Letter from the Chair

Dear Friends,

The Philosophy Department continues to be an active place at Virginia Tech! The most exciting news is that in the last year we have increased the number of Philosophy majors and double majors by about 50%—so it is now well over 130! In fact, our College is giving an Advising Award to Prof. Joe Pitt in recognition of his tireless work promoting the Philosophy major among our students. But of course it is also a credit to all our faculty and instructors who do such a great job of teaching. We’ve also had a parade of scholars—and scholarship—as well. A new Distinguished Speakers Series, anonymously endowed, has brought three experts to campus this year. Philosopher of Physics Jeffrey Bub, from University of Maryland, visited in November. Philosopher of Language and Mind William Lycan, from UNC, Chapel Hill, was here for three days in February. And at the end of April we will welcome Kant scholar Patricia Kitcher, from Columbia University, for a class visit and a public lecture. These visits have been in addition to our regular colloquium series and conferences. And the experts are not only from other places. This year the department faculty have published two books already, and two on the way. Walter Ott’s book, *Causation and Laws of Nature in Early Modern Philosophy*, was published by Oxford in November, and Deborah Mayo’s book, *Error and Inference*, was published by Cambridge in October. Prof. Ott’s book won him a College Research Award. In the fall Prof. Pitt and I will have books coming out.

The department will unfortunately see some losses next year, as Professors FitzPatrick and Daskal take positions elsewhere to be closer to their families. Meanwhile the College dean has assured us that we will be her top priority for two new faculty searches in the fall. We’ll keep you posted.

For the last few years we have had a tradition of going to the Floyd Country Store at the beginning of the school year to hear bluegrass music. We are now adding another tradition of “Running with the Philosophers.” In the fall a half-dozen of us ran together for the Homecoming 5K Run. And on April 16th, at least a dozen of us are signed up to run in the 3.2 mile “Run in Remembrance.” Another fun event this year was Family Day, in October. We presented a performance of some rewritten Platonic dialogues! Three students from my Greek Philosophy class rewrote portions of the “Euthyphro” and the “Protagoras,” giving Socrates’ interlocutors better lines. Then I directed an audience-participation re-enactment of the Parable of the Cave, using overhead projectors instead of fire. There were over 40 students and their families, and a good time was had by all. We have recently re-recorded the dialogue part, and hope to post that on the department’s Facebook page soon.

Last year we informed you of the passing of our department matriarch, Marjorie Grene. The memorial service was a very moving event. Over 50 people from around the country attended—about a dozen colleagues, students and friends spoke. A recording of the event is posted on the department’s web page. Then, in April of this year, retired professor Dick Burian represented the department at an American Philosophical Association meeting session in San Francisco in Marjorie’s honor. Her legacy also lives on in the collection of important books she donated to our department library, and a new award for a graduating MA student each year.

Now and then we hear from alumni by e-mail. We always want to know how you are doing. Please send us your e-mail addresses so we can more easily keep up with you (ottw@vt.edu). (And keep us up-dated on your physical address.)

Thanks for your interest and support, —Jim Klagge.
Spring 2009 ceremony

On May 16, 2009, James Klagge, Chair, presided over the 2009 Commencement Ceremony in Major Williams. William FitzPatrick presided over the hooding ceremony, while Joe Pitt presented the undergraduate diplomas. Steve Daskal presented the William H. Williams Prize to Harold Metz and Jason Vick, while Joe Pitt presented the Marjorie Grene Memorial Prize to Heather Oldham.

This year’s commencement speaker was Darryl J. Traynham, who earned a B.A. in Philosophy and Spanish 1992 from Tech, as well as an M.A. in Education. Currently a Spanish teacher at Freedom High School in Loudon County, Virginia, Mr. Traynham gave a particularly entertaining talk entitled, “The Evolution of the Pinky.” It was the first commencement speech in recent memory to feature a cappella singing.

Bachelor of Arts:
- Ballard, Amy Leigh (Fall 2008)
- Brooks, Andreas Phillip
- Bundrum, Scott Thomas (Fall 2008)
- Cantrell, David Julian
- Choi, Jae-Chan
- Chung, Annie
- Foster, Amanda Monay
- Gladney, Mary Elizabeth
- Karg, Harrison Edward
- Lauren, Charlotte B.
- Lewis, Cameron Costello
- Metz, III, Harold Arthur
- Popoff, Emalee Gloria
- Raimo, MaryAnn (Summer 2009)
- Razzaghi, Metra Leigh
- Rieman, Carl Martin (Summer 2009)
- Scott, Drew Donald (Summer 2009)
- Templeton, Johanna Christine (Fall 2008)
- Trainor, Patrick Eamonn
- Vick, Jason William

