.

More than other disciplines, philosophy has been dominated by white male thinkers. In addition, the discipline has struggled to ameliorate this shortcoming by appealing to people with more diverse interests and backgrounds.³ This lack of diversity could result from different factors: the language and technical jargon used in most philosophy is arcane and uninviting; late exposure to philosophy courses means that most students have already developed other interests by the time they reach a philosophy course; the methodology is foreign to those first trying philosophy. The panel is entirely made up of white philosophers, only one of whom is female. All of the participants agree that few panels should look like this, least of all a panel on the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. With this in mind, each panelist has attempted to be conscientious and aware of the limitations placed on their role by their experiences. This does not mean we do not have any authority to talk about King's legacy; it only means we need to be respectful, aware, and humble in exploring the limited range of interpretation and meaning over which we have jurisdiction. Everyone has a place in the movement, but not every role in a movement is available to every person.

Although philosophy shares shortcomings of education with other disciplines, it also has its own unique assets that hold potential to serve the goal of education mentioned at the beginning of this section. The focus on congenial and constructive discourse in philosophy helps its students develop a skill-set that gives them an understanding of how to partake in and guide civic discourse. Additionally, the analytic mindset necessary for philosophic inquiry combined with abstract and creative thought helps students to engage with novel and complex problems. It is my belief, and the belief of fellow panelists, that philosophy has a lot to offer, and social progress depends on sound philosophy. This means philosophical research, and all academic research, owes society its returns.

I will close this section with a discussion of the special obligation held by educators. Power differentials are essential to making classrooms run

³ The changes philosophy made decades ago are just starting to pick up speed, so it seems safe to say the discipline will become more diverse in years to come. Minority and Philosophy groups (WMU is just starting its chapter this Spring), Committees on the Status of Women in philosophy, and other programs like them are the initiatives I have in mind, but a lot more has yet to be done

smoothly and ensuring a stable learning environment. However, it is when educators abuse or over-extend this power that voices are silenced and classes miss out on the opportunity for transformative education. Additionally, a teacher's experience limits their ability to lead discussions on issues of race and gender in the classroom. It is incredibly important that the classroom provides students an arena to explore these issues and formulate their own thoughts in response to movements organizing people around crucial social justice issues. As an educator myself, I believe teachers should be dedicated to trying to learn how to maintain order while facilitating or otherwise supporting class discussion regarding issues where they have neither experience nor expertise. These kinds of discussions exercise both directions of fit, and I want to explore the difficulty and importance of developing the world-to-mind direction of fit in the classroom. If educators neglect their obligation they are complicit in stifling individual development and barring access to social discourse as a source of progressive action.

Segregated Students — Segregated Society: The Primacy of Education in Ending Hate

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It is a sad but undeniable truth that most Americans, if asked, are hard pressed to name more Supreme Court cases than they can count on one hand. Yet even among this swath of our citizenry, the name “Brown v. Board” is ubiquitous and meaningful. Though the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were undeniable in their impact and in their transformative effect on American life and politics, and though the bitter struggle to fully implement and enforce these laws and see that everyone enjoys their protections still continues to this day, the end of racially segregated schooling and the legal principle of “separate but equal” that had undergirded it had a special significance and power that helped to make those

later legal and political victories possible by bringing about a deeper kind of change in people's hearts and minds. The change in their consciousness included greater awareness of the struggle and cruelty faced by black and brown Americans, even as children.

Laws and systems of discrimination, such as the slave codes or Jim Crow regime in America or the apartheid regime of South Africa, are only as strong as the willingness of the favored group to respect them, or at least to abide by them. Under these systems, a majority of white citizens may not have been actively racist in the sense of committing acts of violence, acting or campaigning against the welfare of black Americans, or otherwise participating in white-supremacy in a "hands on" way rather than simply benefiting from it passively. However, the genius of those systems was that it prevented these more benign white citizens from spending any time around or interacting with black Americans, and absent any first-hand experience, which would foster empathy and allow them to see that the targeted minority-group is no different and no less human than themselves, they are free to paint in their mind, or to passively absorb from the propaganda of the oppressor, a crude and detestable caricature of what "the other" is that serves to justify the system of segregation, and therefore to render it morally permissible in their minds. By way of illustration: a majority of white people in the Confederacy had never owned slaves, and in fact, were gravely harmed economically by the institution of slavery, and yet many of these same poor white men actively fought and died to protect wealth slave-holders precisely because they had never been permitted to spend any time working or socializing with black people and therefore were readily able to believe that "it must be this way for a reason," and that black men were violent, primitive beasts who had to be held in bondage in order to prevent them from running amok terrorizing them and their families. The reason that this economic majority of poor whites was never employed in any capacity on the plantations, even for the most pitiful of wages, was not just for the sake of greed: it was because the slave-holders understood that if white workers spent any time near black workers, and came to see a) how blacks were treated and b) that their own desires, motivations, hopes, fears, emotions, and even cultural and educational frame of reference were no different than those of the black workers, they would quickly come to realize how greatly they had been de-

