

September 6, 2017 jhendrick

## Early Career Researcher Highlight: Joel Michael Reynolds



**Name:** Joel Michael Reynolds

**Title:** Rice Family Postdoctoral Fellow in Bioethics and the Humanities

**Institution:** The Hastings Center

**Field of Study:** Philosophy

**Bio:** My teaching, research, and public engagement center on issues concerning ethics, embodiment, and society, especially as these relate to biopolitics, biomedical practice, and questions concerning disability. Seeking to bring reflective and empirical insights together, I draw upon work across the humanities and social sciences. In addition to completing the monograph-form of my dissertation, *The Life Worth Living: Ethics and the Experiences of Disability*, I am developing two major projects on (a) biocitizenship, genomic responsibility, and the informational self and (b) the meaning of ability in the later Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. You can learn more about Joel [here](#).

### What was the most difficult hurdle you had to overcome as a researcher?

The balance between situating one's work within an existing literature and maintaining openness, creativity, and left field insights. This problem is exacerbated when one's work spans multiple literatures or disciplines. It can happen, especially as an early career scholar, that a piece is not recognized as germane to a discussion in one's target journals. One can thus end up talking about an issue or set of issues without actually entering into, much less affecting, the conversation of those doing work on those issues. Accordingly, I often find myself puzzling over effective, yet accurate *translation* of ideas across domains, debates, and audiences. I also puzzle over this with respect to familiar gaps between applied and theoretic work. From one angle, this is a hurdle intrinsic to the proliferation of scholarly knowledge production and dissemination intensified by the information age. While an argument can be made that this is a positive development on the whole (more players at the table, more tables, etc.), there are only so many hours in a day. It seems to me that both hyper-specialization and generalism/pluralism are more difficult to achieve today. In another sense, this is a hurdle due to scholarly cliques, hierarchies, and the echo-chambers that can often result. Judgment over what counts as relevant or even basic to a field, a given literature, or even a specific debate can reveal enormous tensions. One cannot avoid or dismiss the ethics and politics of citation. It is a constant struggle to thread the needle of rigorous research and creative insights with both pluralist aims and historico-political sensitivity.

### Did you feel you had enough resources at your disposal when you were crafting your research and submitting it to an academic journal?

Yes. Emory University has a superb library with fantastic staff. In addition to its own holdings, there is a robust interlibrary loan system that meant, in effect, there were no articles or books I couldn't procure (granted, I wasn't doing archival work). I feel very lucky to have had such resources at my disposal.

*"One person thought the paper was complete rubbish—they more or less laughed at my efforts. Three of the readers thought it was a mixed bag, but for completely different reasons. Two of the readers thought it made a novel and powerful intervention to a contemporary debate in the relevant literature."*

### What advice would you offer the early career Humanities researcher?

Despite going through some very rough times personally, I have stayed afloat in large part due to a strong social network. In addition to feeling surrounded by people who have my back, maintaining relationships with colleagues in my own and other fields has meant that I am always reading something stimulating that pushes me outside of my comfort zone. When I send a draft—even a very rough one—to one of my friends, I not only receive incisive and constructive feedback,

but build upon an intellectual relationship that, if I'm lucky, will be lifelong and continue to grow richer. Everyone needs multiple kinds of editors and their sparks. The time, effort, and trust it took to build and maintain those relationships is paying—and I suspect will continue to pay—far more dividends than I ever expected (forgive the economic metaphor). So, above all, my advice is to nurture and cultivate the social relations and attendant dimensions of one's academic life.

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**What do you wish someone “in the know” would have told you earlier in your career about the publishing process?**

Getting over being rejected has been one of the more important lessons at this stage in my career, and I wish someone would have told me to submit to a journal during my first year of grad school. In other words, there is no reason I couldn't have gotten my first rejection letter and started that particular journey sooner. I also wish someone had more candidly explained the social dynamics underwriting professional journals. The role of editors, editorial boards, regular vs. ad-hoc readers, reader reports, etc., are all complex and can vary immensely between journals and across fields. This can be true of conferences as well. I once had a paper that (in accordance with a stated policy) was submitted to six different readers for a possibility of presentation at three distinct conference venues (one central conference and two satellite meetings at larger conferences). The divergence in assessment was astonishing. One person thought the paper was complete rubbish—they more or less laughed at my efforts. Three of the readers thought it was a mixed bag, but for completely different reasons. Two of the readers thought it made a novel and powerful intervention to a contemporary debate in the relevant literature. I'm happy to say that it ended up being selected for presentation at one of the three venues, was well received, and will hopefully be published sometime next year. Still, the lack of consensus was instructive. In my experience and with respect to both conferencing and journals, both mid-career and senior scholars too often avoid being forthright concerning the power dynamics at play. I now see that some journals, given any numbers of commitments, will avoid publishing on topic X or if one is (or isn't) citing Y regardless of the quality of the paper. Indeed, I'm not sure it makes sense to speak of the “quality” of a paper outside such dimensions—it's not a question of whether, but the way in which they bear upon its reception. Examples such as this could be easily multiplied. While the complexity of these factors strikes me as more or less obvious today, it evinces an intricate set of social and institutional relations that needlessly mystified me in the past. Publishing, by my lights, is ultimately about being part of an ongoing, specialized conversation. You can't jump in unless you know the topics, central participants, rules, history, and structure of the conversation. And not all of that can be gleaned by merely reading.

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