

THE STETSON GADFLY

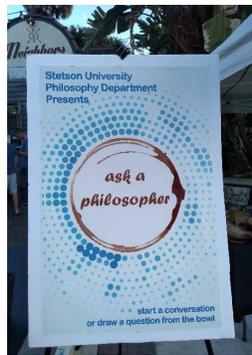
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY NEWSLETTER



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“Ask a philosopher”

This year, the department piloted an initiative in public philosophy. Inspired by a blog post on the American Philosophical Association’s website (<https://bit.ly/2WKcO3l>), two members of the Stetson philosophy department rented a spot at the DeLand farmer’s market and invited members of the community to discuss philosophical problems with us. The way we did this was as follows: we printed a sign that said, “Ask a philosopher”. We set out two bowls—one with assorted candies and another with slips of that upon which philosophical questions and thought-experiments were written. We invited members of the community to initiate conversation with us, either directly or by way of the prompts.



Sample prompts include:

- Can we learn things from art and literature that we can’t learn from science?
- If you play the lottery, do you know that you’re going to lose?
- Suppose that you could go in a machine that would give you every experience you wanted, but you had to stay in it for the rest of your life. Would you?
- Suppose three kids have to decide who gets a flute. Anne says the flute should be given to her because she is the only one who knows how to play it. Bob says the flute should be handed to him as he is so poor he has no toys to play with. Carla says the flute is hers because she made it herself. How do we decide between these three legitimate claims?

Of the two hours spent at the farmer’s market, we estimate that over 75% of the time was spent in conversation with members of the community. We engaged about 10 people with conversations lasting from 5 to 30 minutes. While a significant minority of interlocutors tended to move the conversation in the direction of conspiracy thinking, other interlocutors were thoughtful, lively, and philosophically sophisticated. We ended up having an extended conversation, for example, on the question of whether it would be ethically permissible or even optimal to enter into an immoral line of employment (e.g. an industry that creates chemical weapons) in order to disrupt that industry’s operations. We then connected the topic to a recent NYT op-ed entitled “I am Part of the Resistance Inside the Trump Administration.”

While we are not yet committed to regularly doing this, overall, we were encouraged by the pilot and plan on hosting more such opportunities for public philosophy in the fall.

“I am that gadfly which God has attached to the state, and all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you.” - Socrates

SENIOR HONORS BANQUET



Dr. Ron Hall, Kelsey Maglio and Dr. Joshua Rust

Congratulations to Kelsey Maglio, who was invited to the Stetson Arts and Sciences Annual Senior Honors Banquet for her outstanding work as a philosophy major!

Her senior research project, entitled “Democracy, Mutual Regard, and Conspiracy Theories,” explored the possible political and social value of conspiracy theorizing. She argued that if our democratic institutions are to be truly differentiated from tyrannical regimes, there needs to be space for the free exchange of ideas. And this means we must approach each other, not as one approaches a political hack, but with reason. How then, should the norms of democratic interaction have us approach the conspiracy theorist? She argued that these norms require that we don’t dismiss the holder of such theories—at least initially—as unworthy of philosophical, conversational engagement. But her thesis is stronger than this. She argued that because the label “conspiracy theory” might move us not to consider ideas that are inconvenient to existing power holders, the notion itself might be an instrument of tyrannical suppression. Following Locke, under certain condition, conspiracy theorizing might be an instrument of truth and just rebellion.

HATS OFF TO 2019 GRADS



Matthew Brogan
Tyler Kiby
Kelsey Maglio
Joshua Hasker
Hailey Williams

Celebrating Amanda's Success



The Department of Philosophy is so very proud of our former student and colleague Amanda McMullen. She has just successfully defended her dissertation to complete her Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of Miami. The title of her dissertation is "Offensive Uses of Language: Slurring and Synecdochical Utterances". We were fortunate to have Amanda as a philosophy major here at Stetson, and most recently, as an Adjunct while she was completing here graduate studies. She has accepted a position for the fall as Visiting Assistant Professor at The University of Arkansas. Amanda, we celebrate your success!