ceived and kept from gainful employment, and how much more they had in common with the slaves than the slave-holders.

This is part of our nature as mammals and primates: the capacity and indeed, I would argue, the primal need and drive we have to empathize with each other, which is what allowed us to survive and thrive as a species through cooperation, communication, and collective effort, even in the harshest of climates surrounded by no shortage of other lifeforms that were stronger, faster, bigger, or tougher than we were. We can't help it. We are built to feel each other's pain, but only if we can see it with our own eyes, or hear it with our own ears. We are not yet so evolved as to be able to empathize through abstraction—we must know with our own senses that our fellow homo sapiens are in pain; it must be tangible and real to us. And this is a double-edged sword, because if we cannot see the suffering of other human beings for ourselves, we would greatly prefer to believe that it must not be occurring so that we need not feel any pain or discomfort ourselves, and we will therefore go to any lengths and grasp at any straw we can in order to rationalize or justify that belief: *“They aren't like us. They don't feel what we feel. They can't be trusted. They don't have the same mental faculties that we do. They don't think as we do. It has to be this way. They're too dangerous to be around. We have no choice. It's not as bad as they say it is. It can't be. They must be lying. We wouldn't hurt them for no reason. We couldn't do that. Nobody could. WE aren't capable of it. I'M not capable of that. THEY must have done something to deserve it. We're just protecting ourselves. It HAS to be this way.”*

This is why public education is of such paramount importance, because, even more important than the quality or focus of the education itself, schools are the institution in which all people, from a young age and from all walks of life, all identities, and economic and cultural groups, are encouraged, and indeed, required to be together, side by side, in an environment where they are all safe and all respected, no matter what is happening or what they are told at home or in society at large. The forces of willful white supremacy understood this as well as anyone, which is precisely why they and their politicians and their police were prepared to use martial violence in Little Rock and across the south against children trying to enter their elementary school. Hitting the rock bottom level of depravity was nec-

essary before passive, non-racist whites could see with their own eyes, before they were finally prepared to understand what was being done in their name and to be galvanized to action.

When President Johnson, after sending the National Guard to finally execute the Brown decision and after successfully forcing through and signing the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, famously remarked to his staff that “We have just lost the South for a generation,” he said “a generation,” not “forever,” because he understood full well that once black and white children were finally allowed to sit side by side while they learned their ABCs, Jim Crow would never be allowed to rise again because the KKKs and the CCCs would no longer have a steady stream of ignorant white adults ready to believe whatever they were told about black America because they had never truly *known* a black American. Tragically, in today’s America, those same forces hold power again, and we who stand for justice and equality for all must remember the lessons of history that made victory possible, because those with power have not forgotten, and they also remember well the taste of defeat.

This, my friends, is why the unparalleled assault on the civil rights, freedoms, safety, and humanity of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Trans*, Intersex, and genderqueer or non-conforming Americans that we are about to witness has begun in the same place that the ongoing struggle for black liberation and equality began—with our education system. Other laws are coming, laws that will allow the refusal of service to LGBT people by any private business or even public servants and institutions. Laws that will allow an emergency room doctor to let me bleed to death on the floor because he claims that his so-called religion decrees me to be less than human⁴. Executive actions have already been implemented by Betsy Devos and Jeff Sessions that allow discrimination in public schools; these actions denied the opportunity for the Supreme Court (to which Neil Gorsuch had not yet been appointed) to rule on the issue in the case of high school student Gavin Grimm, effectively insuring (like the *Plessy* verdict before it) that the segregation of trans and intersex students will be legally sanctioned for decades to come. A so-called “religious liberty” law, promised by President Trump

