

# Public Symposium

## Western Canadian Philosophical Association

Saturday, October 25<sup>th</sup>, 1.30 – 4.20 pm  
University of Alberta, Edmonton, Business 1 – 9

### Philosophy, Eugenics, and Disability in Alberta and Places North

#### ALL WELCOME

Dick Sobsey, J. Dossetor Health Ethics Centre, “Varieties of Eugenics Experience in the 21st Century”  
Simo Vehmas, Education, University of Jyväskylä, “Preventing Disability: Nordic Perspectives”  
Martin Tweedale, Philosophy, University of Alberta  
“Ethical Dilemmas in Eliminating the MacEachran Prizes in Philosophy”  
Rob Wilson, Philosophy, Alberta  
“Building Inclusive Communities Through Practices of Collective Memory ...”

#### Symposium description

The Sexual Sterilization Act of Alberta was law from 1928 until 1972. During this period, the rate of eugenic sterilization in Alberta was one of the highest in any jurisdiction, especially after 1945. Most of what is known here came to light through the legal case of *Muir vs The Queen*, including the decision handed down by Madam Justice Veit. In the 1990s, the Scandinavian countries engaged in a sustained, public exploration of their own history of eugenic and other sterilization practices, resulting in the book *Eugenics and the Welfare State: Sterilization Policy in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland* (1996, reissued 2005). Two aspects of Alberta’s history of eugenic sterilization relevant for this symposium are that (a) the head of the Eugenics Board for 45 years was the founding chair of the Department of Philosophy and Psychology at Alberta, John MacEachran; and (b) that, in the wake of the Muir trial, the Department of Philosophy, on the recommendations in the “MacEachran report” of a subcommittee, acknowledged the role of philosophy--disciplinarily and institutionally--in the history of eugenic sterilization, and in contemporary reflections on that history. In this symposium, past will meet present, with local twists to general issues. **Dick Sobsey** (*Varieties of Eugenics Experience in the 21st Century*) will begin with underlying assumptions of the eugenics movement and how they led to distinct practices of selective population control, including sterilization, incarceration, selective abortion, and extermination. Dick will argue that compulsory sterilization has been identified as the hallmark of negative eugenics simply because it has been difficult to justify by any other rationale, while other eugenic practices have dual effects. **Simo Vehmas**, (*Preventing Disability: Nordic Perspectives*) will describe and analyse from an ethical viewpoint the attempts to prevent disability in the Nordic countries. **Martin Tweedale** (*Ethical Dilemmas in Eliminating the MacEachran Prizes in Philosophy*) will focus on the Philosophy Department’s decision over whether to continue its association with the prizes in the name of John MacEachran, summarizing the factors considered in the deliberations, and exploring the extent to which the decision taken was rationally demanded by those considerations. **Rob Wilson** (*Building Inclusive Communities Through Practices of Collective Memory: The Case of Eugenic Sterilization in Alberta*) will deliver part interim report, part philosophical reflection, on his work on building alliances both across disciplines, and between university researchers and community activists, to explore the Alberta’s eugenics history.