2019 Hall Award



Returning to Stetson after some time away, Matthew Brogan wowed the Philosophy Department with his insights and intelligence. Faculty noted his unflinching attention to matters of economic inequality, and felt that he held us to account in treating these concerns in the classroom. His work analyzing so-called positive psychology does the difficult work of pairing discourse analysis with economic critique. He took that senior project to two graduate conferences, and is headed to an MA program at Warwick in the UK this fall. Further, he spent the last year volunteering with Stetson’s higher ed in prison program. But, my favorite story about Matt is that, as a student, he was once cited in my course evaluations by a peer as *the most successful part of my class*. I had to agree! This year, Matt Brogan is the recipient of the Ronald L. Hall and Margaret Smith Hall Award for our most outstanding graduating senior in philosophy. Thanks, Matt, for being a great leader both within and outside the classroom – you make the work of teaching so meaningful! (written by Melinda Hall)

Philosophy Club News



Dr. Tom Cook of Rollins College presented a lecture to the philosophy club entitled: "Alien Possession, Time Bombs and Post-Mortem Harm: How to Think about Advance Directives and Dementia"

A person of sound mind signs an advance directive indicating that if, in the future, she should be afflicted with severe dementia, she does not wish her life to be sustained. As fortune would have it, she does indeed come to suffer from this condition (as a consequence of Alzheimer's Disease), but at that time she has no memory of having signed the directive, and (so far as can be ascertained behaviorally) evinces no wish to die.

This circumstance occurs with some frequency, and is destined to become more common as the population ages, the dementia rate increases and more people become familiar with the typical course of the disease. "Death with dignity" policies are of no help in these cases. The practical and legal consequences are wide-ranging. The deep and disturbing philosophical issues gathered here -- identity, autonomy, death, post-mortem harms, etc. -- have led to some remarkable proposals for approaching the problem.

Tom Cook's first job was a one-year sabbatical replacement position in the one-person Stetson University Philosophy Department in 1978-79. He now teaches at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida, and directs the Master of Liberal Studies Program.



Jenny Brown an animal rights activist presented a talk to the philosophy club on the top
"Animal Agriculture and the Disregard for life."

The consumption of animals plays a significant role in our culture and habits, but rarely in our thoughts. Sadly today 99% of animal products come from factory farms, where animals live short, miserable lives—almost 10 billion annually in the US, and 56 billion worldwide. Factory farms employ abusive practices that maximize profits at the expense of animal welfare, our communities and our environment.

Over the 12 years I ran the sanctuary, I gave educational tours to thousands of visitors of every age group, and continue to speak at festivals and conferences for animal welfare and healthy lifestyles. I combine the story of my path to activism and founding a sanctuary for farmed animals with the largely hidden facts of animal agriculture, while also sharing my experiences with just some of the hundreds of individual animals whom I've known and cared for over the years.

My presentation challenges students to take a closer look at our food system and the uncomfortable truths behind it. It inspires critical thinking about consumption habits that impact issues about which students care deeply: social justice, the environment, capitalism, and the ethics of our everyday choices.

My story and the work of the sanctuary have been featured in the *New York Times*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Rolling Stone*, *New York Magazine*, NPR's *The Diane Rehm Show*, CNN and more. For more on my bio and lectures please visit my website speakerjennybrown.com

FOOD FOR THOUGHT (From Ron Hall's Desk)



