DECONSTRUCTING THE GOOD LIFE:
DAN KESSLER AND MARLENA SANTOS
INTERVIEW MICHAEL MURRAY

Professor Michael Murray retired in December 2013 after forty-three years at Vassar College, where he taught courses on Phenomenology and Existentialism, Queer Theory, Philosophy of Art and Aesthetics, Literary Theory, and key figures in 20th century European philosophy including Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. He was a visiting scholar at the University of Turin, in Italy, and Yale University. During the 1980s, Professor Murray lectured at Peking University. His lectures, Hermeneutics and Deconstruction: The Great Wall of China, were published in Chinese in 1984. That trip ignited Professor Murray’s passion for contemporary Chinese art, which brought him to curate one of the earliest exhibitions of Chinese experimental art in the U.S. The catalogue, Beijing/New York: Avant-Garde Chinese Art, was published in 1986. Professor Murray is author of several books including Modern Philosophy of History and Modern Critical Theory: A Phenomenological Introduction, and is the editor of and contributor to Heidegger and Modern Philosophy: Critical Essays. Among his articles, “Time in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit,” in the Review of Metaphysics, “Wittgenstein and Heidegger,” in The Philosophical Review, and “Against Dialogue,” in Reinterpreting the Political: Continental Philosophy and Political Theory;

Because of his many contributions on a wide range of topics, Professor Murray has been a leading scholar in Continental Philosophy in the United States and abroad. He is currently working on a theory of censorship in the arts, which traces its genealogy throughout the history of Western Philosophy, but also anchors it in different social and geopolitical spaces. He asks: what is the construct of censorship and which are the institutions that inform it? In examining the way in which a given concept is a social practice that grows out of a specific institutional setting, Professor Murray continues the tradition inaugurated by Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, and other Continental theorists. Concepts like the human being, the good life, and the citizen, taken by the
tradition to be universally applicable, turn out to be exclusive and potentially hegemonic if their normativity isn’t exposed, and thus offered to critical scrutiny. The approach associated with the name of deconstruction, which Professor Murray broadly embraces, aims at expanding the borders of these concepts, and to shine light on the possibility of conceiving them otherwise. This mode of critique demands that we put pressure on those comfort areas that often times determine what is familiar to us, and in so doing, forces us to re-examine our grounds of attachment to ourselves and to others as well as to life itself.

The themes that motivate Professor Murray’s work resonate with our mission to explore and critically assess the traditional construct of the good life. We originally looked to Professor Murray for his authority and expertise in areas of philosophy with unique relations to the good life. However, in line with his philosophical beliefs, Professor Murray requested that we see him not as an authority, but as a partner in intellectual inquiry. To respect Professor Murray’s request, we have structured the interview as an exchange of perspectives on a number of topics, rather than as a series of questions.

In the context of an interview, the reader might expect a philosophy professor to provide a definitive answer. By contrast, Professor Murray’s responses are unavoidably open, demanding both the original questioners and his readers to reflect on their own on what has been said. This is the spirit of deconstruction that, as Derrida claims, “tonight I will act for awhile as if these two orders were distinct, to seek to determine later on, here or elsewhere, at least as a disputable hypothesis, the rule of what passes [ce qui passe] from one to the other, the rule of what occurs [ce qui se passe] between the two, and for which I would have, in some, to respond.”

**DK & MS: What is the good life?**

MM: This topic runs throughout the history of philosophy—Plato and Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas, Hume and Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche, and their contemporary variants. Sometimes in

1 Jacques Derrida, *Abraham, the Other*, 5.
connection with religion but also independent of religion. Some differences among them are enormous, others smaller, while some consist in matters of emphasis or priority. Throughout the question of the good life always gets thought in terms of an essence, an ideal, and a telos, along with some grounding ground (nature, god, law). It’s impossible even to describe all these chapters of the tradition here, let alone evaluate them. But I could hazard that there has been a weakening of the force of the traditional constructs (essences, grounds). I don’t just mean that, if you look up the most common definition of the good life in everyday English today, you will find that it means luxury living, being rich and enjoying high levels of material comfort. Rather the weakening calls into question or deconstructs the essences and the foundational claims and seeks an alternate way to think.

