Barry Allen, McMaster University

Citation
Professor Barry Allen of the Philosophy Department at McMaster University is a leading philosopher of culture. He has worked to bridge the gap between analytic and continental philosophy, in aesthetics particularly on questions of design and the relationship to technology, and most recently on Asian philosophy, focusing particularly on moral and aesthetic elements in martial arts. He is a pioneer in this field and communicates effectively with scholars from both West and East.

Detailed appraisal
Barry Allen's work concentrates on the concept of knowledge, which he studies from interdisciplinary and multi-cultural perspectives in all its dimensions in human society, civilization, ecology, and evolution. This highly interdisciplinary work engages with evolutionary biology, archaeology, anthropology, the history of cities, art, and technology, and Eastern as well as Western philosophical traditions, to address a wide audience in contemporary and comparative philosophy and the human sciences.

His first book, Truth in Philosophy (Harvard University Press, 1993) was one of the earliest efforts to rise above the now-crumbling dichotomy between Analytic and Continental philosophy. The work lucidly analyzed complementary arguments among normally sequestered thinkers like Wittgenstein, Derrida, and William James. It is perhaps superfluous to observe that Harvard University Press is a prestigious publisher with a distinguished list in philosophy. It is unusual for an author's first book, appearing less than ten years out of graduate school and on completely different research, to achieve this recognition.

The interdisciplinary quality of his research came to the fore in his second book, Knowledge and Civilization (Westview Press, 2004). This book exhibits a range of investigations without precedent in contemporary philosophy, including chapter-length discussions of the relation between knowledge and human evolution, the history of tools, urbanism, and the rise of civilizations. Reviewing the book, anthropologist Clifford Geertz praised it as "original, incisive, and brilliantly argued," also "extraordinarily wide-ranging and creative." Allen's argument is that knowledge is more than science, and its value exceeds the classical value of truth. Knowledge is most solidly and centrally expressed in technological artifacts, materials, and processes, and in the accomplishments of world artistic traditions. Philosophers working on the theory of knowledge are not used to being told they need to think about cities and urbanism too. But that is Allen's argument. Millennia of urbanism have left their mark on knowledge, enhancing its value to the point where there is no doing without what only knowledge can do. To paraphrase his conclusion, the value of knowledge and the civility of cities have become two sides of the same question suspended over our future on the earth.

The theme of his third book, Artifice and Design (Cornell University Press, 2008) is the interaction between art and technology. It is unusual in philosophy to treat these topics together. The work makes an unprecedented case for the proposition that fully engaged technical design is at once aesthetic and structural. The engineers do not disagree, and have received this work warmly. Henry Petroski, a prominent professor of engineering at Duke University, said the book "should be considered must reading for anyone desiring to understand the nature and challenges of engineering design." A review in Civil Engineering called the book "a compelling and unique work." Technical Communication described it as "rich in insight, reveals deep scholarship, and will provoke fruitful reflection in technical communicators concerned about usability as a combination of utility and beauty." Invitations to lecture on engineering aesthetics at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (06/12) and Istanbul Technical University (11/13) confirm the interest these reviews express.

The surprise in Allen's fourth book, Vanishing Into Things: Knowledge in Chinese Tradition (Harvard University Press, 2015) was to bring classical Chinese thought into his argument about knowledge. That had never been done before, neither in the theory of knowledge nor in comparative philosophy, and in the words of an early reviewer, "Philosophy as a discipline is better for having it." For Allen to have broken
into a completely new field, formulated a problem no one had seen, have his results pass muster by Sinologists, and be published by Harvard University Press were challenges. The book can be expected to set a landmark in the rising field of comparative philosophy.

The newer research in Asian philosophy and the older themes of art and technology found an unexpected synthesis in *Striking Beauty: A Philosophical Look at the Asian Martial Arts* (Columbia University Press, 2015). Despite worldwide popularity there is practically no philosophical literature on the Asian martial arts. This book has become the starting point for work on the topic. Stanley Henning, probably our most eminent scholar of Chinese martial arts, described the work as "an incredible book . . . a breathtaking experience." Other reviewers called it "beautifully and forcefully written . . . groundbreaking and inspiring," and "a necessary book."

In addition to these books, Allen's papers include more than a dozen (in three languages) on aspects of American pragmatism and especially the neo-pragmatism of Allen's teacher, Richard Rorty. Another half dozen analyze the thought of Michel Foucault, especially as it concerns Allen's thematic preoccupation with the concept of knowledge.

In sum, the motifs of his work are, first, the concentration on the concept of knowledge, especially in interaction with art and technology. Secondly, its pronounced interdisciplinary and even intercultural character. He challenges us to place knowledge in the greater field of art, technology, urbanism, ecology, and evolution. His studies in Chinese philosophy reveal alternative understandings that address emerging problems of knowledge in the dawning Anthropocene era, when humanity begins to act on the global ecology as a concerted planetary force.