

Letter from the Chair

Dear Friends,



The Philosophy Department continues to be an active place at Virginia Tech! Last year I reported to you that our number of majors and double majors had increased to over 160. Perhaps we are leveling out, as there are now almost 150 majors. Fifty of them are planning to graduate next month. Our graduation speaker will be a Philosophy MA graduate from 2003, Seth Bordner, who is now an Assistant Professor at the University of Alabama. Our graduations have become so large we have had to move them from the friendly confines of Major Williams Atrium to a lecture hall in Torgersen. This is less intimate, but much more comfortable! (Some of you may remember the graduations held in the seminar room in Patton Hall until 1995—That was crowded!) This also reminds us, of course, that when so many graduate, we have to refill the ranks of majors. What got you interested in majoring in Philosophy? I know in many cases it was the teachers of our introductory classes. The university is in the process of rethinking the core curriculum, and while we are always in favor of reflecting on how we might do things better, we worry about adjustments that might make it less likely that students would take our intro classes. Your comments and suggestions are always welcome.

We conducted a search this year for a new faculty person to teach ethics and political philosophy in our department and contribute to the interdisciplinary ASPECT PhD program. It turned out the best person was right here. We hired Michael Moehler, who has been a visiting professor in the department for two years. Michael grew up in Germany, got his PhD in London, and has taught in the USA. We look forward to his full involvement in the department from here on. Professor Lydia Patton was granted early tenure this year, and we are delighted she now has this security with us! Next year Professor Deborah Mayo will continue her 2-year leave stint as a Distinguished Visiting Professor at the London School of Economics, Professor Walter Ott will spend a year as a visiting professor at UVA, and Professor Tristram McPherson will hold a Fellowship at Melbourne University in Australia to work on the “Many Moral Rationalisms” project. Tristram and Amy Shuster had a son, Finn, in December, and he has been hanging around the department absorbing the Socratic Method!

We have continued our departmental traditions of going to hear bluegrass music in Floyd on the Friday before Fall classes start, and “Running with the Philosophers” to commemorate April 16th. Last year the run was cancelled because of sudden tornado warnings—but we are hoping for calmer skies this year. As of this year the university will no longer cancel classes on April 16th, but will continue to find other activities and service opportunities to create something positive out of the horrendous events on 2007.

This semester we had two tragedies in the department, as two of our undergraduates passed away. Dieter Seltzer was a sharp, curious, wide-ranging thinker, and he will be missed by all of us. In cooperation with his family, a memorial fund is being established in his honor in the department. JJ Stinson passed away while studying in Switzerland at Riva San Vitale. Our parents and friends imagine that philosophy might help deal with something like this. Maybe they are thinking of Stoic Philosophy. But Socrates would want us to focus on the things that are most important in life and valuing our relationships is certainly one of those things. Let us try to honor their memories by caring more about the things they cared about. And let's continue to look out for one another.

Now and then we hear from alumni by e-mail. We always want to know how you are doing. Please send Joe Pitt (jcpitt@vt.edu) your news and e-mail addresses so we can more easily keep up with you. Thanks for your interest and support,

—Jim Klagge. ☎

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We want to hear from you!

Please write to us and let us know how (and what) you're doing!

Write to: Joe Pitt (jcpitt@vt.edu)


To make sure you continue to get the Newsletter, go online to: <http://www.alumni.vt.edu/gateway/index.html> to update, view, and edit your information.

Commencement

Spring 2011 ceremony

On May 14, Joseph Pitt presided over the 2011 Commencement Ceremony in Torgersen Hall. Deborah Mayo presided over the hooding ceremony, while Joe presented the undergraduate diplomas.

Joe Pitt presented the William H. Williams Prize for undergraduate excellence to Samantha Plourde, while Deborah Mayo presented the Marjorie Grene Memorial Prize for outstanding graduate student to Claudio D'Amato and William Fleisher.

Dr. Lori Watson was the speaker. Watson, who earned her Master's degree from Virginia Tech, is now Associate Professor of Philosophy and Director of Gender Studies at the University of San Diego. 



