The Scholars Newsletter

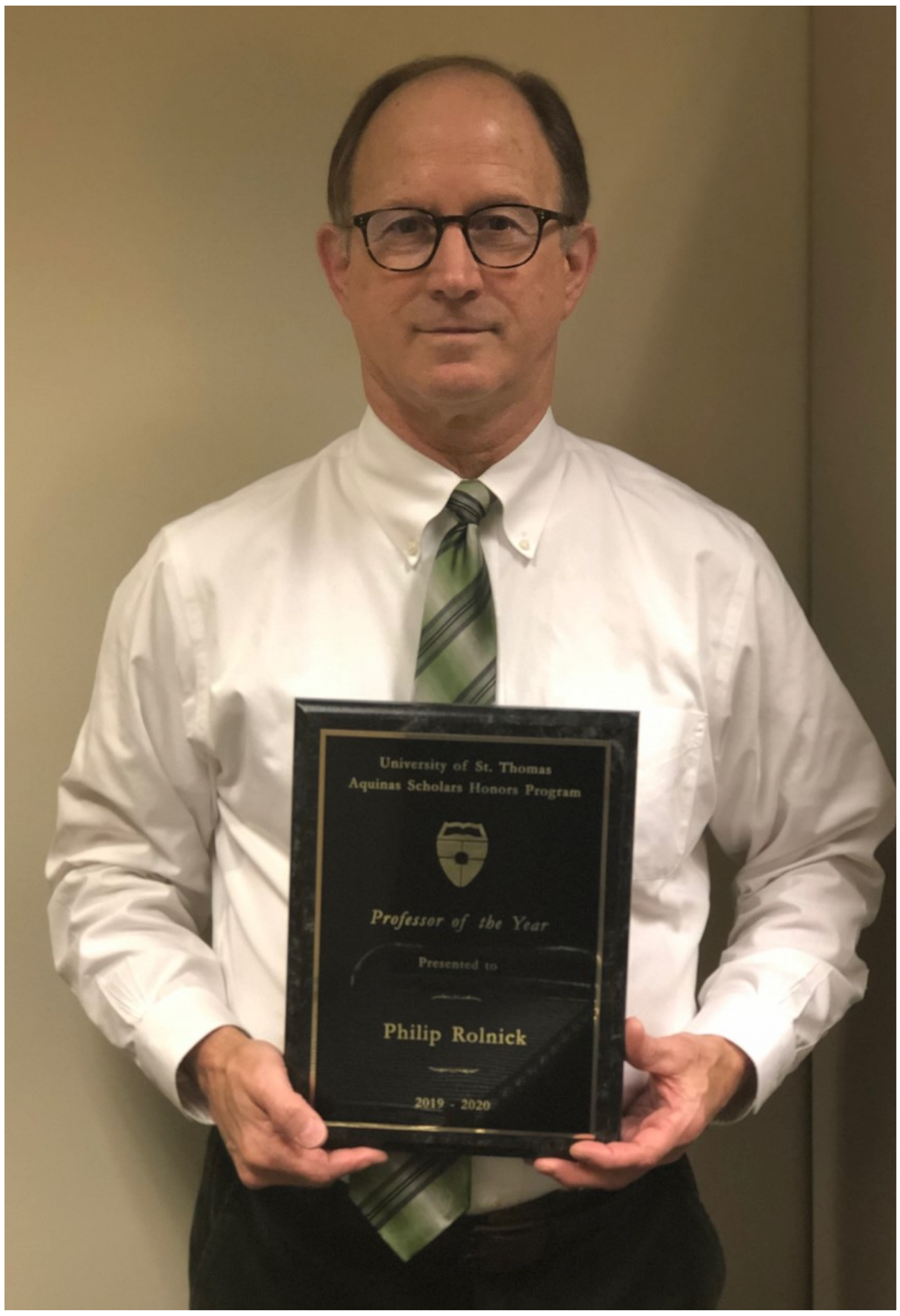
2020 September Edition

The Aquinas Scholars Honors Program

Editor: Ashley Burt

UNIVERSITY OF St.Thomas

Professor of the Year!



The Aquinas Scholars Program elected Dr. Rolnick as professor of the year. Here he is after accepting his award!