Master of Arts:
- Bockert, Shaun James
- Butera, Michael Vincenzo
- Epley, Patrick George
- Holbrook, Scott Dale
- Jackson, Vincent Patrick
- Johnston, Matthew William
- McCall, Matthew Christopher
- McIlroy, David Michael
- Nester, Jaime Philip
- Oldham, Heather Renee
- Phillips, Nathaniel David
- Sayball, Mathew John

In Memoriam:

Andrew J. Woodward

It is with great sorrow that we note the death of Andrew J. Woodward. Andy graduated magna cum laude from Tech in 2006, with a major in Philosophy and minors in Math and Music. In 2009, Andy earned a Master’s degree in English Education from Kutztown University in Pennsylvania and was doing his student teaching at Wyomissing High School. We will miss Andy and all his contributions.
Cherilyn Blumenthal (B.A., 2006) reports, “Life has been interesting since graduation. I entered the workforce to kill time while I scouted graduate programs, and it turns out that I love where I work. Allowing myself to be under-employed, but in a high-profile position, has opened many doors for me. I am now facing my third promotion in three years, have built a solid reputation with executive leadership, and have established valuable industry credentials.

While I was at VT, I earned both a BS in Psychology and a BA in Philosophy. I can tell you, without a doubt, the Philosophy degree has created more opportunities for me. In interviews, it is the only degree people ask me about, and they are always fascinated and impressed by the fact that it is on my resume. There is no underestimating how valuable the skill set is to an employer. Interesting note, my first promotion followed closely on the heels of a discussion of ethics with my Executive Director!

Needless to say, I am grateful for having had the opportunity to return to college as a non-traditional student to complete my studies, and I am very grateful for the opportunities that have come into my life as a result of my education. I am happy that I am in the position to make a donation to the program that has done so much for me.”

Jordan Busse has been accepted to the doctoral programs at Ohio State and the University of Rochester; he is also wait-listed at Notre Dame, University of Wisconsin-Madison and the University of Virginia.

Tanya Hall has been accepted to doctoral programs at Purdue, University of California San Diego, University of Iowa, University of Maryland, University of Washington, University of Western Ontario, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Eric Hodges has accepted an offer from Tech’s doctoral program in Public and International Affairs.

James Lewis was accepted by doctoral programs in biology at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and the University of Maryland. He has accepted an offer from the University of California Irvine's Ph.D. program in Evolutionary Biology and Ecology.

Matt McCall (M.A., 2009) has been accepted at Ohio State University and Fordham University, and wait-listed at Syracuse.

Matt Sayball (M.A., 2009) is currently teaching PHIL 1304 for the department. Matt reports, “this summer I’ll be teaching both summer sessions at Cape Fear Community College in Wilmington, NC. I have two upcoming extracurriculars worth mentioning. The first is the Rocky Mountain Philosophy Conference April 9-10. I’ll be presenting my writing sample “Penumbral Connection” there. The second is a talk at my alma mater UNCW. The talk is intended to promote a discussion.

The title is “What’s So Interesting about Vagueness?” Matt has been accepted to the doctoral program at the University of California-Santa Barbara and wait-listed at Boston University and the University of Minnesota.

“Interesting note, my first promotion followed closely on the heels of a discussion of ethics with my Executive Director!” — Cherilyn Blumenthal

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. In particular, it enables us to continue our tradition of hosting regular conferences and colloquia, which is vital both to our functioning as a recognized center of active philosophical research and to the broad education of our students. We’d like to acknowledge our most recent donors:

Alumni donors:
Cherilyn Blumenthal (’06), Herndon, VA
Dale Jones (’81), Smithfield, VA
David (’74) and Aida Davis, Arlington, VA
Dominique C. Bunai (’08), Silver Spring, MD
Matt Hettche (MA, ’95)

Faculty and Friends donors:
Deborah Mayo
Joe Pitt
Dorthea Frede (UC, Berkeley)
David Rosenthal (CUNY)

Last year, we noted that the preponderance of alumni donors graduated in the 70s. We are glad to see more recent alumni stepping up to support the program!

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).
Graduate student conference

This year’s graduate student conference was held on November 6-7, 2009; its theme was “Contemporary Philosophy of Science.” James F. Woodward of CalTech gave the keynote address, entitled “Causation in Biology: Stability, Specificity, and the Choice of Levels of Explanation.” This, the sixth annual graduate student conference at Tech, attracted graduate student presenters from as far away as the London School of Economics and the University of Western Ontario, with commentary from our own Master’s students.

Professor James F. Woodward of CalTech

Students and faculty engaged in lively debate

A pensive moment

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:
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
Department conference and diversity initiative

On Saturday, March 20, the department hosted a conference on “Ethics in Democracy.” The conference brought together speakers Carol Gould, of City University of New York, Judith Lichtenberg of Georgetown University, John Gulley of Winston-Salem State University, and our own Tim Luke, from Tech’s Political Science department. The talks were a lively mix, discussing the use of statistics about race in legal judgments, the use of online tools in democratic reasoning, and the ethics and rhetoric of global poverty and environmentalism.

