Letter from the Chair

Dear Friends,

The Philosophy Department continues to be an active place at Virginia Tech! The most exciting news is that we have hired two new tenure-track faculty members who will begin in the fall. Benjamin Jantzen has just finished his PhD at Carnegie Mellon University, with a focus on Philosophy of Science. Tristram McPherson comes to us from Minnesota, where he taught for 3 years after earning his PhD from Princeton. Tristram works in ethics. We are very happy to be growing the faculty once more. These two searches took a lot of time and energy, but were very rewarding. We were impressed by the number and quality of applicants, which makes our hires all the more special. We hope to do at least one more search next year.

Last year I reported to you that our number of majors and double majors had increased to over 130. I now report that the number is over 160! There may be a limit to how much we can increase our numbers, but apparently we hadn’t reached it yet. As you might guess, this is partly due to the quality of our teaching—by faculty, instructors, and graduate teaching assistants. But just as important is that we have embraced the need to talk-up the Philosophy Major. The fact is that it does not even occur to many students to consider a Philosophy Major. Unfortunately philosophy is rarely taught, or even mentioned, in high school or earlier. So students seldom come to VT intending to major in it. Alumni can do their part here, by making sure young people are exposed to critical reflection on moral and other issues. I wonder what books aimed at younger people might inspire an interest in philosophy? When they were early teenagers, I read my children Sophie’s World, by Jostein Gaarder. Does anyone have other suggestions?

This year the department installed its first class of Phi Sigma Tau recipients. Phi Sigma Tau is an international honor society for philosophers, founded in 1930. We are now one of over 200 chapters in the US and Canada. We installed five majors, and certainly that is just the beginning. Thanks are due to Paul Poenicke (MA, 2010) and Prof. Joe Pitt for their work in gaining this chapter.

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’ at the April 16th memorial. Last year we had ten of us participate in the 3.2 mile memorial run. This year 19 are signed up. Since nearly all students enrolled in April 2007 have moved on, this is one way we continue to remember that dreadful day with something positive.

During the break between fall and spring semesters this year we had a tragedy in the department. Lauren Fleming was a Visiting Assistant Professor for the year who specialized in ethics. After finishing her grading in December she headed home to Michigan, but her car hit a patch of black ice on the interstate. While she survived the crash, and was transferred to the University of Michigan Hospital near home, she ultimately succumbed to her injuries and passed away in January. In March the department held a memorial gathering in her honor at the War Memorial Chapel, organized by the graduate students. Eight students, graduates and undergraduates, spoke of their experiences with her and in her classes—She will obviously be missed. A memorial fund has been established in her honor at Georgetown University, where she had done her graduate work.

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.
Commencement

Spring 2010 ceremony

On May 15, James Klagge, Chair, presided over the 2010 Commencement Ceremony in Major Williams Hall. William FitzPatrick presided over the hooding ceremony, while Joe Pitt presented the undergraduate diplomas.

Steve Daskal presented the William H. Williams Prize to Jesse Paul, while Joe Pitt presented the Marjorie Grene Memorial Prize to Tanya Hall.

Lawrence C. Becker (Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the College of William and Mary and Fellow of Hollins University) gave an especially lively and entertaining speech. Professor Becker chose to address ‘a very real problem’ all our graduates were about to acquire: ‘For the rest of your lives, when you get the question ‘What was your major?’ or ‘What was your degree in?’ you are going to have some modestly annoying conversations.’ Professor Becker then equipped us with a definition: ‘Philosophy is the attempt to get a thoroughgoing, reasoned understanding of essentially contestable, conceptual issues, and to live in accordance with that understanding.’

