

THE STETSON GADFLY

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY NEWSLETTER

Susan Peppers-Bates (speppers@stetson.edu), Melinda Hall (mchall@stetson.edu)
Joshua Rust (jrust@stetson.edu), David DiQuattro (ddiquatt@stetson.edu)

Greetings from Philosophy Chair

Dr. Susan Peppers-Bates

Greetings from your new chair for 2023-2024: yes, after 23 years, they finally convinced me to take a turn as chair. Our department is hopping (despite the painful loss via retirement of our longtime member Dr. Ron Hall).

We have an Instagram! <https://www.instagram.com/stetsonphilosophy/> We also held our first annual Rollins-Stetson Undergraduate Philosophy forum at Rollins College April 15th, 2023, with papers by students from both schools & the keynote by yours truly. It was a wonderful day, watching our majors shine and engage with the Rollins philosophy department majors. We look forward to hosting the event at Stetson this year and encourage current students reading this to submit to present their work. Our student engagement continues with bi-weekly Idle Talk sessions, where we relax and talk philosophy, as well as monthly philosophy clubs, led by students. Finally, speaking of stars, our own Dr. Melinda Hall will leave behind her turn as Chair of Faculty Senate to serve as interim Assistant Dean of Arts & Sciences, and Dr. Joshua Rust will be serving as Chair of the Faculty Senate. Having philosophers in positions of leadership gives me great hope for an amazing year.

And last, but not least, we have a departmental mascot, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Frankie for short, whose happy presence is often available in Dr. Hall's office for stress release and hug therapy.



"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



Philosophy Club News

This year's Philosophy Club explored a variety of themes across multiple traditions. Thanks to everyone who attended to contributed to the vibrant intellectual community which is Stetson University's Philosophy Department!

Fall 2022

9/22/22 – Dr. Christopher Bell (Associate Professor of Religious Studies, Stetson University) "Everything Zen"

10/27/22 - Margaret McLaren, (Professor of Philosophy, Rollins College) "Women's Activism, Feminism and Social Justice"

11/17/22 – Kelsey Maglio and Luke Ford (Stetson graduates) Sharing Experiences as Philosophy grad school students.

Spring 2023

2/10/23 – David DiQuattro, (Visiting Assistant Professor, Stetson University) "Wayfaring Strangers: Augustine and Ethics"

Hall Award 2023

Kristina Mickens is the 2023 Hall Award winner.

Kristina is a master's candidate in Bioethics at New York University. Her current research evaluates societal systems and institutions that influence intersectional persons' autonomy, agency, and ability to live a better life, and exploring related ethical problems. I intend to earn my PhD in Philosophy after my master's to move forward with my career in academia.

Alumni News

- **Kadhapiya Lindo**, graduated Fall 2021 but took a gap year to work on campaigns; reporting here to note that she is enrolled in law school, University of Richmond School of Law, Fall 2023
- **Zurielle Payen**, graduated Spring 2022 but took a gap year; reporting here to note that she is enrolled in law school, Florida A&M University College of Law, Fall 2023
- **Pedro del Valle**, is in his last year of law school at FAMU College of Law



List of Senior Project Titles & Destinations for new grads



The Stetson Philosophy Department takes immense pride in celebrating the remarkable achievements of the graduating class of 2022-2023. We especially applaud these graduates for successfully defending their senior research projects over the course of an hour-long presentation and discussion. A list of our graduates and the title and abstract of their Senior Research is as follows. Go Hatters!

Fall 2022

Kristina Mickens, Senior Thesis Title: "Bound and Unbound: The Social Toll of Institutionalized Delusion"; enrolled in MA in Bioethics, New York University's School of Global Public Health, Fall 2023

Jake Simmons, Senior Thesis Title, "Diminishing the Naturalistic Fallacy: Grounding John Searle in Michael Thompson's Aristotelian Categorical"; enrolled in PhD in Biochemistry, UNC Chapel Hill, Fall 2023

Julia Moore, Senior Thesis Title, "Exploring Beatrice in Dante's *Divine Comedy*: Through the Lens of Kierkegaard and Love," currently Unit Manager at Waffle House

Spring 2023

David Harnage, Senior Thesis Title: "Why Suffering?: A Response to the Problem of Evil"; (completed senior project in PHIL in Spring 2022; graduated Spring 2023); currently applying for law school.

