The following papers are edited versions of a Scholar’s Session on the work of Gary Brent Madison, which took place as part of the Canadian Society for Continental Philosophy Annual Conference in Ottawa in the Fall of 2012. It was my pleasure and honour to chair this event and to now present in written form the four contributions to the celebration of a long and distinguished philosophical life. I say life not career because career has come to mean a job or occupation such that we are told that people can today expect to have multiple careers, and even etymologically the word has the sense of racing a race, careering along a racecourse. As Gary’s most recent book, *On Suffering*, makes clear, philosophy is for him neither a career, nor is it a race, but is rather a way of living. As such, for him, philosophy has always truly been a “love of wisdom.” But as anyone who has ever heard him speak, or spent time with him, or indeed read his many books and articles will know, the love of wisdom is not simply a matter of earnest pursuit, but is something to be engaged in with humour, a humour that recognizes the comical as well as the tragic. Gary, both in person and in writing, shifts effortlessly from the rigorous to the humorous, from the serious to the comical.

I will not here attempt to give an account of the stages of Gary Madison’s philosophical journey. This is ably done by Calvin Schrag below. Instead, let me briefly draw attention to certain motifs that seem to pervade Madison’s thought.

Responsibility is a key term for Madison. He speaks constantly of self-responsible thought. Such self-responsibility is one which recognises both human finitude and the infinite claim on thought. That infinite claim is an ethical and a political one. The human being, for Madison, is responsible to become genuinely human and that is an infinite task. It is so because “human” in Madison’s vocabulary is not a biological category, or as he puts it “a metaphysical given,” but rather moral category: to be human is to be free and freedom is exercised moral-culturally, politically, and economically. To think responsibly then is to think in such a manner to expand human freedom, while recognizing throughout that such expansion only occurs in community and in communication with others.
This account of responsibility is closely tied to an understanding of philosophy as a vocation. I suspect that Husserl holds an important place for Madison in part because of the German philosopher’s stress on the vocational character of the philosopher. I also cannot but hear some echoes of Madison’s Catholic education in that vocational motif. The vocation of philosophy for Madison is already expressed by the oracle of Delphi: “know thyself.” Understanding philosophy in that way allows him to range from deliberations about knowledge, history, economy, and politics to the most personal questions of suffering and mortality. Indeed, the latter themes have come to prominence is recent years not alone in the book On Suffering, but also in a work published since the 2012 conference session, Philosophy, Suicide, and the Art of Living.

The last motif to which I wish to call attention to is that of “post-,” after. Madison is always careful to distinguish the post-modern, post-metaphysical, and post-rationalist from the anti-modern, anti-metaphysical, and anti-rationalist. He sees his own thought within a tradition of philosophy from Nietzsche to Ricoeur, but stretching back through their precursors in Protagoras and the so-called Sophists, through Cicero, Seneca, Sextus Empiricus, Montaigne, Pascal, and Kierkegaard, which questions and subverts the dogmatism of metaphysical and rationalist speculation in order to pose the ethical-political question of the good life. But Madison is always careful to avoid the snares of anti-rationalism, as he sees them, which emerge at times in that tradition and endanger those very virtues of philosophical reasonableness that for him it is the philosopher’s vocation to uphold. That which comes after metaphysics is true to a more fundamental calling of philosophy to cultivate the human.

It may well be that, as Grondin suggests, Madison remains within metaphysics after all. But if he does so, it is because his self-responsible thinking, that of someone called to philosophy, rediscovers the inner core of metaphysical thought. If that is the case, then his recent book, On Suffering, which is referred to in various places in the contributions below, is a work of metaphysics. It is a book which unflinchingly poses the fundamental question of philosophy (at least since Socrates): what does it mean to be human? In addressing this question Madison draws from sources within both Western and Eastern thought, from literature, religion, as well as philosophy and gives us all a gift of profound philosophical reflection.

The first of the contributions which follow is from Professor Calvin Schrag, George Ade Distinguished Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at Purdue University. Professor Schrag gives an account of Gary
Madison’s philosophical journey in three stages. The first is his scholarship on the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the second his engagement with the question of Postmodernity, and lastly his research in the area of social and political philosophy. Schrag outlines Madison’s contribution in each of these spheres, paying particular attention to the second and showing how the question of post-modernity is for Madison always a hermeneutical issue. This entails that the rejection of modernism can never lead to irrationalism for Madison, but rather to the recognition “of an embodied speaking and acting hermeneutical subject, with a non-representational understanding of the world in which it moves about with other knowledge-seeking embodied human subjects.” Schrag emphasizes the continuity between these three realms in which the early explorations of existential phenomenology with Merleau-Ponty develop finally into a discussion of human practice within a civil society in which communicative and interpretative rationality guide human action and existence.