The Philosophy Department sponsors conferences each year, on topics chosen to reflect current interests of the faculty and graduate students. These conferences bring in well-known scholars and enrich our philosophical dialogue on campus, and increase the diversity of voices contributing to our department life. This year’s conference attracted graduate and undergraduate students as well as faculty, even though it was on a sunny Saturday!
Faculty News

Faculty Awards

Simon May — faculty fellowship at the Murphy Institute’s Center for Ethics and Public Affairs, Tulane University

Walter Ott — 2010 College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences Research Award

Joe Pitt — 2010 College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Advising

Mark Bauer (Visiting Assistant Professor) is interested in the accommodation of psychological and semantic typing in scientific practice. His present work concerns the projectibility of psychological and semantic typing within the cognitively-oriented biological sciences, as well as the explanatory relationship between autonomous explanatory domains.

Steve Daskal (Assistant Professor) specializes in moral and political philosophy, combining an interest in metaethics with work that addresses concrete political issues such as welfare policy. He has recently published “Plan Based Expressionism and Innocent Mistakes” in Ethics and “Libertarianism Left and Right, the Lockeian Proviso, and the Reformed Welfare State” in Social Theory and Practice. His paper “Absolute Value as Belief” is forthcoming in Philosophical Studies. He is currently working on two papers, one that addresses Rawlsian views of welfare policy and one that explores the nature and significance of moral principles. Together with Phil Olson and a colleague in criminology at the University of Maryland, he is a finalist for a $140,000 grant to study the effectiveness of virtue education in crime prevention. During the Spring of 2010 he is teaching a large introductory undergraduate course in ethics and a graduate seminar on the nature of moral and practical reasoning.

William FitzPatrick (Associate Professor) has taken a new position at the University of Rochester. Bill writes, “It is with very mixed feelings that I leave the Philosophy Department at Virginia Tech, which has been a truly wonderful professional home to me for more than a decade now. While my family and I are very excited about the many new opportunities in Rochester (like snow shoeing to school), and I’m looking forward to joining the faculty at the University of Rochester, I am very much aware of the extraordinary colleagues and students I’m leaving behind here, not to mention this awesome corner office. This is a very special department, as you all know, and it’s been a privilege for me to have been a part of it. I’m particularly fortunate to have gotten to know so many of you so well through serving as Director of Graduate Studies, and it has been a pleasure watching the M.A. program grow and flourish over the years. Since I never made it to a single football game in all my years here, it may be a stretch to say I’ll always be a Hokie. But I will certainly always see the department here as my first real philosophical home (not just a place where I worked for a while), which is something you carry with you. And I will never forget all the stimulating friendships with students and colleagues that made this such a great place to be. I hope that you will all continue to be in touch with me after the move to UR, and keep me up to date on what is happening in your lives.”

James Klagge (Professor and Chair) writes, “Last summer I was an invited speaker at the annual Wittgenstein conference in Austria. This was a great chance to renew old acquaintances, and to meet young scholars. It also gave my wife and me our first chance to visit Budapest. I have continued my tradition of running a marathon each fall. On November 1st I ran the NYC Marathon, finishing in 4:36.

I am completing my 3rd year as department chair, but have been reelected to another 3-year term. The book I have been working on for the last few years, Wittgenstein in Exile, was accepted for publication by MIT Press. I just got them the final manuscript in April, and it should be out sometime in the fall. My next project is a collection of material that influenced Wittgenstein when he was writing his two great books. This should help students get a better sense of what he was responding to.”

Mark Lucht (Visiting Assistant Professor) reports, “This year I am splitting my time between the philosophy department and the Center for Peace Studies and Violence Prevention. My background is in the history of modern philosophy and phenomenology, and my scholarly interests focus especially on moral philosophy, the philosophy of art, and environmental philosophy. This summer a book I’ve edited on non-human animals and other creatures in Kafka’s writing will appear, and I am looking forward to traveling to Beijing in July to deliver a paper on the contribution Husserlian phenomenology can make to intercultural dialogue.

At the CPSVP, I have spent most of my time working on two big projects. I am conference coordinator for an international and interdisciplinary summit on violence prevention, which will be held here at Tech in November. The second project is the development of a series of university concentrations all relating to Peace Studies. In fact, the CPSVP is delighted that philosophy will be contributing to the curriculum! As part of the development of this undergraduate degree option, I have been designing an interdisciplinary capstone seminar as well, and the current plan is for me to co-teach that course next year with Dr. Jerzy Nowak, the CPSVP’s director.”

Assistant Professor Simon May’s paper, “Religious Democracy and the Liberal
Principle of Legitimacy,” appeared in the Spring 2009 issue of Philosophy and Public Affairs. Dr. May will spend the 2010-2011 academic year at Tulane University.