Ariana Motta, Senior Thesis Title, "Beyond Retribution: Why the Death Penalty Fails as a Deterrent and Amplifies Racial Justice," currently applying for law school

Annah Krol, Senior Thesis Title: "Sartre's Transcendence and Identity"; enrolled in law school, Penn State Law, Fall 2023



Kristina Mickens



Jake Simmons and Dr. Rust



Julia Moore



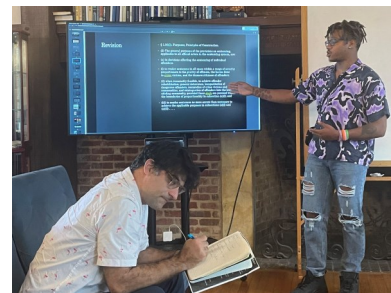
A New Tradition: the inaugural Rollins-Stetson Undergraduate Philosophy Forum

The first-ever Rollins-Stetson Undergraduate Philosophy Forum was a success, highlighting the incredible dedication, thoughtfulness, and courage of our students despite their initial nervousness. The conference took place at Rollins College on April 15th, 2023.

Leah McCarter presented a novel theory of Bimbification. Emily Flugrath discussed group epistemology. Tywan Lewis defended Ronald Dworkin's philosophy of law against positivist criticisms. Chase Sabari articulated a rehabilitative alternative to retributivist theories of punishment. Grace Norgaard argued about the importance of the attitude of natural piety to an environmentalist ethos. Annah Krol discussed Sartre's existentialism. Finally, Susan Peppers-Bates' Keynote Presentation was a paper entitled "Epistemic Justice in Western Religion and Philosophy of Religion."

We eagerly look forward to next year's conference and are excited to see how this promising tradition will continue to grow.

A special shoutout of appreciation goes to Leah McCarter, whose hard work in organizing the conference was a key ingredient in its success!



Is ChatGPT an agent? Or: how a social ontologist started thinking about AI

Dr. Joshua Rust



We are agents. My cat is an agent. Perhaps a bacterium is an agent. But rocks aren't agents. Nor are tools—hammers have purposes and are useful, but they aren't agents. So, what about something like ChatGPT and other Large Language Models (LLMs)? Is ChatGPT more like an agent or is it more like a tool (a non-agent)? While I'm a social ontologist, this is a topic that I've found myself writing about over the past several months. Before I turn to the question of whether ChatGPT is an agent, let me say something about how this social ontologist began writing about technology.

Those of you who have taken my classes know that I'm fascinated with the question of whether some institutions are better cast, less as social tools, and more as agents over and above the agents that comprise them. Some institutions are clearly social tools; like the monetary system, they exist only because they help us do things that are difficult or impossible to do without them (bartering sucks!). But other institutions might begin to qualify as agents if they acquire agendas and purposes that can't be explained in terms of the agendas and purposes of their members. For example, the legal philosopher, Ronald Dworkin thinks that maybe the judicial system might qualify as having agency (or as he puts it, "personification"): "My account of political integrity takes ... personification ... seriously, as if a political community really were some special kind of entity distinct from the actual people who are its citizens" (Law's Empire, pg. 168). Why does he think this? Because he thinks that agents are systems that, unlike solar systems and chemical elements, are responsive to and changed by their own history of decision-making—they are responsive, in the way that the judicial system is responsive—to precedent's force. Maybe now it is clearer how this social ontologist found himself interested in talking about the agential status of ChatGPT. Since I'm already asking the question as to whether one kind of artificial system—namely, institutions—have agency, it's a short step to ask the same question of another kind of artificial system—namely an AI. So, do LLMs have agency? Maybe. The process by which they are trained suggests that they are responsive to and changed by their own history of "decisions". Perhaps, then, what is unusual in the universe is not minimal agency, but agency that is *intelligible to us*—agency that has been honed over millions of years of evolutionarily significant encounters with a shared environment. LLMs are fascinating because they occupy the uncanny valley of intelligibility. It's tempting to conclude that this uncanniness is because they aren't really agents. But another explanation is possible: perhaps they are genuine agents who have evolved in a different world than we have, but a world that bears a mediated relation to our own. The training set against which a LLM's self-imposed norms are selected constitutes a kind of twin-*Umwelt* of propositions *about* our own *Umwelt*. Thus, perhaps what is uncanny about LLMs is explained less in their failure to qualify as genuine agents, but in the environment such agents occupy. They are agents in a world of words about our world of things instead of agents in a world of things about which we have constructed a world of words. So maybe just maybe LLMs have genuine agency. But if they do, it is only in the way that bacteria or some institutions might have agency.