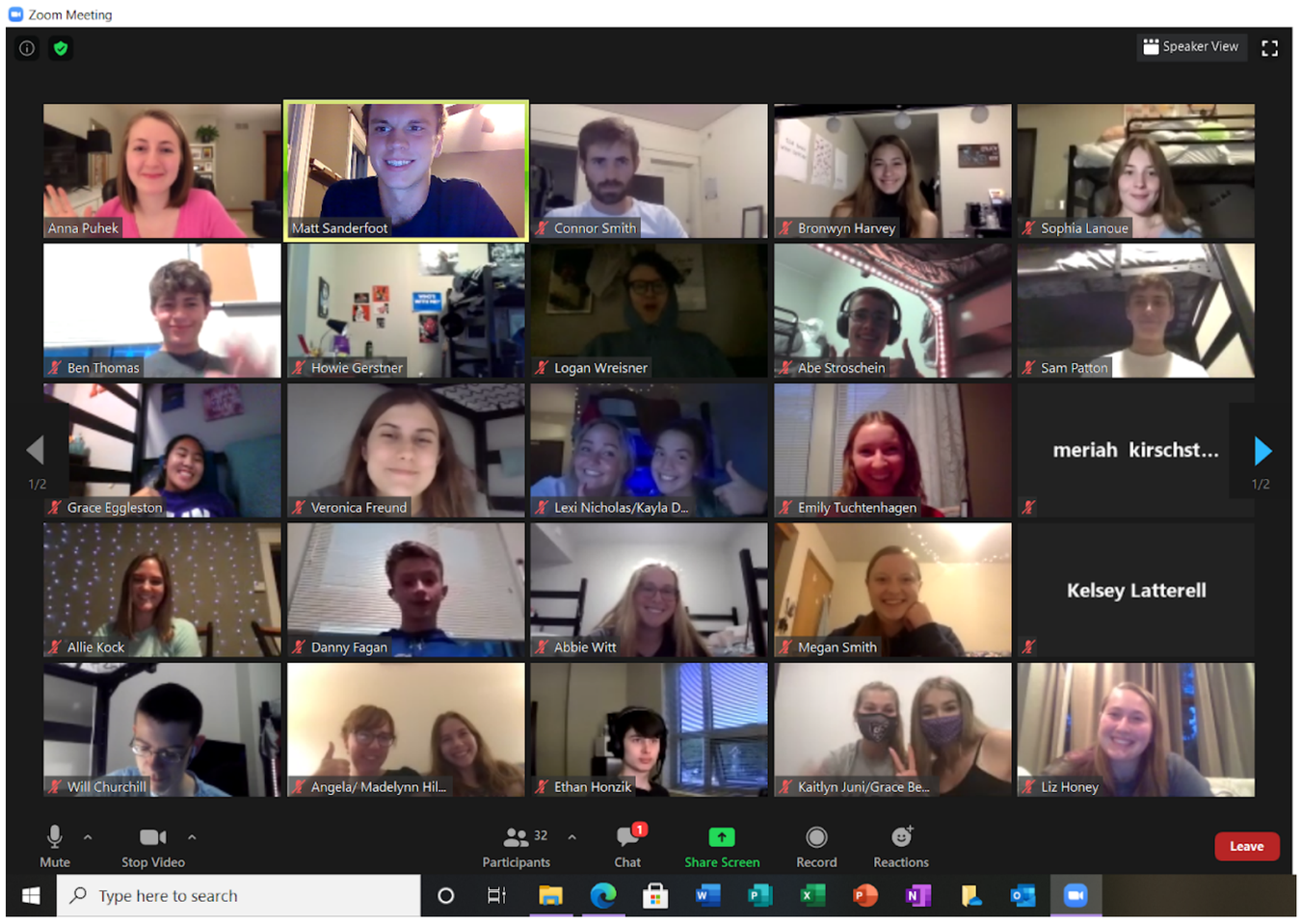
Scholar Spotlight!

Our Scholar Spotlight this month is Abby Johnson! She is a Psychology student with minors in Spanish and Catholic Studies. Along with her studies, Abby is very involved on campus. She is the Senior Class President for Undergraduate Student Government, is on the Student Alumni Council, is involved in Psychology Club, is a member of the Catholic Studies Leadership Interns Program, is a part of SPO, and does Psychology research on a student team!

