In our jobs, we have all had tasks we didn’t want to do, but what happens when we are asked to perform a service that goes against our fundamental beliefs?

This ethical interplay is central to Philosophy professor Carolyn McLeod’s research about the practice of conscientious refusals – declining to provide services based on personal moral beliefs – by health professionals, particularly as it relates to reproductive health care. “This is my biggest interest right now and one I find not only socially important, but fascinating philosophically,” she says. “The topic forces us to wrestle with the importance of freedom of conscience and with the limits to that freedom, especially for professionals in society.”

McLeod, who holds a cross-appointment in Women’s Studies, is breaking new ground by applying feminist theory to the myriad questions conscientious objection in health care raises. Despite obvious implications for female reproductive health, including debates about abortion, contraception and in vitro fertilization, this angle has yet to be examined in detail in philosophical bioethics.

Questions about how to define conscience and understand how much authority to give it add further dimensions to the studies. “We tend to think of conscience as an inner-nagging voice that threatens us with negative moral feelings, such as shame or guilt,” McLeod says. This voice, and its associated feelings, can be informed by an oppressive social environment, including one that is sexist or homophobic. “There is the issue of why we should take conscience seriously – our own or other people’s – if, or even if, conscience is misguided,” she adds.

McLeod has written extensively about ‘reproductive autonomy’, which refers to the ‘reproductive autonomy’, which refers to ‘reproductive autonomy’, which refers to reproductive autonomy, which refers to the ability to choose whether and how we reproduce. Reproductive autonomy extends far as choosing the care you receive during pregnancy to deciding what options to pursue, if any, for overcoming infertility. She has also examined other concepts important in bioethics, including trust, self-trust, integrity, informed choice, objectification and commodification, and has published work about the ethical dimensions of miscarriage, in vitro fertilization, prenatal testing, embryo and oocyte donation and contract pregnancy.

For the past two years, McLeod has been the co-director of the International Network on Feminist Approaches to Bioethics (FAB), an interdisciplinary organization with members in more than 30 countries. The network helps researchers see how their work is relevant to health issues women face around the globe.

McLeod’s research goals vary from informing health policy directly to analyzing particular moral issues with the aim of giving readers – who may include health policy makers, health professionals, students, lay people or academics – a deep understanding of how one ought to approach the issue in one’s personal or professional life.
Threads woven through ancient history

When Classical Studies professor Kelly Olson studies vintage fashion, she’s not rummaging through a bin of tattered denim. Instead, she’s helping us understand how really vintage clothing – from ancient Rome and Greece – can teach us about how people lived and what was important to them.

Attire is an important indicator of how people identify with themselves and with others. As such, it can help us learn a lot about gender roles and traditions, cultural anxieties, class and even legal standing. “Clothing has an almost limitless potential for communication and encapsulated cultural anxieties and values,” she says. “In some cases, it was even legally prescribed in an attempt to solidify social order.”

Messages encoded in the clothing one wears can also depend on personal perspectives and on the social systems in which it’s worn. Views about the mitinosh and the veil, for example, vary greatly depending on the region of the world in which you live, Olson says. “Clothing doesn’t always mirror social change, but the effects of social change tend to trickle down eventually into garments.”

Despite the importance of attire to everyday life, it hasn’t always been subject to academic scrutiny. In recent years, this attitude has begun to shift as research about clothing has become increasingly common in a variety of fields, including history, sociology and anthropology. Olson noticed, however, that nothing had been done about classical clothing, which provided her with an opportunity to combine her passion for fashion with her academic work.

While many classical scholars rely heavily on texts, the relative absence of documentation related to clothing has led Olson to become a quasi-expert in the use of a variety of alternative sources. “It’s not like you can just open a catalogue to see what people were wearing at the time,” she says, “so I’ve had to do a lot of detective work, looking at literature, art, poetry, legal sources and historical inscriptions.”

It’s a challenge she welcomes. Olson calls her recently completed first book, Dress and the Roman Woman: Self-Presentation and Society, her biggest accomplishment in academia thus far. She plans to take an in-depth look at male clothing in her next book, in which she will describe the details of male appearance in Roman antiquity using literary and artistic sources.

“I’m also going to look at how clothing fits into ritual and at certain sartorial conventions in ancient society, such as how one was supposed to show up to a trial wearing mourning clothing,” she says. As part of the book, she will also look at the clothing of the overlords, or the effeminate man, and of the ‘dandy’ figure, both of which types function as loci for social anxieties concerning wealth, class, gender, sexuality and political legitimacy.

