

# SJSU SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

**Newsletter:**  
**Department of Philosophy**  
**San José State University**  
**December 2025**

Editor: Janet D. Stemwedel



**Our Philosophy Department Web Site**

**Address:** <http://www.sjsu.edu/philosophy/>

For the archives of the old newsletters look at Quick Links on the first page and click on “News and Events.”

**Letter from the Chair**

It’s been a while since we’ve compiled our department newsletter. In part, this is because our colleague Prof. Tom Leddy, who ably edited the newsletter for many years, retired in December 2023. But also, a lot has been going on, whether on campus, in the California State University system, or in the wider world. There is a lot I could say about the federal governments assault on higher education (and on other things that serve our communities), but that’s news you’ve probably already heard.

A reliable feature of the last few years has been budgetary uncertainty, to the extent that the only thing that *has* been certain is

that resources are getting tighter. As I originally drafted this, we were expecting to face another 4% cut in our budget beyond the cuts we experienced over the last three academic years. We ended up with an operating budget for the fiscal year that is just a hair over \$15k (which doesn’t need to cover salaries – that comes from the College’s budget). The dividend that the department once earned from our Summer and Winter classes, and from teaching Open University students in our Regular Session classes, now stays with the College of Humanities & the Arts to help maintain critical staffing, rather than providing funds we could use to support faculty conference travel. And, as the College tries to make up a deficit that is somewhere between \$600k and \$1m, there is a moratorium this year on using our operating budget to pay for faculty or student travel. Of course, conference travel is pretty essential in the life of a professional philosopher, which means we’ve been tapping our Tower Foundation funds at a much faster clip. We are unlikely to be able to cover these costs, or others for things that really matter to us, without some help! (More about how **you** can help later in this newsletter.)

Budget woes notwithstanding, our department is a vibrant one, as you’ll see in the pages that follow, full of curious students, committed and innovative teachers, important research, and engaging shenanigans. Now more than ever, we are committed to empowering our students, and the larger community, with vital tools for critical thinking, sense-making, perspective-taking, and human-ing. And, we strive to be a real community – one that we’re glad that **you** are a part of!

-- Janet D. Stemwedel

## Conferences & Speakers

Academic year 2024-2025 saw the Philosophy Department host a number of conferences, a Visiting Speaker Series, plus a significant public philosophical lecture.

### Visiting Speaker Series

Prof. Rebecca Chan, who in Fall 2024 took the reins from previous VSS Coordinator Prof. Noah Friedman-Biglin, declared First Fridays (i.e., the first Friday of the month) as the regular day for our Visiting Speaker Series events, and presented a thought-provoking set of speakers and topics for the hybrid talks. These included:

**9/6/24: Jason Aleksander (SJSU)**, “Heroism, Hubris, and Humility: The Many Faces of Magnanimity”

**10/4/24: David H. Kim (University of San Francisco)**, “Xenophobia, Racism, and the Compound Structure of Anti-Asianism”

**11/1/24: Caro Flores (University of California, Santa Cruz)**, “Beyond Misinformation: How Platforms Shape How We Reason”

**12/6/24: Karin Brown (SJSU)**, “The Nikāyas and Aristotle on Moral Psychology: Emotions and Moral Responsibility.”

**3/7/25: Ajume Wingo (University of Colorado, Boulder)**, “Apatharianism and Its Implications for Democracies in Post-Colonial African States,” *Co-sponsored by the Center for Comparative Philosophy*

**5/2/25: Michael Rea (University of Notre Dame)** “Devotion, Worship, and Loss of Self,” *Co-sponsored by the Center for Comparative Philosophy and the Society of Christian Philosophers*

I can hear you asking, “*What happened to January, February, and April?*” January’s First Friday was in Winter Recess, April’s First Friday was during Spring Break, and much of February included research talks from candidates for out tenure-track job in Aesthetics. (Read on to learn more about the new colleague who joined us in Fall 2025!)

**9/5/25: Carlos Sanchez (SJSU)**, “An Account of Remorse in Mexican Philosophy”

**10/3/25: Justin Clardy (Santa Clara University)**, “What’s Wrong with Intimacy Confining Constraints?”

**11/7/25: Riana Betzler (SJSU)**, “The Problem of Isolating and Measuring Empathy”

*Watch our “News and Events” page for upcoming virtual talks that you can attend!*

### American Philosophical Association Lecture

On November 22, 2024, we had the honor of hosting the annual American Philosophical Association Lecture, delivered by a member of the APA Board of Officers selected by the host department. We also hosted members of the APA Board of Officers and the APA staff in a department open house before the lecture, which provided our students the chance to have some one-on-one conversations with the eminent philosophers leading our main scholarly society.