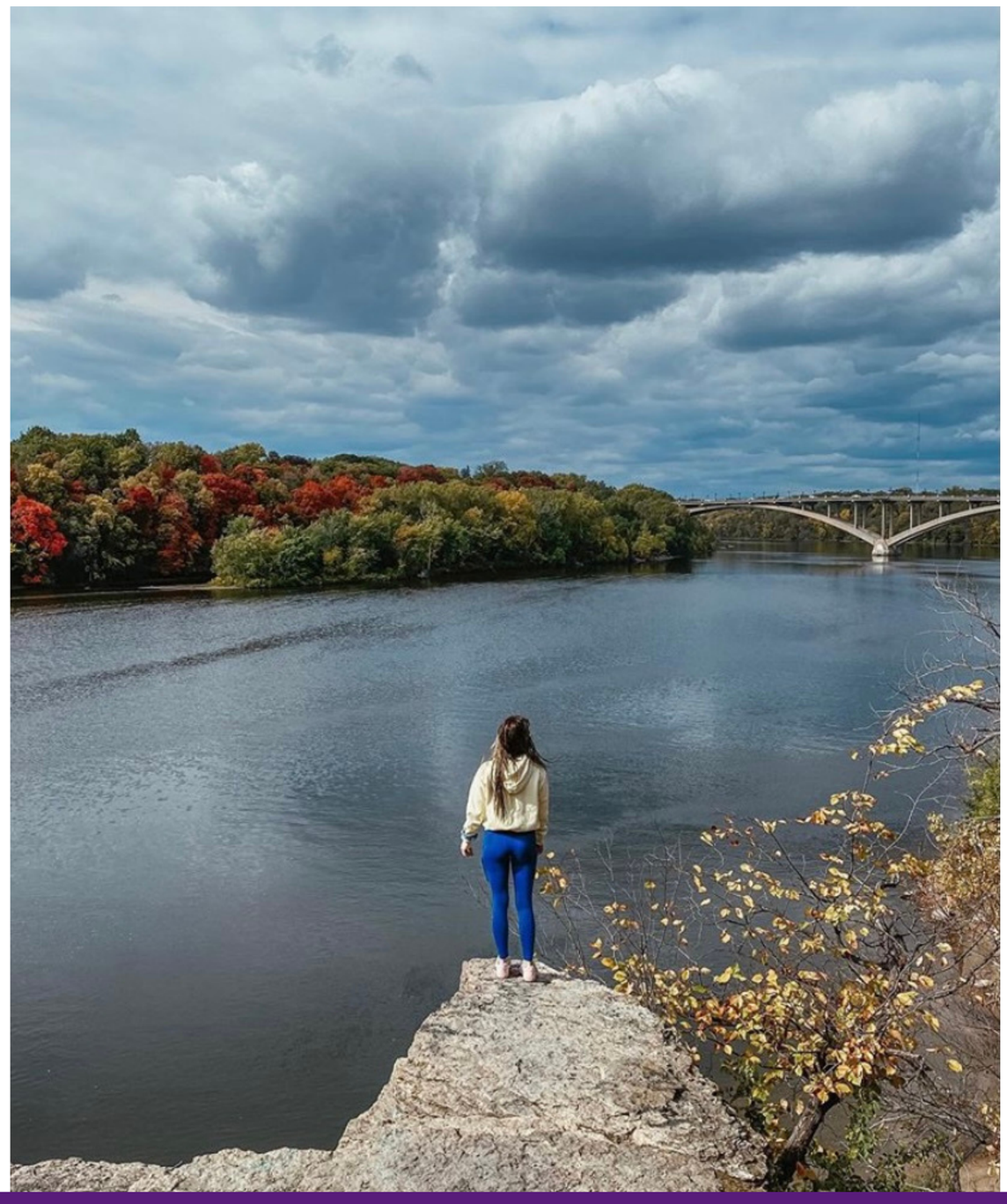
Her favorite seminar she has enrolled in is on Nature and Spirituality with Dr. Laumakis and Dr. Neuzil. Her biggest takeaway from her time at St. Thomas is that there are so many amazing groups and professors that want to see us succeed. Finally, when asked to give advice to her peers, Abby said that she would encourage everyone to take advantage of all the opportunities that come your way during college!

In case you missed it...