Professor Deborah Mayo’s anthology, Error and Inference: Recent Exchanges on Experimental Reasoning, Reliability, and the Objectivity and Rationality of Science, co-edited with Aris Spanos, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2009. Along with Professor Spanos, Mayo is organizing and participating in a conference to be held in June at the London School of Economics entitled “Statistical Science & Philosophy of Science: Where Do/Should They Meet in 2010 (and Beyond)?”

Phil Olson (Visiting Assistant Professor) continues to work on virtue theory (in ethics and epistemology). He is currently writing a paper on applied virtue ethics and a paper on epistemic value. In the Fall of 2010 he will be co-teaching an ASPECT seminar on “Feminist Epistemology” with Dr. Larua Gillman (Sociology). Phil is looking forward to biking his one-year-old daughter, Maryn, to and from day-care when the mornings get warmer.

Associate Professor Walter Ott’s second book, Causation and Laws of Nature in Early Modern Philosophy, was published in November by Oxford University Press. His next project might have something to do with philosophy of mind in the modern period, particularly issues of mental causation. His paper, “Locke’s Exclusion Argument,” appears in the April 2010 issue of History of Philosophy Quarterly.

Visiting Assistant Professor Ted Parent works in epistemology and the philosophy of language, especially in relation to ontology. His current work focuses on ontological commitment, two-dimensional semantics, and the apparent conflict between semantic externalism and a priori knowledge of content.

Daniel Parker (Assistant Professor) specializes in the philosophy of physics. His current research projects involve foundational issues in statistical mechanics such as the reduction of thermodynamics to statistical mechanics and attempts to ground the distinction between past and future in the second law of thermodynamics.

Assistant Professor Lydia Patton’s research centers on the history and philosophy of science, especially on scientific experiment and theory building. She is interested especially in the tradition of philosophy that began with Immanuel Kant. Kant engaged with many of the most fascinating problems of the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, including problems of mind, being, and perception, but also constructed his own system of philosophy, which is still the focus of intense interest and research among philosophers. A paper of hers, “The Paradox of Infinite Given Magnitude: Why Kantian Epistemology Needs Metaphysical Space,” is forthcoming from the journal Kant-Studien, and she gave a talk, “Why Kant Needs the Principles,” at the Eastern meeting of the American Philosophical Association in December 2009.

Patton also has working interests in the related axiomatic tradition in the philosophy of science, which stretches from the neo-Kantian re-reading of and revisions to Kant, through the philosophers and scientists Hermann von Helmholtz and Heinrich Hertz, to the more contemporary figures David Hilbert, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and even Albert Einstein. One key fact about this tradition is that it is one of the movements in philosophy that has had the closest contact with working scientists. A paper about these issues, “Signs, Toy Models, and the A Priori,” was published in Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science in 2009, and she published a substantially revised entry in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Hermann von Helmholtz,” on January 12, 2010. In Fall 2009, Dr. Patton was a Visiting Fellow at the University of Pittsburgh’s Center for Philosophy of Science, working on a project about the axiomatic tradition in science and its interactions with philosophy.

Professor Joe Pitt reports, “It was a busy summer - back to back conferences in Dublin Ireland and Twente University in the Netherlands where I gave talks. The conference at Twente was the 16th Biannual International Conference of the Society for Philosophy and Technology. Following a graduate seminar in the fall of 2008, four of the graduate students in that class (Mike Butera, Bob Darrow, Erik Taylor, organized by our own intrepid Ashley Shew) submitted a panel to SPT 16 on “The Social and Ethical Consequences of Technological Innovation,” which was accepted. They asked me to moderate and it was a smashing success. This fall I was asked by Springer Publishers to put together some of my papers on the philosophy of technology for a new book series, Philosophy of Technology and the Engineering Sciences, a project now underway. I was also asked to be on the editorial boards of two new journals: Technology and Ethics and Philosophy and Technology. I gave a talk at a panel coming out of an STS course Jim Collier (VT class of 84, Philosophy, and now Associate Professor of English here) and I offered one on the Philosophy of STS in DC at the annual 4S conference. Once again, graduate students were involved and that kept it interesting. My current joint project with faculty from the Business School and Engineering on Graduate Education and Ethics is thriving. We held a very well received workshop last June and we have been asked to do it again at IIT in Chicago in March. Teaching is great!”

Marjorie Grene Memorial

On May 3, 2009, a Memorial Gathering was held in honor of Marjorie Grene, Honorary University Distinguished Professor, who passed away on March 16 of that year. Speakers included Professor Richard Burian, Ruth Grene (daughter), Nicholas Grene (son), and two of her grandchildren, Sophia and Hannah Grene, as well as numerous friends and colleagues.