For those trying to learn, the past doesn’t go out of style. “History is important for modern society because it’s hard to know where you’re going if you don’t know where you’ve been,” Olson says.

Currently undergoing a renaissance, so to speak, baroque customs may hold a key to better understanding cultural diversity.

In music, the term baroque refers to emotional, highly stylized and flowery presentation. In visual art, it denotes dramatic light and shade, turbulent composition and exaggerated expression. Rising to prominence 450 years ago, baroque culture swept across the globe in what historians refer to as the first stage of globalization.

Modern Languages & Literatures professor Juan Luis Suarez is looking at how artistic expressions generally considered baroque in the Hispanic world emerged from a larger system of interactions between 1550 and 1750, coinciding with the establishment and ascendency of the Spanish imperial presence in Central and South America. He is also interested in the current baroque revival and by the extent to which the Americas have been shaped by this first Atlantic Empire.

Suarez attributes the globalization of baroque culture to interactions, relationships and information exchanges developed through montage – the fusion of cultural traditions, including language, religion, food and music between groups in Spain and Latin America. Once it permeated the culture, it spread across the world.

“We would like to develop a clear model of how cultures co-exist while allowing for a certain cultural autonomy and interdependence at the same time,” says Suarez. He also hopes to explain why the baroque strategy of communication – where a single cultural message is communicated with enough ambiguity that it unfolds in different ways to people with different backgrounds – is emerging in other places around the world.

Las Vegas is one of the most visible current cities where baroque characteristics are evident.

“Sin City is the perfect baroque example because it’s the ideal combination of spectacle and technology used to fully impact the spectator in much the same way rhetoric was used in the first baroque period,” says Suarez. “Seeing and being seen are just as important as the spectacle itself, which is a characteristic that can be traced to baroque times.”

In the true spirit of globalization, Suarez leads an international, multi-disciplinary team of scholars from diverse fields, including music, literature, mathematics, computer science and anthropology. Called the Hispanic Baroque – Complexity in the First Atlantic Culture, the study received a $2.5 million SSHRC grant in 2007, the largest ever in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities.

By learning from the past, Suarez believes the Latin American baroque era will provide valuable information to help countries around the world deal with issues related to diversity. “History is a great repository of knowledge,” he says, “but I’m merely working in the past because we think the solutions are there.”

For more information, please visit: www.hispanicbaroque.ca
Hollywood may have a reputation for presenting fantasy worlds in its movies, but Visual Arts professor Christine Sprengler says film can also teach us a lot about history and the nature of our access to it. “There is an argument that nostalgia films trading in visual spectacle seize our connection to the past and provide no meaningful representations of history,” she says, “but I would argue that they help us to engage with the past – including its myths – and to understand how history is written about and understood.”

Sprengler recently finished writing her first book, Screening Nostalgia: Popular Pops and Technicolor Aesthetics in Contemporary American Film, which looks at the relationship between past and present in nostalgia film, and the effects of mass-mediated memory. In it, she explains how cinema can provide significant insights into a generation’s preoccupations, concerns, interests and values. Popular film provides us with a mediated way of reading into the past that should not be dismissed simply because it’s based in fiction.

“Taken in context, archival footage has been mediated, too,” Sprengler says. Portrayals in movies can help researchers learn about a generation’s fears, aspirations and lived experiences that have been otherwise ignored in favour of historical sound bites or popular recitations of public history. As such, film can help viewers engage with questions about memory and history in a more meaningful manner. “Nostalgia film tells us what’s of concern to us in the present and serves as a lens through which we can filter past events,” she says.

Sprengler contends that cinema’s visual dimensions – including its props, costumes and cinematographic techniques – can also help initiate critical explorations of the past. These visual triggers and archetypal images – including, for example, how the tailfins of a car hearkens back to the 1950s – translate across media and provide us with a dominant shorthand for the whole construct of an era, she says. “Canonical objects are rich in meaning and central to so many cultural constructs.”

With her first book already in the can, Sprengler has begun a new project looking at a genre of contemporary art that attempts to explore the effects cinema has on cultural memory. Called parascinema by film theorist Jonathan Walley, this art form tries to generate the effects of cinema without using traditional materials or the physical support of film. “The nature of the intersection between art and film over the last 20 years is the focus,” Sprengler says. “By looking at cinema at a pivotal moment through the lens of art, we might better understand their relationship and what one can teach us about the other.”

With the right approach, your next DVD might open a window unto the past rather than simply providing a couple hours of escape.