The speaker this year was Alexander Guerrero (Rutgers University), giving a talk entitled “Lottocracy: Democracy Without Elections.” Here’s a description of the talk:

*Democracy is in trouble. What is going wrong? What ought to be done? Alex Guerrero argues that the problems is the heart of democracy in its modern form: the election. Although electoral representative*

*democracy has been a significant improvement over other practiced political systems, the basic mechanism – the election – is broken and non-viable under modern large-scale political conditions. Guerrero argues that we should introduce a new form of democracy: lottocracy. Lottocratic systems incorporate many new elements, but the most striking is the shift from using elected representatives to using representatives selected through lottery. Guerrero will discuss the promise of lottocratic systems and potential concerns. He will consider how rights of broad political participation, political equality, political power, and political accountability and legitimacy are illuminated and reconfigured in a lottocratic framework.*

There was a strong turnout (especially for the Friday before Thanksgiving week) and an engaging discussion. We're honored that the APA chose SJSU to host this event.

## **West Coast Philosophy Masters Conference**

Jointly organized by MA students at SJSU and University of Nevada-Reno, this conference was created to allow Philosophy MA students to present their work, receive feedback, and network with other MA students, with the goal of promoting a supportive culture to help the strengthen their skills as students and to build ties among participants and between Philosophy MA programs.

The inaugural conference was held April 4<sup>th</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> at San José State. The program included speakers from seven different West Coast Philosophy MA programs, and had attendees from even more. We applaud the months of collaborative work that our MA students, Sol Ashlynn and Jenna Beales, and their counterparts at UNR, put into building this conference from scratch.

Since both Sol and Jenna graduated in Spring 2025, we are looking for ways to

keep this conference going, perhaps with the help of Philosophy MA students and programs at other Cal State campuses. If you know a program or students we should contact to make this happen, please let us know!

## **2025 Mountain-Pacific Meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers: Religious Perspectives on the Good Life**

On May 2nd and 3rd, the Philosophy Department, along with the Center for Comparative Philosophy and the Society of Christian Philosophers, hosted a comparative philosophy of religion conference at SJSU. This conference brought nearly 30 scholars from around the country (and in a couple of cases, the world) for a marathon of 24 talks in two days. Typically, these talks covered diverse territory: perfect being theology, theodicy, hope, friendship the Buddhist self, Mengzi's method for extending concern, Confucius on wealth and poverty, devotion and loss of self as understood by mystics and de Beauvoir, and even AI alignment and original sin. In addition, the conference included a mentorship workshop that (in part) featured advice from Prof. Carlos Sanchez to young scholars and included SJSU students as participants. Current and former members of the department also attended and greatly contributed to the success of the conference.

As Profs. Carlos Sanchez and Rebecca Chan (aka 'Team Chanchez') begin their second term as co-directors of the Center for Comparative Philosophy, we expect they will find ways to host more vibrant programming like this at SJSU!

## **22<sup>nd</sup> (approximately) Annual SJSU Philosophy Alumni Conference**

On Saturday, May 10, the department hosted the Alumni Conference. The program

included nine talks from current Philosophy students, alumni, and faculty, on topics ranging from existence, an ontology of death, and what hypochondria can reveal about contemporary western medicine, to fascist aesthetics, the importance of logic in philosophy, and the evolution of Feigl's philosophy as he came to America, to strategies for creating reflective discussions in online philosophy classes, the importance of material conditions in the practice of philosophy, and Bigfoot. As you might expect, each presentation was followed by a rousing Q&A/discussion period.

This was our second "hybrid" conference, after the pandemic forced the conference fully online in 2021, 2022, and 2023. One silver lining of those years when we could not safely convene a conference in person is that we were able to present the conference in a format that was more accessible to our alumni who live a significant distance from SJSU. Even as we bring back the experience of being in physical rooms together for this conference, we will strive to keep the virtual component so our alumni can participate anywhere they are that has the internet.

## In Memoriam

Since our last newsletter, in Spring of 2022, a number of faculty from the department have passed away.

### **Dan C. Williamson (1950-2023)**

Dan C. Williamson died in his home the weekend of May 6, 2023, sometime after the conclusion of the Department's Alumni Conference that day.