*Is ‘weakening of thought’ a tendency, or are you referring to a particular definition of Heidegger as revisionary, or without a structured moral theory?*

Weakening (Vattimo) or deconstructing (Heidegger, Derrida) is not weakening of thought but the thought that weakens, weakens the referred to structures, but it also describes what’s actually been happening in cultural history. It pertains not only to moral theory but jointly to ontology and theology, which form an ensemble.

For example, Heidegger—the most challenging, revisionary philosopher of the last century—sought to think the authenticity of human Dasein in a way that avoids the split between descriptive and prescriptive, and to think the meaning of Being prior to or beyond the split up between reality and appearance, between being and becoming, and between being (is) and value (ought), which became the staples of both ancient and modern thought.

*Heidegger seems to take issue with Platonic dialectic of forms, more broadly with Western metaphysics, and the other descriptive/prescriptive theories you have mentioned. What modes of thought has he instead employed in searching for the authenticity of human Being?*
Instead, he has sought what he calls the existential-ontological analytic of Dasein, or existence as the specifically human mode of Being, and set out its complex of structures (being in the world, being with others, being oneself) and care, concern and solicitude, whose meaning rest upon the temporalization of existence and its historicity. The ordinary condition of existence is what he calls Average Everydayness—similar motifs can be found in Kierkegaard and J. S. Mill—which means acting and thinking in the mode of the One-self (doing what one does, thinking what one thinks, speaking as one speaks). This mode of selfhood is inauthentic, the mode in which I am not myself but someone else (the generic Oneself), divested of responsibility, in flight from the demands of authentic life, while caught in a constant underlying anxiety. Authenticity consists in responding to the call to be one’s own self, i.e., to modify my life, my relation to myself and to others, and to come face to face with my mortality.

Is the normativity of the good life influenced by historical, cultural, or social factors?

Historicity, culture, and society are all involved of course, but this way of putting the question already assumes affirmative agreement and regards the manner of posing as neutral. Yet the very taken for grantedness of the question and the entire conceptual framework—Norm, normativity, normality, normalization—has all been called into question and problematized by thinkers like Foucault, Derrida, and Butler.

By posing that question, we reaffirmed the notion of the good life as normative or collective. This is one example of self-normalization – transforming the singular, the individual into a normed universal. What do you think about the concept of self-normalization?

I think self-normalization belongs to normalization. I’d put it slightly differently from your formulation: the singular is transformed into an individual, which instantiates or gets subsumed into the normal universal, which Reiner Schürman calls the subsumption machine.
Conversations about identity are very prevalent at Vassar. Is identification with a race, religion, or organization a form of self-normalization? Is identification different from acknowledging one’s context in space, time, or background?

The various senses and the scenes of identity issues would need to be unpacked. Race, religion, to which should be added sexual-orientation, and political parties etc.—yes, these are various forms of self-normalization, which like the entire regime of the normal assume the look of unquestionable, reified, and antagonized enclosures and underwriters. Yet, any group action and support requires staged collective unities, whether to achieve emancipatory or oppressive purposes. In the area that I myself have made some contribution—Queer Theory—over the last decade, I saw quite distinctly how so-called gay identity marked a crucial break from the dominion of the pseudo-science of homosexuality (the dereliction of this concept is still not wholly appreciated), but this identity assertion suffered its own rupture with the advent of the Queer critique of identity, anti-essentialist, and making use of creative re-signification. Nonetheless, getting over the idea of strong or substantial identity, we support the push for gay rights in the military and in marriage equality, which has found notable successes, but does not require an ID card and is open to participation by “non members.”

Is the “good life” constrained by a specific interpretation of the human? Does it always exist within certain institutions involving certain exclusions?

This belongs with earlier questions you asked on the good life and on normativity. Conceptions of the good life do belong to and vary with conceptions of the human, and are defined within certain horizons and limits. Yet the essential historicity of human life must not be viewed as a mere epistemic fault, but as positive possibilities of existence, of how to live which always remains to be decided.

In lieu of a more detailed response to all that might be said about
the above questions, let me speak for myself, about how I would start to set forth an answer: First, I think of life—of a life, of a life time, and therewith of the time of life, of having the time of my life, and the time of our lives. When I think of life in this way I think of it as given, not in the sense of the merely supposed, but as a gift, though without a giver, as happening, insurgence, movement.

