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red light on the periphery,” she said, noting that this experimental model is based on previously published work by GM. She also plans to vary the conversation to include more emotional or mentally demanding content to determine how that might affect performance, and to compare the consequences of speaking to oneself and speaking aloud.

In addition, she is working with the University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute to examine how her virtual-driving tests are associated with actual, on-road driving results. “We would like to go on-road using a similar behavioral paradigm, but we have to make sure it’s safe and it’s doable,” she said.

The results of this virtual vs. on-road comparison is important to other studies that are based on virtual data, she commented. “If we can get a bit closer to predicting the on-road data, that would be good not only for this study, but also for the many other simulated driving studies that are being conducted.”

The applications of these studies are varied, and may include improved driver training programs that make drivers aware of their performance limits. It may also help to develop effective, advanced-crash-warning systems that alert drivers to danger so that they can apply the brakes or control the steering to avoid an accident. ■

Philosophy Professor takes on Public Role

Though he isn’t comfortable with the term, Dr. John Corvino of the Philosophy Department is a public intellectual. Corvino calls it an “awkward term,” admitting, however, that “there are people who think of me that way.” How, then, would he describe what he does? “I’m someone who tries to bring philosophy to a public audience,” he says. When told that this would seem to be the very definition of a public intellectual, he laughs, admitting to the logical lapse.

It’s a rare slip for Corvino, whose academic and public careers are based on a commitment to clear argumentation. As an academic, Corvino’s main philosophical interest is in ethics—the justification for moral claims. And this interest has led to his public career, one in which he uses philosophical



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rigor—along with wit, humor, and anecdotes from his own history—to defend the rights of homosexuals, gays and lesbians. “My public talks focus on specific moral claims,” he says. “I want to bring a certain level of rigor to the public debate. I want the debate to be reasoned. I’m not into crossfire politics, with people talking in soundbites.”

Corvino began delivering his talk “What’s Morally Wrong With Homosexuality?” while a graduate student at the University of Texas in 1992. “Someone at Texas A&M saw the tape of the talk,” he says, “and said, ‘Will you come here?’ Then someone at Vassar saw the tape and said, ‘Will you come here?’” He has been refining the talk ever since, and has also engaged in numerous debates with opponents of gay marriage at campuses all over the country. A frequent opponent is Glenn Stanton, of Focus On The Family, for whom Corvino expresses the utmost respect. “We both believe in the importance of reasoned, respectful, but spirited public dialogue,” Corvino says.

He recently returned from a debate at a conservative campus college that was ranked the least hospitable for “alternative lifestyles.” “It actually went really well,” Corvino says of the visit. “I prefer going to that kind of campus rather than to a liberal campus. At a liberal campus, I often end up sitting back as the audience beats up on my opponent. At conservative campuses, there is more of an interest in serious dialogue and philosophy, and less interest in turning the debate into a political rally.”

Corvino was hired as a philosophy lecturer at Wayne State in 1998, and hired on the tenure track in 2001. He says he never tried to hide his sexual orientation from his future colleagues, joking that “if you put my CV in the copying machine, it’d come out lavender.”

“Some of my colleagues worry that public work distracts me from more serious philosophical work,” Corvino admits. “My colleagues are so pro-gay that they can’t understand why I spend so much time protesting bad arguments [against homosexuality]. They would rather see me work on responding to arguments that aren’t astoundingly silly. That said, the arguments are out there, and they need answering.” Corvino also continues to work on the moral philosophy of the eighteenth century empiricist David Hume.

It is clear how Corvino’s philosophical training influences his public presentations—he takes the arguments against homosexuality, one by one, and proceeds to logically pick them apart. But is the reverse true—does his being a public intellectual influence his philosophy? “It does,” he says. “It reminds me that these deep issues we talk about in philosophy have real-world implications, that they have an effect on people’s lives. I also think they help me be a better teacher. I experience different audiences during these talks, and bring that experience back to Wayne State. I feel that these campus visits are pedagogical.”

Perhaps Corvino’s most public moment came earlier this year, when the national gay and lesbian magazine *The Advocate* ran his essay “Kiss and Tell,” which Corvino sardonically describes as being about “a run-in I had with a Texas state trooper.” After seeing Corvino kiss another man, the trooper began to harass him, saying that “homosexual conduct is against the law.” As Corvino wrote elsewhere in the essay, he cited *Lawrence v. Texas*, and “pointed out that Texas state law never banned mere kissing.” When the trooper continued to press the point Corvino relented, and was let go. Afterward, Corvino filed a formal complaint, and the trooper was “put on six months probation, was given a formal written reprimand, and will be required to take additional classes on Texas state law.” Corvino laughs: “I don’t think he realized who he was picking on.”

Corvino has plans beyond his current lectures and magazine and newspaper work. “I certainly have been itching for some time to do a trade book on gay issues,” he says. “Right now, all I’ve got worked up is the title—I’m thinking about using the title *The Gay Agenda*.” He laughs. “It will be a moral defense of homosexuality, which sounds boring, but I hope it’ll be lively in the way my lectures are lively. It will couple academic rigor with personal sensitivity.” He’s also thinking of collecting, under the title *The Gay Moralist*, the regular columns he writes for the local gay and lesbian paper *Between The Lines*.

“My reason for doing the work I’m doing—though it does get exhausting—is that, as a gay person who grew up Catholic, with a great deal of guilt, I want to help other people in similar situations,” Corvino says. “I want to help prevent people from experiencing unnecessary pain and isolation. The letters I get are often from people who are young, college-age, who say, ‘Reading your stuff really made me feel better about things.’ That’s very gratifying.” ■