Bachelor of Arts:
Bailey, Kendall Lyons
Black, Caise Shea
Bourne, Katlin Marie
Carr, Kristin Morris
Chaisson, Nathan Green
Crilley, Caroline Noel
Dorsey, Christopher Kagey
Eaglestone, Kenley Alexandra
Greene, Abigail Nicole
Grumbles, Drew Neville (Fall 2009)
Jenks, Joshua Shane
Kelley, Jonathan Craig
Mackereth, Erin Michelle
Milligan, Matthew John (Summer 2009)
North, Lindsey Christine
Paul, Jesse Michael
Pons, George Brown (Fall 2009)
Putman, Jared Robert
Rogers, Christopher Warren (Fall 2009)
Talwar, Sahil

Master of Arts:
Busse, William Jordan
Creighton, Andrew Joseph
Hall, Tanya Lee
Hewitt, Bradford Dallin
Hodges, Eric Brandon
Lewis, James Joseph
Mazza, Michael Peter
Milona, Michael Christopher
Poenicke, Paul Arthur
Schuler, Matthew Michael
Smith, James Adam

Master’s graduate and Grene Prize recipient Tanya Hall with Professors Klagge and Pitt
Alumni and Placement Notes

Elc Estrera (M.A., 2011) will pursue a master’s at the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago. This summer he will intern with the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights in Washington, D.C.

Will Fleisher (M.A., 2011) has been accepted into doctoral programs in philosophy at Wisconsin, Washington-St. Louis, and San Diego, among others. He plans to enroll in Rutgers’s program in the fall.

Kevin Klipfel (M.A., 2008) has been accepted into Master’s programs in Library and Information Science at Pittsburgh, North Carolina, and Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.


Donations

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:

Cherilyn Blumental (’06)
Deborah Mayo
Joseph Pitt
Justin Chiarodo (’00)
George B. Adams III (’78)
Elizabeth and Eric Hulett (’89 & ’90)
Regina M. DePalma (’75)

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).

Run for Remembrance

As part of Virginia Tech’s Day of Remembrance, the second annual 3.2-Mile Run in Remembrance was held on Friday, April 16, 2010. Professor and Chair James Klagge organized the Department’s contingent under the banner ‘Run with the Philosophers’ and generated quite a turnout.
Graduate student conference

The seventh annual Virginia Tech graduate philosophy conference ‘Topics in Moral Philosophy’ was held on 5-6 November on the Virginia Tech campus in Blacksburg. The keynote speaker was Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill).

Professor Sayre-McCord’s talk was entitled ‘Rational Agency and the Nature of Normative Concepts.’ Graduate students from around the country gave talks on such subjects as harm, promising, practical reason, and drugs in sports and entertainment, with comments provided by our own graduate students. Congratulations to all members of the Graduate Philosophy club, especially Claudio D’Amato, Jonathan Dixon, and Will Fleisher, for organizing and hosting such a successful event.

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
Benjamin C. Jantzen began his academic career in the sciences, earning a pair of bachelor’s degrees in biology and physics from Penn State University. While there, he worked on insect flight and metabolic scaling. He subsequently entered the physics graduate program at Cornell University to work in single-molecule biophysics, specifically in a laboratory equipped with ‘optical tweezers’ that allowed him to mechanically manipulate proteins one at a time. Ultimately, however, he returned to working with insects and earned his MS for a thesis on butterfly flight. Jantzen left Cornell to take a job as a research scientist for the Naval Undersea Warfare Center in Newport, Rhode Island where he worked on problems in a diversity of disciplines from hydrodynamics to multi-criteria decision analysis.

Partly as a consequence of his work at the intersection of biology and physics, Jantzen realized that he was interested in philosophical questions raised by the sciences. In 2006 he completed an MA in philosophy at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU), writing a thesis on the concept of coding in biology. In October of 2010, he received his PhD, also from CMU, for a dissertation entitled ‘How Symmetry Undid the Particle: A Demonstration of the Incompatibility of Particle Interpretations and Permutation Invariance.’

Since receiving his doctoral degree, Jantzen has been teaching in the Department of Philosophy at CMU, and serving as the Coordinator of Graduate Student Programs for CMU’s Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence.

Jantzen’s research interests focus on the plausibility of scientific realism and the question of what (if anything) can truthfully be said about unobservable entities and processes. Aside from philosophy of science, Jantzen has interests in inductive inference and the philosophy of religion, and is currently completing a textbook on design arguments for the existence of God. Outside philosophy, Jantzen enjoys long-distance hiking, fossil hunting, and sea-kayaking. On occasion, he still does experiments with butterflies.