Honors Trivia Night



Mississippi River Clean Up



Scholars Journal

You Don't Seem Like a Horse Girl

Izzy Iliff

There is a box in my closet with all the journals I've ever kept. A white cardboard shoebox filled with my childhood, laminated edges scuffed

from the removal of horse stickers deemed "too childish." I once mentioned that past obsession to a college friend, and he replied, "You don't seem like a horse girl." Well –

I used to watch horse racing on TV to fill my brain with the stomp of hooves that would never fill my backyard because I didn't have enough acreage. Acreage: a word I learned

at a young age because land measurement comes up in every how-to-own-horses guide. My suburban childhood didn't have enough acreage to house at least two horses, and everyone

knows you can't have just one horse because they're herd animals and they'd get lonely without a friend. I used to watch horse racing on TV, engrossed by the horses' beauty,

the flick of tails and the sun gleaming on muscled flanks. I watched horse racing until the day I saw one fall, a filly, slim front foreleg snagging the graveled ground. She went down

and didn't get back up. I knew enough about horse anatomy to know this meant a broken leg, and that a broken leg meant a broken racehorse, meant that she would be put down. I was

practically a baby – maybe seven years old – when I started playing violin and learned that the bow is made of horsehair. I didn't know whether to think that's cool or disgusting, but it didn't

matter because my violin teacher wouldn't let me play my real violin, beautiful auburn wood gleaming like my favorite color of a horse's coat (chestnut), not until I mastered my fingering

on a practice violin made of a box of cracker jacks taped to a ruler. After I quit violin, I learned that the hairs of a bow cannot be bleached and must come from a white horse, white

like the rescue horse named Chica whose life updates came in the horse magazine I got in the mail every month, white like the page I typed my goodbye letter onto when I was eight,

when the news came that Chica had died and I cried onto the glossy magazine picture of the horse that had felt like a friend. “You don’t seem like a horse girl.” No – I never rode horses,

never housed them in my yard or grew up to rehab the abused ones, reined in by circumstance. I never grew up on a ranch raising foals to be ridden – I spent my childhood with my nose in encyclopedias, memorizing breeds and how they ought to be brushed, and crying when my tiny minifigure of a brown Fjord pony fell to the floor and shattered. But tell me I’m not a horse girl.

Scholars Journal

Report on Durkheim's book, "Suicide"

Emma Torres

Throughout time, suicide has been an issue that every society has tried to cope with and understand. Durkheim's book, "Suicide," took a different approach at understanding and explaining suicide compared to a psychologist's traditional approach. Where psychologists would focus on the individual, and their personal reasons as to why they might commit suicide, Durkheim focused on how social structures can increase or decrease suicide rates among different groups of people.

What he found, through observing data already collected, was that certain groups of people had higher suicide rates than others. He found that unmarried people committed suicide more than married people. Similarly, people who had children were less likely to commit suicide than someone without kids. Finally, when it comes to religion, he found that Protestants had higher suicide rates than Catholics did. Furthermore, Catholics had a higher suicide rate than Jews had. Durkheim also found that there were higher rates of suicide at a time of either economic recession or prosperity. Although it might seem surprising that suicide rates would increase at a time of economic prosperity, Durkheim explains that it is less about the actual economic state and more about the fact that the economy, and society, is changing and not stable. This change in society is what triggers higher suicide rates, showing that when social structures change, it causes Anomie, or the "feeling that people get when they do not know what is expected of them in society – the feeling of being adrift in society without any clear or secure moorings" (36). Anomie is mainly caused by fast changes in society, leading to unclear rules and norms in the society.

Up until Durkheim's work, suicide was seen as an area of psychological research, not sociological, and responsibility for committing suicide was placed on the individual, rather than society itself. What he argued was the idea that suicide was the result of social cohesion or social integration. This was important to the field of sociology because it proved that phenomena that seem to be personal can still be explained through the studying and observing of societies and their changes. It proved that suicide isn't just caused by an individual's problems, but through a society's problems, changes, and integration as a whole. Durkheim's work on suicide was also important because it was the first sociological study based on real data. This paved the way for future studies to use data as well, to explain changes in society and the effects of the people within it.

Although Durkheim's findings proved to be incredibly important and helpful to understanding suicide, most people, today, still tend to understand suicide as psychologists do: focusing on the individual and their personal situation. For example, a popular Netflix series today is "Thirteen Reasons Why." The series follows a teenager, Hannah Baker, and is slowly exposed to her personal circumstances that led her to commit suicide. The entire show is set up in a psychological perspective, focused solely on her, her life, and her emotions. This psychological perspective is the exact opposite of Durkheim's argument he made on suicide. His perspective would take the entire social integration of the society and town that Hannah lived in and look at societal reasons why Hannah might have committed suicide. Reasons such as economic changes in her town, the complete lack of rules, standards, or enforcement in her high school, or any other societal changes in her area.