⁴ Example: Tyra Hunter

and already implemented by Vice President Pence in his own home state of Indiana, would make legal in all 50 states (instead of just 30+) the practice of evicting, firing, or refusing to hire someone because of their gender expression or sexual orientation, because a poverty rate of 1 in 2 isn't high enough. Laws that will openly allocate government money to subsidize the torture and abuse of gay and trans children in so-called 'reparative' therapy which drives many to suicide and substance abuse. Laws that shun, stigmatize, and segregate trans* and intersex Americans and require them to use separate bathrooms or hospital rooms, or be turned away from homeless shelters and other public facilities when they flee from abusive homes. Laws that will abolish hate crimes legislation, because the death rate for trans women (especially women of color) isn't high enough when it comprises more than half of identity-motivated homicides recorded. Laws that will allow those same women to be thrown in men's prisons for having the audacity to defend themselves from being beaten or killed while guards joke and take bets about how many times they'll be raped⁵. Laws championed by the same kind of men-- smug, slick, pale white politicians in their dark grey suits looking into the camera to tell you all the same things: that this is about THEIR "freedom" to discriminate, that queer people are marked by God as inferiors and that having to breathe the same air as us is an affront to their "spiritual beliefs," that they don't hate us or want to kill us at all—they just think that we should not be allowed to work, go to school, join the military, go the hospital or have insurance coverage, get married, adopt children, receive any government services, be served in any public business or accommodation, or use indoor plumbing.

Given these atrocities and some of the battles that lie ahead in the coming years, it may seem easy to forget about education, to think that discrimination in schooling is a less urgent or imperative issue than matters that have an immediate life-or-death outcome. But the exact opposite is true. Any adult with a shred of reason or conscience knows that any one of those things is an outrage and an affront to civil society, but children do not. The queer child, who learns that they are a second-class citizen from the time they are in kindergarten will not know any better. The straight child, who is

⁵ Examples: Eisha Green, CeCe McDonald, Zahara Green

taught that we are animals who are to be shunned, exploited, or abused for sport from the time they are old enough to speak will not know any better either—unless they are taught. If queer Americans, our friends and loved ones, and any and every citizen of conscience and conviction does not remember the lessons taught to us by the struggle of black America and the Brown verdict, the violent resistance to it and the struggle that was necessary, and all the even greater victories and systemic changes that were made possible as a result, then we are in trouble. If we allow segregation, abuse, and apartheid back into our public schools, then I fear that LGBTQIA Americans will have lost their freedom, dignity, and opportunity--their very humanity--for a generation.

Combatting Emerging Resegregation: Teaching Those in Power to Empower

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In my individual presentation, I will explore the essential role that teachers play in either reproducing or challenging accepted social norms and show that their failure to fulfill their obligation to create a critically reflective atmosphere facilitates the insidious re-segregation of schools. My discussion centers on Dr. Beth Hatt's article "Smartness as Cultural Practice in Schools" and uses it as a springboard to discuss the many ways educators and the educational system can silence and disenfranchise students.⁶ The teacher needs to help students understand how the world ought to be and mobilize them in pursuit of that achievable dream in a way that does not interfere with, pollute, or co-opt student thought on the matter.

Hatt highlights the role that artifacts and communication styles play in facilitating the entrenchment of cultural norms. Typically, classroom dy-

⁶ Hatt, B. (2012). "Smartness as a Cultural Practice in Schools." *American Educational Research Journal*, 49(3), 438-460.

namics serve to equate “smartness” with cultural practice. Importantly, Hatt’s study is exercised in a kindergarten classroom, so the reproduction of cultural norms—sometimes harmful norms—begins at a young age and persists throughout students’ educational development. Instead of teaching children critical reflection, instructors frequently teach students sensitivity to established norms. This happens through artifacts, which serve to broadcast a student’s insensitivity or inability to follow norms, and through communication, in that students who communicate most similarly to the teacher are seen as smarter. I will discuss each in turn.