Master of Arts:

Chall, Cristin Cain
D'Amato, Claudio
Darrow, Robert R.
Dixon, Jonathan Starrs
Estrera, Elc Alleb Christian
Fleisher, William Paul
Garland, Andrew D.
Hupfer, Elizabeth Curtis
Loewenstein, Yael Rebecca
Martin, Joshua David
Moosavi Tabatabaei, Seyedeh Parisa



Bachelor of Arts:

Atkinson, Landis W. IV
Bethany, Jesse H.
Birisik, Mehmet
Christiansen, William
Cole, Dustin Troy
Cook, James Henry
Dawood, Jennifer Lynn
Demma, Anthony Michael
Doyle, Jack Fredrick IV
Fede, Samantha Jean
Freeman, Fred F.
Gonzalez, Gabriela Ivette
Green, Brandi Michelle
Hamilton, William Lee
Hartley, W. Hunter
Heimlich, Jennifer Ann
Howell, Lee Austen
Huffman, Joel Cline
Link, Casey Thomas
Little, Claire Elizabeth
Loftis, Benjamin Avery
McEnroe, Charles Gillick
Oliver, Ashley Ann
Ovelgoenner, Paul Alan
Patterson, Brent Livingston
Plourde, Samantha Nicole
Puccetti, Ulysses Dominic
Southall, David Matthew
St. Thomas, Robert Joseph
Steele, James Brian
Swanson, Erica Lee
Tesh, Peter Alexander
Thomas, Lindsey Marie
Tribble, Mark Waring
Walsh, Christopher Ian



Alumni Notes

Jonathan Dixon (M.A., 2011) will be teaching at a community college in Houston, Texas, and applying to Ph.D. programs in the fall.

C. Wesley French, P.E. (B.A., 1967) is Senior Project Manager at Brown & Gay Engineers in Houston Texas. He writes, 'I believe that I received the first Bachelor of Arts degree in Philosophy back in 1967. Guy Hammond and Palmer Talbutt taught most of the courses. The following timeline shows how this degree program benefited me.

1968 – Draft notice from the US Marines; my B.A. was the credential that allowed me to avoid this by joining the Air Force as an officer.

1968 -1971 – USAF; my degree gave me the academic skills to stay in training schools.

1971-1972 – Vietnam; I survived.

1973 - 1977 – NC State, Civil Engineering degree w/ 3.8 GPA (a bit better than the 2.01 for my philosophy degree) earned with the VT academic skills.

1977 -1989 – US Army Corps of Engineers, Wilmington, NC; hydrology and hydraulic research reports, project design and water resource planning reports. VT writing skills and logic helped make these efforts more productive.

1989 - 2001 – Stone & Webster Engineering, Houston, TX and Denver, CO; petrochemical and power plant site work and drainage design.

2001-2003 – Walter P Moore Engineers, Houston, TX; Forensic engineering (following Tropical Storm Allison) and site/drainage projects.

2003 -2011 – Brown & Gay Engineers, Houston, TX; major site / drainage projects

All my professional career has been blessed with the knowledge and the skills learned from Prof. Hammond and Prof. Talbutt. Philosophy gave me a more holistic perception and better ability to understand the issues required to meet project challenges.

Christopher Fox (B.A., 1996) is now Assistant Dean and Director of IT in the College of Visual and Performing Arts at Syracuse University. He writes, 'While I made a valiant effort to dive right into grad school to pursue a Master's degree, I realized quite early in that pursuit that I should've taken some time off. I therefore did so, and rather unceremoniously dropped out of the Master's program at the University of Virginia. Life sometimes demands difficult and challenging decisions,

"Through all of my adventures, I've found my training in philosophy immensely valuable" - Christopher Fox

and I often wonder how my life might have turned out had I tried to "stick it out" and continue my graduate studies.

Regardless, after dropping out of grad school, I pursued a number of interests. I performed odd jobs in the Charlottesville area before moving back to Richmond in early 1998, where I accepted a position as hardware repair technician and salesperson for the new "Apple Store within a Store" at the local CompUSA in Glen Allen, Virginia. In the latter half of 1999, I left CompUSA for a brief stint as a prepress engineer at a billboard design and printing business. In 2000, I accepted a position with Capital One as their senior Macintosh platform engineer. In 2005, Capital

One outsourced their IT services to Unisys Corporation; I accepted a new role in Unisys as lead Mac engineer, primarily dedicated to the Capital One account. In 2008, I left Unisys after aggressive recruiting by an old friend of mine who had been running his own independent IT consulting firm for many years. I spent about a year and a half working for my friend's consulting business, where I performed "soup-to-nuts" IT consulting work for about two dozen diverse businesses up and down the east coast. In the latter half of 2009, I moved to Syracuse, NY where I accepted the position as Assistant Dean and Director of IT for Syracuse University's College of Visual and Performing Arts.