Poor Wayfaring Strangers: Augustinian Ethics

Dr. David DiQuattro

Ancient ethical thinking, asks two basic and related questions: What is the best life for human beings? And what is the best good for human beings that results from or completes the best life for human beings? This second question is the *telos* question: What is the end or goal of human life? Ancient Greek philosophy used the term *eudaimonia* (meaning very roughly: happiness or flourishing) to refer to the *telos* of human life. So I use the term 'eudaimonism' to refer to views that answer the question "how should we live" by providing a characterization and account of the best life for human beings and the *telos* of human life.

In my view, Augustine of Hippo (354-430) developed a version of eudaimonism that is distinctive and creatively develops elements of eudaimonist ethical thinking derived from Socrates and Plato. Augustine was born in Thagaste in North Africa, about 150 miles west of Carthage. He was trained in classical rhetoric and moved to Italy, where he converted to Christianity in Milan in 387. He returned to North Africa shortly thereafter; he was ordained as a priest in Hippo (a port town about 200 miles west of Carthage) in 391, and was made bishop of Hippo in 396. He served as bishop of Hippo until his death in 430. During his time as bishop he wrote his most well-known works (in particular, *Confessions*, *On the Trinity*, and *City of God*).

Pierre Hadot suggests that ancient philosophical traditions unpacked the idea that the best life for human beings is a life characterized by love of wisdom, and *eudaimonia* is a transformative, fulfilling vision and enjoyment of genuine goodness which culminates a life of loving wisdom. The best life (love of wisdom) is then characterized as the cultivation of the capacity to disclose and enjoy genuine goodness (and to be able to distinguish it from its counterfeits). This cultivation of our sensitivity to goodness is the cultivation of wisdom, and is also the cultivation of our other capacities - our capacities that constitute and enable human creativity, understanding, enjoyment, achievement, excellence. This entails cultivation of our capacities to love and enjoy genuine goodness, and to eschew counterfeits. So, it requires the education and cultivation of our desires. Hadot calls this life "philosophy as a way of life." We can call such a life an examined life, or even a "contemplative life" (not because it is spent in an armchair, but because of its emphasis on the cultivation of our sensitivity to and appreciation of goodness). The *telos* of such a life is loving vision and appreciation of genuine goodness (another reason to call this kind of eudaimonism "contemplative.")

Ancient ethical traditions develop certain "icons" for the person of wisdom who achieved the good life; these icons are all indebted to their conception of Socrates as the exemplar of the good life. The Stoics, for example have the icon of the "sage" who is only unbothered by whatever is outside their control, and who cares only about virtue.

Augustine affirms the broad contemplative eudaimonist outlook, as stated above. Augustine's distinctive contribution lies in his insistence that the best life for human beings cannot be brought to completion in temporal life. And my view is that this has profound implications for: how we think of the best life of human beings; the motivations and practical reasoning involved in such a life; and the contrary motivational energies we must confront and resist in such a life (and the remedies to our inevitable acquiescence to such contrary motivations). Indeed, Augustine provides us with a different kind of icon of the life of wisdom - that of a wayfarer or sojourner.

Augustine conceives of the best life for human beings as fitting us to enjoy a goodness from which we must remain alienated in temporal life. So we have to think about the relationship between our life, reasons, goals and the *telos* for human life in this indirect way. The best life for human beings is a life that prepares us to enjoy that which it cannot achieve or make fully present to us. So Augustine characterizes the good life for human beings as the life of a wayfarer or sojourner.



Poor Wayfaring Strangers: Augustinian Ethics (continued)**David DiQuattro**

Augustine's image of a sojourner evokes a displaced person or people, displaced in such a way that a way of life previously available is no longer available to them in the same way. But Augustine points us to how sojourners can nonetheless organize their life with reference to and for the sake of that lost way of life. As an example, we can think of a rural community continuing agricultural and related practices when the economic and social conditions that made these practices more fully intelligible are no longer present. In Augustine's conception of this way of organizing life, sojourners live in such a way that is suited for thriving in a way of life that is not fully available to them. And in so doing they bear witness to both the goodness of that way of life and to their alienation from it. One key feature of such a life is that it must bear witness to the goodness it loves and longs for *even when doing so appears fruitless and ineffective*.

So the idea of sojourning suggests a distinctive mode of practical reason. This mode of practical reason entails a way of conceiving our actions in relation to the human *telos* in the distinctive way suggested by this image of a sojourning – a life lived with reference to a way of life and goodness from which one is alienated. My view is that in light of the loss, alienation, evil, conflict, and suffering that is part of human life, the best versions of contemplative eudaimonism should go in this Augustinian direction.