In his early work, (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, with a new translation by D. F. Pears & B.F. McGuinness and with an *Introduction* by Bertrand Russell, (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961) Wittgenstein made an interesting distinction between nonsense and senselessness. For him, in this early period, a sentence expresses a sensible proposition only if it is about the way things are in the world; hence, only if it has as such truth-conditions. That is, the only propositions that are not empty of sense are propositions that reflect (or picture) states of affairs that are possibly true or possibly false. That is, only contingent propositions are genuine propositions. (In his later work, he realized that the sense of many sentences is not a function of truth-conditions but is determined rather by success conditions.) Being concerned as he was about logic, this posed a problem for him because the propositions of logic are not contingent but necessary. So naturally, the question arises as to whether the propositions of logic have sense. Are they genuine propositions? He answered this question by drawing a distinction between senselessness (*sinnlos*), and nonsense (*unsinnig*). In this early period, he thinks that such necessary propositions, such as tautologies or contradictions are senseless but not nonsense. If a proposition can only be false or can only be true, then, the "or" between "true or false" that determines the sense of a genuine contingent proposition drops out. Necessary propositions, logical truths (tautologies and contradictions) hence are senseless, that is, empty of sense. This is because necessary propositions meet one half of the true/false criterion for sense; they are necessarily true, or they are necessarily false. (4.462). However, he says that even though the propositions of logic are senseless, they are not nonsense. For example, it is not nonsense to say "2 + 2 equals 4", but it is nonsense to say, "2 + 2 at 3 o'clock equals 4". The second proposition is nonsense while the first is not; yet neither is contingent and hence both are senseless (without sense); neither is a remark about some fact of the matter in the world. Contingent propositions are not empty of sense because they are about some fact of the matter that is either true or false. The proposition "2 + 2 equals 4" is a tautology and so cannot be false. The reason the second is nonsense is because it attempts to turn a senseless proposition (a proposition of addition) into a sensible (true or false) contingent one, that is, a proposition about the existence of some fact of the matter. Tautologies, however, are not true at a certain time, nor are they about anything, nor are they falsifiable, nor can they be false. And necessary truths of logic are not the only senseless propositions.

Wittgenstein's later work considers grammatical propositions that are also not about some matter of fact in the world, but about how words are used; that is, grammar, like logic, is about meaning and not about existence. See his remark "There must be water in the picture of the boiling pot." (PI §297). This masquerades as a sensible contingent claim about what exists in the pictured pot, when it is actually not true or false but empty of sense, that is, senseless. The attempt to turn grammatical propositions into contingent ones is just as problematic as trying to turn logical propositions into contingent ones; this always yields nonsense. Propositions of logic are similar to propositions of grammar insofar as neither is nonsense, but both are empty of sense (senseless). If we try to turn a grammatical proposition that is empty of sense into a sensible contingent proposition, we get nonsense. This is Moore's mistake. He thought, "this is a hand" was a claim about existence rather than a grammatical remark. "This is a hand" is not nonsense, but it is senseless and his attempt to turn this into a proposition of sense, a proposition about the existence of the external world, produced nonsense.

If you would like to comment on this matter, please do. Write me at ronhall@stetson.edu. We can start a conversation about this.



FACULTY NEWS



Dr. Ronald Hall is keeping busy as Editor-in-Chief of the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*. His essay, "On Being Known: God and the Private I" will be published shortly in *Sophia*. He has also submitted a proposal to read a paper at the next meeting of the Southern Society for Philosophy and Psychology entitled "Existential Certainty: Somewhere between Logic and Psychology".



Dr. Susan Peppers-Bates went to two great events to enrich her teaching in pedagogy and content. First she was selected by Stetson to participate in the Faculty Resource Network program in San Juan Puerto Rico at Sagrado University to spend a week studying "Women's Activism of the Americas" led by Dr. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, the Anna Julia Cooper Professor of Women's Studies (and former President of) Spellman University and fellow scholars from around the United States. Second, she was selected to participate in a "multicultural syllabus make-over" at the American Philosophical Association meeting in Vancouver Canada, where she received great tips to invigorate her Metaphysics course.



Dr. Joshua Rust After 12 years at Stetson University, Josh Rust was promoted to Full Professor this year! He published an article on Max Weber's conception of traditional authority and got another article accepted in the *Journal of Social Ontology* on the topic of institutional identity. He was especially excited about teaching two new courses this year, one on *Moby-Dick* and another exploring philosophical accounts of the notions of life and normativity. Thanks to all the students who participated in both of those classes.



Dr. Melinda Hall This year, Dr. Hall enjoyed leave to spend time with her newborn daughter, Mara. She continues research for her next book, tentatively titled *Risking Ourselves*, in which she argues that risk communication in public health contexts creates risk for marginalized people. For her, risk is political and social, and risk discourse assigns responsibility for risk, which is especially hard for the vulnerable. Her chapter, "Second Thoughts on Enhancement and Disability," was published in the *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Disability*, and her entry for Critical Disability Theory in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* is forthcoming.