Durkheim also could look at Hannah Baker's suicide and explain it in a way that he called egoistic suicide. This type of suicide, as defined by Durkheim, results when there is low social integration, and people may feel a sense of being meaningless to others and themselves. Hannah Baker had recently moved; thus she did not feel that she was part of the social integration of her new home. Perceived meaning to others, as a result of social facts, social integration, and any changes occurring in one's society, all can lead to egoistic suicide, where the emphasis is still put on society being a cause, rather than just the individual.

This idea that societal changes and society structures can be an underlying cause to personal social phenomena and situations, because of Durkheim, can now be translated to all aspects of society. In a book called "The Sociopath Next Door" by Margaret Stout, the topic of sociopaths is discussed; what they are, how we can identify them, and how they are created. She follows a very similar idea to Durkheim. She explains that, yes, personal environments that one grows up in can influence someone becoming a sociopath or not, and yes, genes can play into that outcome as well, but the biggest contributor to whether one becomes a sociopath or not, is the culture and society that one grows up in. In America, approximately one in 25 people, or four percent, are sociopaths. In East Asian countries, sociopathy ranges from 0.03 to 0.14 percent of the population. This significant difference can be explained by the differences in cultures and societies of these places, showing that sociopathy is a cultural phenomenon, and not something bred out of individual circumstances. In America, individualism is a core value in the culture, whereas in East Asian countries, the culture is much more group-centered and focused on connectivity to each other. Their connectivity to one another represents a strong social integration, where our individualistic culture leads to weaker social integration. These differences can be used to explain why sociopathy is more prevalent in America compared to East Asian countries. This type of view and study would not have been possible, or looked at as credible, without Durkheim's first analysis of how societal structures can explain a phenomenon that typically is explained in personal, individualistic ways.

Scholars Journal

On a Certain Type of Foolishness

Frank Scarchilli

Physical reality is not static. But despite its evanescence, we seek order in it; we intuit that the divergent phenomena that our senses experience are unified about a locus of harmony and intelligibility. And the striking thing is that this instinct of ours is innate; we search for scientific laws before we have empirical proof that they exist. Thus, despite our tendency to be bamboozled by the achievements of modern science, we must not forget the debt that the physical sciences owe to this mysterious drive of our minds. The recognition of such a debt and its implications is a recognition that naturalist reductionism is wont to forget. Consequently, both the human mind and the world it seeks to explain are done a great disservice. For it is only within a religious, supernaturalist framework that one can properly understand the origin and the scope of the physical sciences.

The dogmatic naturalism of our day stands opposed to a proper understanding of science's place in our endeavor to explain reality. For the naturalist, science has the power to explain everything that exists. He holds such a view because he assumes that "nature is the only reality" (Philip Rolnick, "Science and Christianity," 518). For him is thus nonsense to assent to any proposition that cannot be verified empirically. But the naturalist overlooks that the very ground upon which the physical sciences stand is the meta-scientific orientation of the human intellect towards intelligibility. For if we investigate that orientation, we are led to ask: Why can we reason about reality? We ask this because we know that there must be a "reason that there is reason," a logos that is the "foundational reason, cause, and purpose [that] is in the very roots of…reality" (Rolnick, 533), thus providing an end to which our intellectual drive is directed. This ultimate reason, and the intelligibility that it imprints upon reality, is not empirically verifiable. It is not within the scope of scientific method. The scientist must simply take it on faith. He thus finds himself at the doorstep of an immaterial reality that science alone cannot explain.

Here is where the scientist must yield to the theologian. Consider an analogy: If we were to find an orderly and regimented society, to what would we appeal to explain its existence? Surely, we

would explain such a society as taking shape according to rational principles, the product of the crafting of legislators directing society towards a certain end. Similarly, the material universe operates according to rational principles—the laws of nature—that allow for and direct its existence. But if there is a law, should there not also be a lawgiver? So, we should also affirm that the rational structure of our universe must have its cause in some mind. As Dr. Rolnick has it, "scientific development should be seen as the fulfillment of an expectation, the expectation that an infinitely intelligent Creator, the Logos, has imbued creation, and especially the human mind, with its own logos" (534). Such a Creator must stand above nature as its cause—it must be something supernatural. This being we call God.