*When someone gives me a gift, I feel indebted to them – I am uncomfortable until I return an equal or greater gift. That is, there is a measurability and economy to the gift. If life is given or gifted, without a giver, then what do we feel indebted to?*

You describe the limited economy of an exchange as the model of the gift, which is quite familiar to us. But this does not really capture the true meaning of gift. In contrast to the debt, the guilt, the cycle, in the gift of life there is no debt incurred and no one to be paid, hence the only response at the same level is not repayment, but gratitude, giving thanks. Thankfulness breaks through the limited economy model. This kind of extraordinary thankfulness manifests itself in the giving of gifts with a generosity beyond any expectation of return or in gracious reception. I pass on this gift of thought summoned first by Heidegger and Derrida.

Vitality, being and feeling alive, is unmistakably good. Human life—existing in the way we do—involves our bodily movements—sexed and gendered, desiring, longing, thinking, feeling, understanding, creating and constructing, all the gestures by which we inhabit the world and cohabit with our fellow bodily mortals. In this worldly context of movements and happenings, there are special times, including when we think we are engaged in deliberate projects and following plans, when we encounter the unexpected, the accidental, the coincidental, which in my opinion constitute a much larger part of life than is commonly assumed and may be the liveliest part of life. In the late eighties, I conducted a Faculty Center seminar, with faculty and visiting scholars that focused on these issues, titled “Accidentality.” In my view, it’s one of the great motifs of post-modern thought. Nietzsche speaks of the “ancient nobility of the accident.” For me, this stratum is the
indestructible that corresponds to what Wallace Stevens calls “the passion for yes that has never been broken.” At a minimum, a life is good, the goodness of life is the good life, not first of all because a measure or standard is imposed upon it or to which it’s subject, something supposed to be higher than life.

Being alive means alive to the world: To others, with others, to one’s self and our care for them; to language both everyday and poetic, to public and political life. To the products of labor, to the processes of technology, and to the working of works of art. And to encompassing nature as the field of living beings, animals and plants, as earth, sea, weathers, and sky.

You began your response by mentioning a number of philosophers who searched for a final telos, ideal, or highest mode of human existence. Why is there a resistance in Western philosophy to “Accidentality” and “being alive to the world” in the pursuit of that which is “higher than life”?

To answer, briefly: The intelligible is usually thought in terms of as the regular and predictable, the normal, hence resistance to what does not conform, what is more vertical (‘out of the blue’) than horizontal. Further, the accidental is transitory, passing, and marginal and lacks the assurance of the enduring, everlasting. Heidegger argues that Western thought has been governed by a metaphysics of presence that valorizes ‘constant presence’ to rank beings, and conversely, devalorizes those that pass away. This metaphysics corresponds to what Nietzsche calls the fear and resentment against time. Heidegger’s philosophical move was to show that time must be more fundamental, since beneath the threshold of traditional ontology lies a un-thought temporal projection that makes meaningful constant presence, and further, to claim that this repressed projection arises from the inauthenticity of average everydayness.

With reference to Foucault’s account of the examination, combining “an observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing gaze, that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish, it establishes over individuals a visibility through which one
differentiates and judges them.”

I like your question, namely, how do I balance (or cope with) the task (duty) of ensuring my students understand the subject with the normalizing gaze that informs any form of examination?

First, note that the gaze is not that of the professor, but of the educational apparatus/practice, which no one sees. Think of each student’s considerable accumulated file, the collection and circulation of information within departments, committees, academic, medical, disciplinary, employment offices, etc. Think further how all this process gets reflectively internalized by the student, in self-surveillance. Beside the teaching classroom, think of the residential buildings where students live. Interestingly, Vassar’s Main Building originally followed the essential model of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon—as it passed down to Renwick, from his Nurses Training Hospital, now a ruin on Roosevelt Island, neighboring a prison and octagonal asylum, and before that from the London Charity Hospital, a series guided by Bentham’s ground plan [for prisons, asylums, hospitals, factories, schools].

In Alma Mater, Helen Lefkowitz shows how this model was thought to fulfill the needs of young women at Vassar and its sister schools. The classroom and the professor’s evaluation are key posts in the system which produces individuals—individuation on many scales and registers. So on this reading, there is nothing to balance—the examining function certifies that individuals are produced and suited for the workplace and social functions. (I pursued this topic with colleagues in some past college courses, including “Between the Acts: Literary, Sexual, and Academic.”)

But I think this system is a bit of a ruin, which I’ve tried to palpitate with irony and humor, by critique, by debunking, by pioneering new topics and methods, by introducing critical sources and researches. In my teaching, within this ruin, so to speak, I’ve attempted relevant genealogies and deconstructions.