Through all of my adventures, I've found my training in philosophy immensely valuable. The communication and critical thinking skills I developed during my undergraduate education have allowed me to perform admirably at everything I choose to do. Credit should be duly given to Professors Harlan Miller, Eric Watkins, and Valerie & Gary Hardcastle. Their exemplary teaching skills and passion for their fields directly impacted my success.'

Erik Svetich (M.A., 2012) will join the one-year M.A. program in philosophy of biology at Exeter. ☎

Conference

Graduate student conference

The eighth annual Virginia Tech graduate philosophy conference, 'Contemporary Topics in Philosophy of Mind,' was held on 4-5 November on the Virginia Tech campus in Blacksburg. The keynote speaker was Jesse Prinz (City University of New York).



Jonathan Dixon and Jesse Prinz

Professor Prinz's talk was entitled 'The AIR Theory of Consciousness.' Graduate students from around the country gave talks on such subjects as self-knowledge, the emergence of consciousness, and perceptual illusions, with comments provided by our own graduate students. Congratulations to all members of the Graduate Philosophy club, especially Grace McGee, President, Matthew Dougherty, Treasurer, and Planning Members Rachel Crowder, Joey Miller, Amanda Prize, Ronald Radzai, and Erik Svetich, for organizing and hosting such a successful event. ☎



Grace McGee





Michael Moehler began his academic career in Germany with the study of Kant and related works of prominent German idealists, such as Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. After he realized how much shorter the English translation of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason is compared to the original German version, he left the country and finished his bachelor's degree at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).

At the LSE, Michael became increasingly interested in topics at

the intersection of philosophy and economics, and consequently pursued an MSc in Philosophy of the Social Sciences. After spending further time in the intellectually stimulating community of the University of London, his main research interest shifted to moral and political philosophy, and he obtained a PhD in Philosophy, also from the LSE.

After his time in the UK, Michael worked for two years in the Department of Philosophy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and he was especially involved in the department's joint program in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics with Duke University. During his time at UNC, Michael received an offer for a research fellowship at the Murphy Institute at Tulane University in New Orleans. The Murphy Institute supports interdisciplinary research in the humanities and social sciences, especially in philosophy, political science, economics, and history.

After a year in New Orleans, Michael came two years ago to Virginia Tech as a Visiting Assistant Professor. Since then, he has taught courses in value theory at the undergraduate and graduate levels, including a team-taught ASPECT course. Michael's current research focuses on some of the key figures of moral and political philosophy, such as Hobbes, Hume, Kant, and Rawls. He is also interested in contemporary issues in moral and political philosophy, such as the integration of rational and evolutionary moral approaches, moral pluralism, and the topic of global justice.

Apart from his interest in philosophy, Michael holds degrees in business studies and furniture making. He worked for a year in management and political consulting to study the business world, for a year in a Nature Friends House to promote environmental sustainability, and for several years (part-time) in a One World Shop to promote fair trade. After much philosophical reflection, he is still a Kantian at heart. He enjoys exercising his freedom by imposing rules on himself. ☎

Harlan Miller and Ethics Week

As part of Virginia Tech's Ethics Week, Harlan Miller, Professor Emeritus, gave a talk entitled 'Sympathy and Self-Interest,' which was very well received. You can read his paper at parismount.blogspot.com.

Faculty and Staff Grants and Awards

Benjamin Jantzen received a CLAHS Grant-Writing Incentive Grant to advance a project aimed at identifying the individuals implicit in our scientific theories. This project's applications to biological theory will allow Dr. Jantzen to seek external funding for a much larger collaborative project.

He also received a Mentoring Micro-Grant from the University, which will be used to help stage a conference on the interplay between ontology and methodology in the development of scientific theory.

James Klagge won the following grants: Virginia Tech "Scholar of the Week," September 12-18, 2011.

Guest Professor, Bergen Wittgenstein Archive, University of Bergen, Norway, March, 2012.

Niles Research Grant, CLAHS, VT, Spring, 2012: "Wittgenstein's Influences and Lectures."