The first artifact Hatt discusses is the stoplight. In the classroom she worked with there was a large stoplight image, and each child had a car with their name on it. Students that misbehaved had their cars first moved from green to yellow, then yellow to red. This may seem innocuous at first. We all have experience with similar disciplinary tools, and yet such mechanisms are deleterious to student development in a few ways. Regarding the stoplight, it recruits other students in monitoring misbehavior which adds complexity to the class hierarchy, as students begin to compete with each other to stay in the teacher’s good graces. Additionally, students and teachers begin to associate inability to control one’s body with a lack of intelligence. Students who consistently misbehave internalize this message. As a result, students may speak up less, lose interest in class material, and refrain from participating in extracurricular activities or accelerated educational options because they have been told their whole lives that they are “not smart enough.”

Hatt also discusses the shoe tiers club, a club that excludes students who are unable to tie their own shoes. Importantly, these students must go to have their shoes tied by a member of the shoe tier club. Like the stoplight, this elevates some students over others, and such competition in the classroom is toxic to the inclusive and congenial atmosphere needed to unify students in their discussion of social issues. Furthermore, Hatt noted that students that could not tie their shoes often had parents who could not take the time to teach them. So, instead of pulling those students up while they were in class, Hatt noted that teachers in the classroom insisted that the student try to learn from their parents. The shoe tiers club and the stop light served to strengthen the association between intelligence and behavior,

thereby entrenching cultural norms that promote strict control over one's body.

Another key component discussed by Hatt was communication style. For example, a student with a speech impediment was considered less intelligent as a result of their inability to communicate their ideas clearly to the teacher. This student tested extremely well at the beginning of the semester but as the year progressed internalized their teacher's evaluations and began to perform less well in the classroom.

Through a number of other classroom activities, the teacher in the classroom evaluated intelligence based on how closely students were able to emulate her communication style. Hatt noted that during the show and tell activity students already evaluated as intelligent mimicked the teacher's mannerisms and gestures. In another activity, where students recited information about calendars and days of the week, only those that were evaluated as intelligent were given an opportunity to teach their fellow students. This facilitates reproduction of cultural norms by empowering those that are likely to share cultural similarities with the teacher. Students are discouraged from critical reflection and revision to potentially harmful cultural norms, and those that fail to adhere to the norms of their teacher are silenced and prevented from speaking in front of their classmates during activities.

Although Hatt does not discuss at length the opportunity for these classroom mechanisms to introduce implicit bias into the educational setting, these are certainly vehicles for cultural discrimination. It is not hard to imagine teachers dis-incentivizing participation from students of color and low socio-economic status using the same behavioral tools discussed by Hatt. This could serve to bar access to educational opportunities and resources in the classroom in a far more insidious way than the original version of segregation. I will spend the most of my paper suggesting a few other avenues for cultural hegemony in schools that Hatt does not discuss.

The existence of private schools and efforts to privatize education also serve as avenues to disenfranchise already disadvantaged students.⁷ I think

⁷ Though I do not endorse this line of reasoning, some go so far as to say sending children to private school is immoral: see Benedikt, A. (2013, August 29). "If You Send Your Kid to Private School, You Are a Bad Person," *Slate*. Retrieved March 08, 2017, from

immediately of cities like Chicago⁸ or Detroit⁹ that have struggling public school systems. This robs students of two key educational resources over and above the financial advantages held by private schools: other students and their parents. Parents who send their students to private school are likely heavily invested in their child's education, so these parents could be valuable to public schools who need parental engagement in supportive roles (like the PTA or for after school activities). Additionally, schools will be polarized because children intelligent enough to qualify for private schools, magnet schools, or charter schools will no longer be resources in public school classrooms. The same is true within public schools when gifted students are in all accelerated classes, and students on the normal track are made to feel unintelligent and unmotivated. All of these are natural extensions of Hatt's findings.