**Greetings from Ron Hall Professor Emeritus**

You may or may not know that I was a philosophy major at Stetson in the late 60's. While at Stetson, I met and married a fellow student Margaret Smith (Maggi, pictured with me above). Before we both graduated in 1967, we lived in a basement apartment in Carson Hall. The apartment was part of the compensation I enjoyed while serving in the position of Head Resident of what was then called the Upper-Class Men's Dorms. After graduating from Stetson, we moved to North Carolina where I got graduate degrees from Duke and Chapel Hill. Later I taught at a state University in South Carolina.

In 2000 I was invited to return to Stetson to join the Philosophy Department. I served as Chair of the Department for 13 years and continued as a faculty member until my retirement in August of 2022. My daughter Erin (also a Stetson Graduate) sold her Veterinarian Hospital in Deland and decided to move to Hawaii. Maggi and I followed. We now live in Waimanalo Beach Hawaii, just a few steps from the ocean. This state is like Florida but with mountains. We like it here, and especially the good food as pictured above.

Even though I have retired from teaching I have not retired from philosophy. I continue to serve as the Editor-in-Chief of the International Journal for Philosophy of Religion. Even though I live in the most isolated place in the world, I am able (via zoom) to stay in dialogue with colleagues in philosophy. The journal enables me to travel to the mainland to two national philosophy conventions per year. More importantly, I have had time here to read things I have long put off. Now I have the time to sit on the beach and reflect on those philosophical issues that have interested me throughout my career. The issue that has preoccupied me most is the issue of the nature of language. This interest branches out into questions of differences between words and signs, or if you will, differences between speech and non-human communication. I continue to wonder at the fact that only people speak. I continue to test my conviction that being a person is inextricably connected to being a speaker if not in fact, at least in promise.



Faculty News



Dr. Melinda Hall

In the past academic year, I was primarily focused on the work of the University Faculty Senate, for which I served as Chair. Crucially, we wrote and voted as a faculty body on a reform to our allocation of teaching time. The proposal should improve things for both faculty and students by allowing us to focus on what matters most – student learning! We hope that related changes for the Philosophy department will be positive and increase student interaction with us and with philosophical engagement. In terms of philosophical research, I had a moderately busy year; I continue to work on my edited volume with Sarah Gorman, which presents a history of philosophy through a disability lens. I published a chapter in Shelley Tremain's *Bloomsbury Guide to Philosophy of Disability: Radical Resistances and Intersectional Imaginings*, entitled "Risking Ourselves, Together: The Politics and Persons of Risk." This is a key part of my larger project on risk and how we should and can understand it. Finally, I presented a small group of essays in progress related to this larger project in various venues: The Association for Feminist Ethics and Social Theory, philoSOPHIA, and with the research groups Human Reproduction Reloaded (University of Zurich) and NeuropigenEthics (University of Antwerp).



Susan Peppers-Bates

Last spring, I presented on "Racism & Sexism in the Philosophy of Religion" at the 2023 Annual Meeting of the Society for the Philosophy of Religion. While there I caught up with our retired philosopher, Ron Hall & honorary department member Maggi Hall in New Orleans for a lovely lunch, complete with Po'Boy sandwiches. I also published "The Greatest Conspiracy Ever: Racism and Sexism as the foundation for Unjust Religious Interpretation and Exclusion" in *QAnon, Chaos & the Cross: Christianity & Conspiracy Theories*, editors Dr. Michael Wand Dr. Gregory L. Bock, Eerdmans Press, 2023.

Fall 2022 I was on sabbatical working on a piece on epistemic injustice in western philosophy and philosophy of religion, which I will be submitting to a journal.

Fall 2023 I am co-authoring with Mary Bernard, MS, Stetson philosophy alum and one of my first thesis students, a piece for "Philosophy and the Last of Us" entitled "Ellie is the Feminist Queer Crip Icon We Have Been Waiting For." Writing with my former student feels like completing a circle and I am thrilled that she agreed to work with me.



Joshua Rust

I taught a class on Buddhist Philosophy for the first time this year! Special thanks to all the students who participated. I hope you learned as much as I did! Not only did we survey key Buddhist traditions, but we read Evan Thompson's evocative *Waking Dreaming Being*. Do you think that very deep, non-dreaming sleep is a state of consciousness (as opposed to being simply unconscious)? That's what Thompson, following the Madhyamika tradition, thinks! This class also gave rise to a scholarly article, co-authored by Chris Bell and myself, entitled "Is the Third Noble Truth Redundant?" to be published in *Philosophy East-West*.



David DiQuattro

I am happy to be starting my second year as Visiting Assistant Professor at Stetson. I have been working on a project to develop an "Augustinian" conception of ethics, inspired by Augustine of Hippo (354-430). I had a great time presenting some material from this project to the Stetson Philosophy Club last October.