Franklin Travel Grant, American Philosophical Society, March, 2012: Travel to Archives in Bergen and Helsinki.

Excellence in Research and Creative Scholarship Award, CLAHS, VT, April, 2012.

Tristram McPherson won a grant from the Assistant Professor Mentoring Project. He plans to use these funds to invite two leading philosophers working in areas connected his research to visit our department in 2013-14.

Leisa Osborne was nominated for the President's Award for Excellence, in order to recognize her many contributions to the department and in particular her role in undergraduate advising.

Walter Ott won a CIDER grant to work on his open-source textbook for modern philosophy, which you can navigate to from his webpage. He'll be presenting a paper on the project at the July 2012 meeting of the American Association of Philosophy Teachers in Austin, Texas.

Faculty News

Assistant Professor Benjamin Jantzen works in both the philosophy of physics and philosophy of biology. His research is driven by the deceptively simple question: what exists? Answering this question means grappling with the interpretation of specific scientific theories as well as the overall problem of how interpretations should be constructed and what we can possibly learn about unobservable entities and processes in the world.

This past year, he gave a talk at the Boulder Conference on the History and Philosophy of Physics on a new interpretation of non-relativistic quantum mechanics. In this reading of the physics, quantum mechanics is about regions of space and their properties, not particles. He is currently engaged with a project that attempts to provide a universal method for identifying the individual entities whose existence is implied by a given scientific theory. The method exploits the notion of a 'symmetry transformation' to isolate dynamically independent units which are, arguably, the natural individuals described by a given set of dynamical laws or regularities. He is exploring some of the themes of this work with his students in a graduate seminar this spring.

More recently, he has begun using the symmetry approach to address problems in the philosophy of biology, including the question of what levels of biological organization—genes, individuals, groups, species, etc.—participate in processes of natural selection and the question of what sort of species concept(s) biologists should adopt given recent discoveries about the ubiquity of 'horizontal transfer' (sharing genes within a generation and across species). He is looking to develop this latter project into a collaborative effort with theoretical biologists. With respect to an altogether different research interest, Jantzen is anticipating the publication of his paper, "Peirce on Miracles: The Failure of Bayesian Analysis" that will appear later this year in a book entitled *Probability in the Philosophy of Religion*.

James Klagge (Professor and Chair) just returned from a month's research trip to Scandinavia. He spent three weeks in Bergen, Norway, at the Wittgenstein Electronic Archive at Bergen. He gave a series of 3 talks, and consulted with researchers about adding searchable indices of Wittgenstein's lectures to their current database of his manuscripts. And he spent a week at a new von Wright-Wittgenstein Archive in



"A delighted new dad to Finn McPherson Shuster, born December 21st" - Tristram McPherson

Helsinki, Finland. He gave 2 talks there, donated correspondence between himself and von Wright, assisted in understanding and organizing what is in the archive, and discovered material relevant to his own research. So far Klagge's book *Wittgenstein in Exile* has gotten 6 reviews in paper and

on-line publications. In addition to his work in philosophy, Klagge has kept up his running, completing the High Point Marathon in 4:32, and organizing a group from the department to run in the annual 3.2 mile 'Run in Remembrance' at VT in April.

Assistant Professor Simon May has accepted a position in the philosophy department at Florida State University.

Professor Deborah Mayo's paper, "Statistical Scientist Meets a Philosopher of Science: A Conversation with Sir David Cox" appeared in *Rationality, Markets and Morals: Studies at the Intersection of Philosophy and Economics* in 2011.

Assistant Professor Tristram McPherson has had a busy year since joining the department in August. He's gotten into the swing of teaching at Tech, offering Morality and Justice and Ethical Theory in the Fall, and Biomedical Ethics and a graduate seminar in metaethics in the Spring. Meanwhile, he has presented or will be presenting papers on ethics and its methodology and philosophical foundations at the Virginia Philosophical Association, the Central Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Bowling Green State University, and the Simon Fraser philosophy Alumni Mini-Conference. Most importantly, however, Tristram is a delighted new dad to Finn McPherson Shuster, born December 21st!!

Phil Olson (Visiting Assistant Professor) will be joining the department of Science and Technology in Society. His work focuses on virtue theory (in ethics and epistemology). He is currently writing a paper on applied virtue ethics and a paper on epistemic value.