Tristram McPherson hails from Vancouver, Canada. He caught the philosophy bug as a result of recreational reading while working on a land surveying crew. Intrigued by philosophical debates about realism, he dropped back into school. After completing a B.A. in Philosophy at Simon Fraser, he moved to Princeton for his Ph.D, where he spent five years living a variant of the good life: falling in love, making friends, developing views, having them refuted by his friends, and trying again. Tristram has spent the past three years teaching at the University of Minnesota Duluth, making new friends, developing new views, having them refuted…

Tristram has rarely encountered a philosophical question he is not interested in. His current research focuses on the metaphysics and epistemology of ethics, where he is trying to clarify and develop the most promising versions of ethical realism, and investigate their implications for how we can have justified ethical beliefs. Some of this work is published or forthcoming in Philosophers’ Imprint, Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy, Philosophical Studies, and Oxford Studies in Metaethics.

When not doing philosophy, Tristram enjoys loud music and quiet conversation, and can be often be found cooking vegan food, hiking, cycling, or watching movies. He also likes playing board games, baking bread, practicing the martial art Aikido, singing karaoke, and doing just about anything with his partner Amy.
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. Mark is leaving us for greener (or whiter!) pastures in Colorado. We are sad to see him go.

James Klagge (Professor and Chair) "The biggest event for me this year has been the release of my book, *Wittgenstein in Exile*, by MIT Press. It discusses how Wittgenstein's life and philosophy were interrelated, and tries to explain why he is so hard to understand. It aims for a wider audience than just professional philosophers. Now I am at work on a collection of background material that influenced Wittgenstein when he was writing his (in)famous *Tractatus*. But not all my work is so serious. In September I participated in a Philosophy Club panel on Tattoos—talking about the 'Philosophy of Tattoos and Body-Piercing.' Many of those in attendance had personal experiences to offer! Later in September I participated in the 3rd meeting of the Regional Working Conference on Wittgenstein. This year we met in Floyd, VA, where a dozen Wittgenstein scholars discussed Ludwig and listened to bluegrass music. Finally, I ran in the Richmond Marathon again in November. My time of 4:34 beat my time of 4:36 the previous year in NYC—so I am successfully battling the aging process...so far.'

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 is spending the 2010-2011 academic year at Tulane University, where he is a faculty fellow at the Murphy Institute’s Center for Ethics and Public Affairs.

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 organized and participated in a conference held in June 2010 at the London School of Economics entitled 'Statistical Science & Philosophy of Science: Where Do/Should They Meet in 2010 (and Beyond)?'

Visiting Assistant Professor Michael Moehler works in moral and political philosophy. He is especially interested in topics at the intersection of philosophy, politics, and economics, and foundational issues in global justice and public policy. Since coming to Virginia Tech in the fall of 2010, Dr. Moehler's article 'The (Stabilized) Nash Bargaining Solution as a Principle of Distributive Justice' has been published in *Utilitas*, and his article 'A Hobbesian Derivation of the Principle of Universalization' has been accepted for publication in *Philosophical Studies*. During this academic year, Dr. Moehler has presented papers to the Department of Philosophy at Seoul National University (South Korea), the Institute of Philosophy at the University of Bayreuth (Germany), and the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Sabanci University in Istanbul (Turkey). In May 2011, Dr. Moehler will give a talk at a conference on Contractarian Moral Theory at York University in Toronto (Canada), and in June 2011 he will present a paper at the ISUS Conference on the Ethics of Economic Development in Pisa (Italy).

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 co-taught an ASPECT seminar on Feminist Epistemology with Dr. Larua Gillman (Sociology).

