Dear Mercy College Philosophy Search Committee,

I am writing in answer to your call for applications for the open Visiting Professor position. I recently completed my graduate studies, successfully defending my dissertation at the City University of New York Graduate Center, with John Greenwood as my advisor, and will receive my Ph.D. in September. I am also teaching courses in Philosophical Psychology and Knowledge & Reality at Hunter College, where I have held adjunct lecturer and graduate assistant positions continuously throughout the entirety of my graduate studies.

While I enjoy writing and research, my true passion in philosophy is for teaching. I love introducing students to philosophy for the first time and find it extremely gratifying when they develop an appreciation for the discipline. I also enjoy guiding more advanced students toward new ideas in the areas with which they are already familiar and helping them cultivate their own work. Since my first semester of graduate school I have been a member of the Hunter College adjunct faculty. I began as a grader for Christa Acampora’s Introduction to Philosophy course. I was then awarded a Graduate Assistant B fellowship and became a teaching assistant for Alan Hausman’s Intro class as well as his Humanities class about the culture wars in academia. I was supposed to TA for a year before being assigned my own class, but three days before my second term as a Grad B, another faculty member quit, and so I was offered and accepted an Intro class of my own that very semester. After the initial trial by fire, I began to get very positive evaluations from both peers and students and my fellowship was upgraded to Graduate Assistant A. With the promotion I began teaching a 200 level class entitled “Knowledge and Reality”, which is an introduction to metaphysics and epistemology with a focus on Early Modern Epistemology as well as perennial metaphysical issues such as the mind-body problem, personal identity, the existence of God, and free will. In this course as well as in my Intro class, I use science fiction as a way of engaging the students in the philosophical issues, including in my syllabus units on artificial intelligence, the simulation hypothesis, and even time travel; and incorporating movies (such as the Matrix and Minority Report) and TV shows (such as Star Trek and The Twilight Zone) into class sessions. In the past couple of years I have begun teaching the “Philosophical Psychology” course, in which I teach an overview of Philosophy of Mind with an eye toward bridging the gap between philosophical inquiry about consciousness and cognition and empirical work in psychology, neuroscience and animal cognition. I get many psychology majors attending that course and so offer, as an option for the final paper, an interdisciplinary project in which students explore the relevance of empirical findings to philosophical problems.

Hunter is a truly metropolitan school, with students of all ages, economic and cultural backgrounds, talents, and disabilities. Having been publicly educated in NYC from Kindergarten all the way to my Ph.D., I welcomed and rose to the challenge of teaching such a diverse student body. More difficult, however, was the fact that the course of study for the philosophy major is somewhat vague, so that students end up in my 200 level classes with highly varying levels of philosophical experience. This has challenged me to devise syllabuses that cover philosophical basics that novice students can grasp, but which also provide sufficient advanced
material to keep the interest of the students who come with greater philosophical acumen.

My dissertation, entitled “Persons as Self-consciously Concerned Beings,” is an analysis of the concept of a person. Following Locke, in understanding the concept to have primarily forensic significance, marking out the beings that are appropriate subjects of inquiry about responsibility for actions, I offer an account of the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a person. This is, most generally, a topic in Metaphysics, and I contribute to the ongoing debate about personal persistence over time as well as the ontology of persons, arguing in opposition to the traditional Psychological Criterion proposed by writers such as Derek Parfit, that personal persistence requires only the uninterrupted maintenance of the core psychological capacities necessary and sufficient for being a person in the first place, not continuity of distinctive psychological characteristics. As in my writing sample, my dissertation also includes a discussion of the ontology of persons that situates discussion of them within contemporary metaphysical debates about the ontological status of composite objects in general. I argue that one can be a Reductionist about persons, without having to eliminate them from a rigorously sparse ontology.