Note that it is not the naturalist, but the supernaturalist, the religious man, that can account for the intelligibility of the world. He sees all of reality as the product of an ultimate cause, making his doctrine of belief in God more than just a "mass of irrelevant error" (Rolnick, 518). Rather, the existence of God, and the intelligible reality that He has created, constitutes the ground of the possibility of truth and error in the first place. It provides for the possibility of any mental "contact with reality" at all (Rolnick, 516). And the very same belief in causality gives rise to science. While the religious mind seeks the ultimate cause, the scientific seeks the proximate. Both minds are in the game of looking for causes; both look for the logos. They are sisters engaged in the same search.

The folly of the naturalist has been made apparent. When asked to explain the intelligibility of being, all he can do is shrug. In denying the possibility of an immaterial reality, he denies that there is any ultimate reason ordering the material world. But he is entrenched in a lived contradiction. He must accept the irrationality of his position—that the rationality of science can exist in a world that has no cause, no reason, and is thus irrational. He avers, despite himself, that his position is the rational one; he insists that he is the one that has forsaken the superstition of the Dark Ages. Little does he know that he ushers in his own dark age, devoid as it is of reason. No more can be said here; reasoning with him is a fool's errand.

Scholars Journal

Illuminating the Disproportionate Effect of Mass Incarceration on Communities of Color

Payton Johnson

Mass incarceration is a term used to describe the modern state of the American criminal justice system that relies heavily on incarceration as retributive punishment for even the smallest of crimes. This approach is apparent in America's incarceration rates, which are the highest in the world. The prison system in America contains 25% of the world's incarcerated population even though the US only makes up 5% of the total population. Within this system, stark disproportional incarceration rates between whites and people of color can be seen- a hallmark of the discriminatory practices of the criminal justice system. These disproportions are especially severe among African Americans who constitute one third of the prison population despite accounting for only 12% of the national population.

Discrimination in our criminal justice system can only be understood when considering the evolution of slavery and white supremacy after the civil war. Immediately after the civil war, all enslaved people in the south suddenly became "free" with the ratification of the thirteenth amendment. The loss of free labor demolished the southern economy and way of life. Southerners were looking for a way to rebuild. Then came the unholy trinity of resuscitating white supremacy in the newly emancipated south. Share cropping and black codes functioned to keep African Americans socially, legally, and economically powerless, while lynching served as a platform for racially motivated terrorism. Most impactful to the modern state of the criminal justice system were black codes, which enacted discriminatory sentencing and arrest for African Americans and made it less likely for them to emerge out of poverty like their white counterparts did in this era. A further exploitation of African American prisoners came with the introduction of convict leasing. This system of leasing out prison labor to private contractors acted as a form of prisoner exploitation that supported the southern economy with free labor and allowed elite whites to profit off the exploitation of black prisoners. Convict leasing is often considered a modernized

form of slavery and has evolved into the Prison Industry Enhancement Certification Program popular in prisons today.

Though discriminatory sentencing and mass incarceration has existed since the post-civil war era, the system didn't evolve into our modern understanding of the term until the late 20th century. In 1971 Richard Nixon declared the "War on Drugs" campaign and set in motion the building of the modern American criminal justice system. The war on drugs expanded through the Reagan and Clinton administration and caused the explosion of incarceration rates and discriminatory sentencing. Policies such as mandatory minimums and "three strikes and you're out" caused more people to be incarcerated than ever before for longer than ever before. Other policies created harsher sentences for possession of drugs more common among African American communities than white communities. Another political contribution to modern mass incarceration is Law and Order politics. Law and Order politics are a political narrative that function as dog whistle politics criminalizing blackness. This rhetoric was popular during the civil rights era and was used to condemn protests as inciting disorder. Today, Law and Order politics function to maintain white supremacy through rallying support for racially biased legislation under the guise of protecting Law and Order.

The disproportionate impact of mass incarceration on African American communities is not an isolated issue. This is just one of the many social injustices surrounding African American communities. These communities have suffered various forms of discrimination from the government and wider society. Targeted disinvestment meant to enforce segregation of neighborhoods and maintain the concentration of wealth in white communities, lack of access to quality education, and lack of investment in communities of color are all ways in which African American communities are denied resources. These structures all contribute to mass incarceration rates. Poverty, lack of education, and lack of community investment are all indicators that a community will have elevated crime rates. This is not a one-way street. In many ways mass incarceration further compounds these social issues. High incarceration rates in communities often lead to weaker labor markets and increased crime rates. The effect of the "prison label" after one has been incarcerated also leads to high rates of unemployment and homelessness in these communities.

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