Associate Professor Walter Ott seems to be traveling to Canada a lot. In the fall, he presented 'Berkeley and the Invisible Externalisms' at the Trinity-University of Western Ontario Conference on Berkeley's Philosophy of Mind, and in May he'll present 'The Nominalist's Problem with Relations' at the 47th Annual Montreal Workshop on Nominalism. On another trip north, he presented 'Are there good arguments for occasionalism?' and 'Are there duties to the dead?' (yes and no, respectively) at the Rochester Institute of Technology. His paper, 'What is Locke's Theory of Representation?' was accepted in February at the *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*. He also has work forthcoming in the *Cambridge Descartes Lexicon* and *The Routledge Companion to Seventeenth Century Philosophy*. This summer, he'll participate in Mitch Green's (UVa) NEH Summer Institute, High-Phi, which is designed to help introduce philosophy into the high school curriculum.

Visiting Assistant Professor Ted Parent writes, 'Mainly, I’m continuing to work on some new objections to Modal Realism, arguing that it yields certain modal absurdities. (In fact, my latest findings indicate that realism would falsify axioms S4 and S5.) Also, at December’s APA, I commented on Jason Decker’s paper concerning the possibility of rational disagreement. Contra Decker, I argued that the ‘principle of indifference’ is not falsified by the fact that different partitions of knowledge result in different probability assignments. (The principle of indifference says that, where [p1...pn] is a partition of your knowledge, if your evidence supports each of p1...pn equally well, you should assign each the probability 1/n.) I’m also in the process of outlining three new papers: one discusses the meaning of ‘exist’ in relation to abstracta; a second provides new linguistic evidence in favor of Hirsch’s ‘superficialist’ view in meta-ontology; the third argues that esse est percipi at least for the percipi, and that this is important regarding knowledge of our own minds. This spring, I’ve enjoyed

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*I PARTICIPATED in... BODY PIERCING.*

James Klagge
Assistant Professor Lydia Patton’s research centers on the history and philosophy of science, especially on scientific experiment and theory building. Two papers of hers on this subject have been accepted for publication in 2010-2011: ‘Experiment and Theory Building,’ published online in the journal Synthese in 2010 and forthcoming in print, and ‘Reconsidering Experiments,’ forthcoming in HOPOS: The Journal of the International Society for the History of Philosophy of Science. Patton also has working interests in the 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. A paper on early neo-Kantian philosophy of logic and the analytic-synthetic distinction, ‘Anti-Psychologism about Necessity,’ is forthcoming in History and Philosophy of Logic.

Also, Patton gave a talk on David Hilbert’s axiomatic method, ‘Hilbert’s Method of Analogy,’ at the Eighth Congress of HOPOS, the International Society for the History and Philosophy of Science, in Budapest, Hungary, in June 2010, and at the Integrated History and Philosophy of Science conference at Indiana University at Bloomington in September 2010. Finally, Dr. Patton has a continuing working interest in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. She is working on several papers on Kant’s philosophy, including a paper on Kant’s philosophy of aesthetics, which she presented at the 2010 meeting of the Virginia Philosophical Association.

Professor Joe Pitt’s book, Doing Philosophy of Technology: Essays in a Pragmatist Spirit, will be published by Springer in 2011. The book presents an updated and integrated overview of the most important thinking from this prominent philosopher of technology. Throughout his career Joseph C. Pitt has defended the view that to say anything meaningful about the value of a technology one must know something about that technology and how it functions in the world. This starting point leads naturally to a pragmatist philosophical stance, since it is the real world consequences of introducing a technology that must be the basis for any further normative judgments. In the book we find an extended set of arguments that challenge the idea that there are eternal philosophical issues that transcend the impacts that technologies make on human beings and their world. Rather, it is claimed that as our technologies transform our world they transform us and the kinds of questions we find important to answer. 

Professor Don Howard on ‘Einstein as a Philosopher of Science’

On December 3, 2010, Professor Don Howard of Notre Dame’s Department of Philosophy and Program in History and Philosophy of Science, spoke at Tech. Howard argues that Einstein’s engagement with philosophy had a ‘profound effect on the way he did science.’ This talk was part of Tech’s Colloquium Series, organized by Professors Pitt and Patton.