Associate Professor Walter Ott's paper, 'What is Locke's Theory of Representation?', is forthcoming in the *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*. In late

2012, his 2008 paper, 'Causation, Intentionality, and the Case for Occasionalism' will be reprinted in a Routledge volume entitled *Debates in Modern Philosophy*, along with a reply by Sukjae Lee. Other work is forthcoming in the *Cambridge Descartes Lexicon* and the *Routledge Guide to Seventeenth Century Philosophy*. And in a rare foray outside his areas of specialization, his paper, 'Are there Duties to the Dead?', appeared in a popular magazine, *Philosophy Now* (April 2012). Current papers focus on the nature of sensory representation in Malebranche and Leibniz. In 2012-13, he will be Visiting Associate Professor at the University of Virginia.

Assistant Professor Lydia Patton is a researcher in the history and philosophy and science. Several of her papers were published in the past year, including "Experiment and Theory Building" in the journal *Synthese*, and "Reconsidering Experiments" in the journal *History of Philosophy of Science*. In February 2012, she presented new research in talks at Washington and Lee University and as part of the Science and Technology Studies colloquium at Virginia Tech.

Professor Patton teaches varied undergraduate courses, including a large lecture version of Knowledge and Reality and the second-year History of Modern Philosophy course. She has been working on re-vamping her teaching methods in Knowledge and Reality, to improve the experience for students who take the large lecture course. She also teaches graduate seminars on Immanuel Kant's philosophy, and on the history of philosophy of science from 1650-1950 on.

Professor Joe Pitt was invited to give two keynote addresses this past fall and two workshops and a paper in the spring. One spring workshop was on curriculum change in engineering at Notre Dame and also a workshop on creating an STS program there. The paper was a repeat of the paper he gave for Ethics week at Virginia Tech in March and then again at the

meetings of the Society for Philosophy and Technology in Texas in May.

The second workshop was also on engineering curriculum reform for the College of Engineering at the University of Illinois Urbana/Champaign. Joe's interest in engineering curriculum reform is longstanding and beginning to get a hearing by receptive ears. Most recently, he was invited in March to give a workshop on the topic at Concordia University in Montreal.

Thanks in part to Jim Klagge, Joe was invited to give a keynote to the international conference "Hume and Contemporary Philosophy" in Moscow in November entitled "Morality is a subject that interests us above all others," which is a quotation from Hume. Despite Joe's well-known views on ethics, it was well received (so it couldn't have been on ethics!), as was a second paper he was invited to present to a more general audience, "Science, Technology and Change: Instruments."

Joe also published a book last April: *Doing Philosophy of Technology: essays in a pragmatist spirit*. He continues to work on his long running project *Seeing Near and Far: a Heraclitian Philosophy of Science*, and continues to enjoy doing the thing he loves best, teaching.

P.S. – we had a litter of Irish Wolfhound puppies last summer – puppies! 🐕

The Philosophy Department is grateful for the generous donations you have made through the Virginia Tech Foundation. Your support contributes in a very direct way to both the intellectual and social life of the department. We'd like to acknowledge our most recent donors:

Richard Burian (Emeritus Professor)

Dale Jones (1981)

George Adams (1978)

Dominion Foundation

Thomas Adams (1975)

Jean Miller (STS PhD)

Regina DePalma (1975)

Justin Chiarodo (2000)

Dieter Seltzer Memorial Fund:

Harry Befumo

Dal E. Crabb

Leslie Hoffman and Family

James A. Slipetz

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Joseph and Donna Pitt (Faculty)

Leisa and Donald Osborne (Staff)

To make a donation, please contact our Chair, Professor Jim Klagge (jklagge@vt.edu). If you are interested in making bequests or other special gifts, please contact Jocelyn Sanders (jocelyn1@vt.edu, or 540-231-2893). 🐕

Philosophy at Tech on Facebook

Want to meet up with other philosophers, VT philosophy alumni, and people with an interest in philosophy at VT?

The VT Philosophy Department Facebook group is up and running:

<http://www.facebook.com/groups.php#/group.php?gid=78145381226>

Click on the link, send us a request to join the group, and you can see pictures of our annual department trip to Floyd, watch the Monty Python philosophy football game (Germans vs. Greeks), and meet with your philosophy peeps.

If you have questions, email Lydia Patton at critique@vt.edu

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Address correction requested



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