The educational environments just described leave students unprepared and rob them of the desires to dream and self-motivate. To ameliorate harmful classroom environments, we need to reinvest in and reform our public-school system nationwide and at the state level. We also need to focus on equipping teachers to facilitate discussions that they may not have experience or expertise to lead.¹⁰ And though there may be many more necessary efforts, we need to diversify our teaching population to reflect the demo-

http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2013/08/private_school_vs_public_school_only_bad_people_send_their_kids_to_private.html. See also an article giving reasons for sending children to private school: Godsey, M. (2015, March 04). "Why I'm a Public-School Teacher but a Private-School Parent," *The Atlantic*. Retrieved March 08, 2017, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/03/why-im-a-public-school-teacher-but-a-private-school-parent/386797/>

⁸ For more on Chicago's complex school system and problems that arise, see Richards, J. S., & Perez, J. (2016, January 11). "Chicago's neighborhood schools hurting as choice abounds," *Chicago Tribune*. Retrieved March 08, 2017, from <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-chicago-schools-choice-neighborhood-enrollment-met-20160108-story.html>

⁹ Detroit and other school districts around Michigan have been harmed by the emergency manager law; see Hakala, J. (2016, February 3). "How did we get here? A look back at Michigan's emergency manager law," *Michigan Radio*. Retrieved March 08, 2017, from <http://michiganradio.org/post/how-did-we-get-here-look-back-michigans-emergency-manager-law>

¹⁰ This measure would mean that teachers can serve as allies for their students.

graphic makeup of their classrooms. It is my belief that this final option holds enormous potential for encouraging the critical analysis and reform of many norms governing classrooms across the U.S. today.

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The Institute for Ethics and the Center for Patient Safety, American Medical Association

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Robert Koehler

Chicago-based syndicated journalist

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Heather D. Schild

Department of Sociology

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Case Western Reserve University, School of Medicine

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Janelle DeWitt

Visiting Professor of Philosophy, Western Michigan University

Spring 2017 Lecture Series

“The Unifying Power of Education”

6 p.m. Thursday, February 2

213 Bernhard Center

Panel moderator: Jonathan Milgrim, Philosophy, WMU

Panelists: Keagan Potts, Jenji Learn and Andrew Marquis, Philosophy, WMU

Part of 2017 Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration

“Organizing To Prevent Violence and Build Peace:

The Transformative Potential of Everyday Citizens in West Africa and Central America”

6:30 p.m. Wednesday, February 8

2028 Brown Hall

Stacey Connaughton, Director, Purdue Peace Project

Co-Sponsor: School of Communication

Part of 2016-17 Visiting Scholars and Artists Program.

“Islam and African American Activism in Metro Detroit”

12 p.m. Wednesday February 22

Lee Honors College lounge

Asha Noor, Arab American Center for Community and Social Services, Dearborn

Part of Lee Honors College Lyceum lecture series and Department of Comparative Religion’s Islam in Global Perspectives lecture series

“Integrity in the Criminal Justice System”

7 p.m. Wednesday, March 1

211 Bernhard Center

Panel moderator: Tonya Krause-Phelan, auxiliary dean, WMU Cooley Law School

Panelists: the Honorable William G. Schma, former Kalamazoo County Circuit Court judge; Gerard Faber, assistant prosecutor for Kent County; Becket Jones, associate attorney with Hills at Law P.C. in Kalamazoo; and Donya Davis, a WMU Cooley Innocence Project exoneree.

Co-Sponsor: WMU Cooley Law School

“Do We Have a Moral Obligation to Study the Liberal Arts?”

6 p.m. Thursday, March 16

213 Bernhard Center

Kristopher Phillips, Philosophy, Southern Utah University

Co-sponsors: Department of Philosophy and Department of Teaching, Learning and Educational Studies, WMU

“Does Everyone Have a Duty to Volunteer for Research?”

6 p.m. Wednesday, March 22

WMU Stryker School of Medicine’s W.E. Upjohn M.D. Campus

Rebecca Dresser, Daniel Noyes Kirby Professor of Law and Professor of Ethics in Medicine, Washington University (St. Louis) Law School

Co-sponsors: WMed Program in Medical Ethics, Humanities & Law; West Michigan Cancer Center, WMU Cooley Law School

“Again Toward Perpetual Peace:

Elections, World Government and Lottocracy”

6 p.m. Thursday, April 6

213 Bernhard Center

Alexander Guerrero, Assistant Professor of Philosophy, University of Pennsylvania

Winnie Veenstra Peace Lecture

Co-Sponsors: Department of Philosophy, Haenicke Institute for Global Education, Department of Political Science, Kalamazoo Peace Center, Pax Christi Kalamazoo, St. Thomas More Social Justice, St. Joseph Social Justice, and Kalamazoo Non-Violent Opponents of War (KNOW)