Professor Graeme Nicholson, Professor Emeritus of the University of Toronto, concentrates in his reflections on the third phase of Madison’s work, on social and political philosophy, specifically his publications in the philosophy of economics. Nicholson begins by reconstructing the way in which Madison’s account of hermeneutics, in particular his emphasis on “good will,” leads him to a view of society in which “tolerance should not be grasped as a moral or political ‘value,’ but rather as imposed on us ontologically through the whole event of communication.” Nicholson goes on to show how despite appearances, the phenomenon of fundamentalism does not pose a counter-instance to this account. Going on to the discussion of economics, Nicholson shows how for Madison prices can be understood as language and market interaction as a form of communication. Understood in this way market rationality is a form of communicative not instrumental rationality. Nicholson’s question then is whether communicative rationality and the account of good will have limited application in the market economy, he asks whether the institutions of the state as they facilitate and regulate the market economy do not so much instantiate good will as represent authority backed up by law. Secondly, he points out that the free market is a relatively recent phenomenon, emerging in Europe only in the 18th century. Nicholson challenges Madison to give a hermeneutical account of the history of pre-market economy. Furthermore, pointing to the strange transformations in the word “liberal” from meaning a freeing of the market from the state to the contemporary North American meaning of advocating greater state involvement, Nichol-
son asks of Madison what kind of state or government he envisages. Returning finally to the question of fundamentalism in a discussion of *On Suffering*, Nicholson points to the resources in that book not only to engage with religious fundamentalism, but also with those who seek to consign all religion to fundamentalism. In this context he employs Marilynne Robinson’s term “para-scientific,” the appeal to “science” as an authority in the public sphere and the pursuit on the basis of that appeal a materialist and atheist agenda. Madison has shown that hermeneutics allows us to engage with this para-science according to Nicholson.

Professor Paul Fairfield of Queen’s University is Gary Madison’s former student at McMaster University. In his contribution, he concentrates on the theme of communicative rationality. He begins by pointing to Madison’s fundamental distinction between violence and discourse. In this account, reason is an openness to an opponent’s convictions; violence as the imposition of one on another is a departure from reason. But such openness is not simply a relativism: practical reason aims for consensus, aims through dialogue to come to agreement. In line with other commentators, Fairfield points to the similarities of Madison’s position to that of Habermas and Apel, but shows how Madison avoids the foundationalism that we find in those figures. Fairfield then focuses on the way in which Madison develops his account with respect to history. Madison affirms the Hegelian thesis that the highest principle of reason is freedom. Fairfield shows how Madison—without ever developing a philosophy of history—affirms the Christian notion of *Heilsgeschichte* against the account of history as the “repetition of the same old majestic ruin.” Quoting Marcus Aurelius and Nietzsche, Fairfield argues against Madison for such a “majestic ruin” view of history. While Madison sees in history an ethical project and sees this as entailed by his account of hermeneutics, Fairfield prefers an account of history as pure contingency. He argues that while there is evidence for both views, neither is provable. This very situation, however, raises questions concerning the difference of violence and discourse with which he began: Fairfield asks, against Madison’s claims to the contrary, whether history does not show the intertwining of violence and discourse.

Finally, Professor Jean Grondin of the Université de Montréal presents his contribution as an act of “heartfelt gratitude” for Madison’s life’s work. Grondin singles out one of Madison’s latest books, *On Suffering*, which he says rejuvenates the original meaning of philosophy as that which helps us to cope with suffering and pain, as that which guides us as to how to live well and die well. Suffering, and
mortality generally, require serene acceptance and this Madison draws from the Stoics. This does not mean resignation, but rather (following Marcel) openness to the mystery of being, which can only be approached meditatively. This, Grondin shows, is something that for Madison inspires wonder, and wonder in turn leads to gratitude. In this respect, philosophy encounters religion, and in On Suffering, Madison speaks openly about the religious experience of life. This book is, Grondin notes alluding to Augustine, a confession, and he points out that a confession is a proclamation not a demonstration. It is nevertheless an act of hope and it is such hope that is developed in Judaism and Christianity and not in Stoicism or Pyrrhonian Skepticism. In closing, Grondin notes a difference with Madison, which he suggests may simply be a une querelle de mots, regarding the term “metaphysics.” Whereas Madison rightly dismisses the “follies” of metaphysics, nevertheless “when he accepts as at least credible the anthropic principle and reflects so penetratingly on the meaning of human life, buttressed by the beauty of the world, he testifies to the inescapability of metaphysical reflection.”

Following these contributions is Gary Madison’s response, aptly entitled: “Response to My Friends,” in which he reengages in dialogue with Professors Fairfield, Grondin, Nicholson and Schrag.

Aging is an irresistible process and illness, despite the dreams of some, will always remain a part of the human condition. Unfortunately “given the depredations of time” (as he puts it), Gary Madison was unable to be with us in Ottawa in the Autumn of 2012. In the room that day, however, the warmth of friendship and gratitude towards him was palpable and perhaps could be felt many miles away in “Les Érables,” Hamilton, Ontario, and in his response to his friends, Gary playfully compares himself in his home in Hamilton to Montaigne in his stone tower in the French provinces. The conversational tone of the contributions of our four participants emerges still on the printed page, as does the gratitude to the provocations of Gary Madison’s continued life of philosophical dialogue.

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