*Can Vassar, as an institution, escape this “ruin”? Is there a

2 Renwick’s ruin is on the National Register of Historic Places.
Conflict between surveillance and ensuring the welfare of students? Many of Vassar’s regulations are required by federal mandates or were established under fear of civil liability. Vassar is not the Institution, but is constrained by larger structures.

No, Vassar cannot escape this “ruin” since it is not only Vassar’s condition; we all live in the ruins of disciplinary society. Yet, I would suggest that Vassar is far freer than many institutions because it affords space and occasion to carry out critique, engage in ruination and invention. No, to the second query, because the project of “ensuring the welfare of students” just is what surveillance provides, although it’s a ruin. With regard to your last remark, I think states and federal governments now do and will count for less. Vassar does not fit into a box that is the state or the state into a box that is the federal nation. After all, Vassar’s founding was a creative event and a scandal—providing higher education for women! We who maintain and renew the college—current students and faculty—are already outside of ourselves, interacting with the world. Thus we remain ex-centrics.

Has one of your preoccupations been to bring your students toward the good life? And, how has your notion of the good life been reshaped by your relationship with students?

Yes, to the first, in the sense of shared learning, sharing my love of learning, of what I’ve found out in my studies and writings, and of learning from students’ own questions, puzzlements, and discoveries. Active learning is the good life—it belongs to such a life, it’s not just a means to an end. New learning, new discovery, new recognition is something inherently youthful, and real philosophical thinking always involves a youthful experience. Amazement. Birth of thought, of ideas, of interpretations, of friendships. This resonates across decades of my teaching life, directing theses, discussing papers, advising, debating, long hours talking with young men and women. My own sense of the good life has indeed been inspired by constant contact with young minds and with my colleagues, of course. So not just ‘my notion of the good life’ but the good life itself! Philosophers ask disarmingly simple questions, akin to those of children. When I drove my son
Stephen to nursery school, strapped in the backseat, he would ask questions like, “Dad, what’s beyond space?” Or, “Why is the sun following us?” To the first he had an answer, “More space.”

The simple questions you mention are in response to complex contexts. How do simple questions relate to these situations and what types of answers can unfold?

The questions are simple, but the answers may be diverse and open-ended (e.g., about space—are talking about lived existential spatiality, objective spatiality, regional or cosmological spatiality, etc. and how all these interconnect.)

The tradition associates longevity and the good life. Do you agree? How should we understand the goodness of the lives of those who die young?

These are important questions you ask, about old age and short-lived lives. I was speaking before about the pleasures of youthful learning and philosophy’s bond with it. Sometimes taking a long hike or lifting heavy boxes reminds me of my age, but in the throes of thought, of finding out things, age disappears.

Goodness and the youthfully dead pose immediately a poignant question. We may think last year of our remarkable student and friend Jamie Greenberg, who had a promising career in philosophy and was beloved by many. In the Duino Elegies, the poet Rilke writes memorable lines on how we are so struck by the youthfully dead. A good life, cut short, but for us most certainly a good life! But this raises a broader essential question—the relation of death to a good life, or the question of a good death. Since life is being toward death, death is an essential relation of all of us, at whatever our age, our own being toward death, being with our fellow mortals, and our experience of those who die. This is not just a question for old age. We are all aging together, are mortals together. We will all retire. The penchant of the young perhaps is to forget their mortality, while the penchant of the old is to forget

3 A member of Vassar’s class of 2012, who passed away on April 4, 2013.
If the crux of life is everywhere, a life of dis-closure, dis-covery, and un-covering, then living truth means a process of un-concealment, an ongoing happening out of concealment, shadow, hiddenness. A good life is a life of living out of truth. A true life (an authentic life) contests the seductive inauthentic possibilities of everyday life. You ask, “Is truth the same as authenticity?”

Authenticity is the truth of human existence, which relates to other kinds of truth—of things, of works, of products, of sciences, of technologies, of Being. Taking responsibility for a good and true life finally also involves self-shaping and self-care wherein each of us attempts to fashion a beautiful life, whose brilliance lets the good and true shine forth. In the end, the finitude of life must shatter and break up in death, overwhelmed by concealment and brilliance ruined at life’s end. The good life ends tragically, all care worn out, which is why we mourn and why we tell stories about its course.