The main thesis I argue for in my dissertation is that being a person requires possession of the capacities for self-consciousness and concern. Defining those capacities brings the project into the realm of Philosophy of Mind. By ‘self-consciousness,’ I mean the capacity to think critically about one’s own first order beliefs and desires. This capacity is alternatively referred to as ‘metacognition’ and is the subject of much current philosophical and empirical inquiry which I canvas in the dissertation. For instance, I explore the issue of distinguishing ‘self-consciousness’ from the more basic phenomenal consciousness that may be possessed by animals which are not persons, and of which there are numerous competing accounts offered by philosophers such as David Rosenthal and Michael Tye that I adjudicate between. On the other hand, my project is relevant to work being done in developing tests to see if various primates and marine mammals also possess self-consciousness or metacognition, which is usually assumed to be unique to human beings. The same goes for ‘concern,’ which I define as emotional investment in the attainment of one’s goals and truth of one’s beliefs. Part of my project of analyzing the concept of a person is offering an account that can then be applied to beings in the natural world in order to attempt to determine, to the extent possible which creatures are or are not persons. My account of personhood also has implications for bioethics, philosophy of psychiatry and moral psychology, including issues about the personhood and moral status of individuals in vegetative states, infants, psychopaths, individuals with autism and other psychological disorders.

I am currently participating in a philosophy lab at the Graduate Center, directed by Jesse Prinz, where I am developing two empirical research projects, one exploring how the moral emotions, such as guilt and shame, relate to attributions of responsibility and another gauging individuals’ selfreports about why they enjoy watching horror films in an attempt to shed empirical light on the philosophical debate concerning that subject. I also have plans to work on the relationship between personal identity and responsibility, attempting to determine whether or not folk intuitions take the two concepts to be as inextricably connected as is supposed in the philosophical literature, including my own work.
In addition to the topics mentioned above, my research plans include work on the relationship between folk psychological explanation and neuroscientific explanation, particularly as concerns the nature of agency and the apparent conflict between free will and determinism and the function, or lack thereof, of consciousness and its impact on responsibility. I am also interested in the nature of metaphysical disagreement and the metaontological project of determining which metaphysical debates are of genuine substance and the degree to which empirical science is relevant to them.

My primary research and teaching experience so far enables me to teach courses in Philosophy of Mind, Metaphysics, and Early Modern Philosophy. Additionally, much of my graduate work was in Classical Greek Philosophy and Nietzsche studies and I am interested in and prepared to teach courses in those areas. Furthermore, I have long been a member of the Society for Indian and Tibetan Buddhist Philosophy which meets annually at the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division meeting, as well as at the Society for Ancient and Medieval Philosophy conference, and have written and presented several papers which draw connections between my primary philosophical research and issues in Buddhism. This work has given me a strong foundation of Asian Philosophy in general, so that I can teach courses in that area as well. Finally, I have several ideas for courses concerning the relationship between Philosophy and Science Fiction.

I also have various ideas for projects in the area of Aesthetics, particularly as concerns music, literature and popular culture. Concurrent with my undergraduate and graduate studies I have been involved in the New York City music scene, mostly as a singer and lyricist for various rock bands. In that capacity I have performed at many famous NYC venues, including CBGBs, Arlene’s Grocery, the Knitting Factory and Don Hill’s; have made several full length recordings; and have toured up and down the East coast, as well as out to the Midwest, of the U.S. I was also part of the New York Consciousness Collective, which was a musical ensemble of philosophers and cognitive scientists, including David Chalmers, Hawkwan Lau, and Pete Mandik. My experience with music has allowed me to generate ideas about the nature of music and the psychology of its appreciation as well as the relation between improvisation, expertise and consciousness. Additionally, I am an avid reader of fiction with an eye to the philosophy often embedded in it. I minored in English in college and continued taking literature courses in graduate school. I plan on writing about the relationship between fiction and philosophy, particularly science (or speculative) fiction, which is a breeding ground for philosophical thought experiments. Furthermore, I have a general interest in the relationship between art, entertainment and education and the impact of popular culture on society.

I believe my qualifications make me well suited for this position and I thank you for your time, attention, and consideration.

Sincerely,