Through studies of colonial and post-colonial literature and theatre, English professor Nandita Bhatia is helping to raise the curtain on the past. “We really need to uncover the voices of ordinary people who are largely absent in historical documents,” she says. “By looking at the role of theatre and performance in the context of nationalism and colonialism, Bhatia hopes to shed light on British imperial practices as they related to race, class and gender in India throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

Literature and theatre can provide valuable insight into substantive issues across socioeconomic and cultural lines because they provide space for alternative voices and underrepresented perspectives. “They are important because they provide us with understandings and views we wouldn’t be able to access otherwise since they reflect social contradictions being expressed and articulated at the time,” Bhatia says.

To limit these alternative views, the British India government imposed a variety of laws aimed at censoring performances it deemed seditious and counter to the nature of our access to it. “Theatre was more threatening to them because it allowed for a different steweaship and dialogue, often in different languages,” she says.

Research in the area can be particularly challenging, however, because many colonial-era scripts weren’t written down for fear of reprisals, including fines and imprisonment. Circumventing this lack of documentation, Bhatia, who earned the Polanyi Prize for her research in 1999, turned to reading between government rhetoric in censorship documents and in the English and vernacular press from the time, which are rich with debates about theatre.

She is also working on a project that examines women’s contributions to debates about colonialism and nationalism through theatre. “Women coming to the stage was contentious in and of itself,” Bhatia says. “The position of the actors got caught up in both debates of gender and nationalism – women were seen as the upholders of the home and the upholders of the nation.” This research looks at the role women played in negotiating public-private roles, how they came to be constructed in the theatre as actors and playwrights, and at the formation of female-led theatre companies.

“Historical writing has largely silenced the voices of ordinary people,” Bhatia says. While memoirs of colonialism and of the country’s 1947 partition were still relatively fresh when she grew up in India, personal representations of partition – which was one of the largest forced migrations of the 20th century – are limited. “It’s a moment that is very much a part of popular memory for an entire generation,” she says. “For many, life began with partition.” Some of these personal stories have been captured by her country’s theatre and writings.

“It’s ironic that the canon of Indian literature is assembled in English,” Bhatia says, but by understanding performances and texts from a tumultuous period in India’s history, we can help preserve memory and better understand the past.
Contributions

Studies related to rolling stones, magnetic fields or T-Rex might be common on university campuses, but they don’t usually refer to band names. By researching the influence popular music has on life, society and culture, Norma Coates hopes to change that.

Cross-appointed to the Faculty of Information & Media Studies and the Don Wright Faculty of Music, Coates has been fortunate to turn a lifelong passion into her job. “I have been a music fan since I was nine years old,” she says. “When I discovered a graduate program in cultural studies, I wanted to figure out how popular music works, particularly from the perspective of gender.”

A fan of 70s punk, Coates is particularly interested in how gender roles are reproduced in popular music—in terms of both participation and audience. “I care less about the number of women participating and more about what they’re doing in music,” she says. Some of Coates’s work has looked at the ‘ feminization’ of particular instruments, the role women play in bands and their portrayal in the media. “Male-dominated rock culture has been taken up in shorthand and has perpetuated a lot of damage,” she explains.

Despite the increased involvement of women in music, many questions remain unanswered. “Why do we all cringe when we hear certain music’s traditional gatekeepers, thus helping to perpetuate standard rock clichés and perpetuating gender roles?” for example, Coates wonders.

Digital technology has in essence removed music’s traditional gatekeepers, thus helping to create a musical middle class. “The Internet facilitates this discovery, puts the agency back to the user and provides opportunities for people who have been marginalized in the music world,” Coates says. It also provides important new avenues through which musicians can connect to global audiences and better communicate with fans.

The relationship between music and television is fraught with similar complexity. Coates has analysed television’s roles in constructing the image of ‘teennyboppers’, perpetuating standard rock clichés and packaging music for children. Historical footage, however, is often limited. “It wasn’t deemed to be important and much of it has disappeared,” says Coates, whose future plans include a project comparing music programming in Canada, the U.S. and the U.K. “Music plays an important role in constructing who we become and draws upon so many areas of life that it can help us better understand the world. ‘Studying of popular music help us learn about what’s important in our culture and point out prevalent norms — both good and bad,” Coates says. "Why, for example, in commercials do you generally see the father in the minivan on the rock music, while women remain generally disassociated with music?”

With such questions to be answered, the next study you come across about rolling stones might actually be about The Rolling Stones.