On his SJSU webpage, Dan described his educational and intellectual trajectory like this:

*I began my college career as a Journalism major at L.A. Valley Junior College. Back in the late 60s Journalism majors were told to*

*get a good Humanities education and then go on to Journalism. I chose philosophy since it had many interesting aspects, especially Existentialism. After that, philosophy became a lifelong pursuit. I transferred to UC Santa Cruz, which was then in its heyday. There were some fantastic teachers, including Norman O. Brown. The curriculum inevitably provided a deep humanities education and not one strictly limited to philosophy. The central philosopher studied there was Soren Kierkegaard, my first philosophical love whose thought still guides me. I graduated Santa Cruz with a BA in 1971. Journalism after that simply didn't appeal like it used to, and neither did Los Angeles! Instead, I pursued another love found at UC Santa Cruz, music, and that mainly for guitar, some piano and a little harp. I studied classical music and composition, jazz, and played rock and blues--of course. I still do play as time permits. I returned to philosophy here at San Jose State University in 1984, while working full time in the Silicon Valley. Many more philosophers and I crossed paths, ending with the German Philosopher Martin Heidegger and his encounter with Modern Technology. That was the theme of the M.A. at SJSU, which was received in late Summer 1989. I then went on to doctoral studies at UC Riverside. There, my interests in Philosophy were broadened and honed. The doctorate focused on the work of Michel Foucault and questions concerning the self and gay identity. This was completed in the late summer of 1996. It was at that time that I was invited back here as an adjunct in Philosophy, a position I still hold. My philosophical and academic interests are very eclectic and include Continental Philosophy, Foucault certainly, ethics, interests in American history and politics, politics as theory as well as intersecting interests with ideas from social theory. The fields from which I draw include literature as well as a continuing interest in Ancient Cultures and their religions--this area influenced by studies began at UC Santa*

*Cruz. Other interests include a life-long passion for photography.*

Dan's scholarly publications included "Resistance, Self-Fashioning and Gay Identity" (2001) and "An American Foucault" (2009), and he presented his scholarly work at venues that included divisional meetings (on both coasts) of the American Philosophical Association, meetings of the Radical Philosophy Association, and annual meetings of the GLBT Studies Conference at UNC-Asheville. As a lecturer, Dan carried a teaching load that most would find incompatible with continued scholarly work, but scholarship nourished Dan, and indeed, a number of colleagues over the years commented upon the serious scholarship on display in the courses Dan developed and delivered.

Dan was a devoted teacher. A colleague once offered this observation:

*As you may have noticed, Dan has an enviable collection of hats. What has impressed me about this collection is that, unlike most people, Dan does not merely wear a hat, he incorporates it into his character. He does likewise with his teaching: banter, questioning, demonstrating, joking, recalling – all are incorporated into the well-organized character of the class. Nothing is a mere accessory.*

Dan taught an impressive range of courses in Philosophy at SJSU, from intro, moral issues, logic & critical reasoning, philosophy of the person, and ancient philosophy, to professional & business ethics and computers, ethics & society, to undergraduate and graduate seminars on Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault. For many years he also taught a course on the American Dream for the Department of Humanities. He was a devotee of the Socratic method and of wrestling with the texts, had high expectations of his students,

and strove to get those students to take themselves as seriously as Dan took them.

Dan displayed a deep commitment to the life of the department, including during the enforced isolation at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. He is someone you could count on to show up for his colleagues, his students, and his friends.

### **Elizabeth Sonnier (1953-2024)**

Elizabeth Sonnier died peacefully in her sleep on July 6, 2024, after a long illness.

After earning her B.A. in Philosophy from the University of Louisiana in 1979, Elizabeth earned a Masters of Library and Information Science (with a minor in Sociology) from Louisiana State University in 1981 and worked for many years as a librarian with a self-described "special enthusiasm for indexing the Internet." This work included a year as a school librarian at St. Joseph's School in Jeanerette, Louisiana (1982-1983), a stint at the New York Public Library as a Young Adult Librarian (1993-1997), and a posting (starting in 1998) as a Youth Services Librarian at the San Jose Public Library.

Of course, her interest in philosophy did not lie dormant. She entered the Master's program in Philosophy here at San José State in 1987 and earned her M.A. in 1993, writing a thesis titled "Heisenberg's Non-materialist Metaphysics." During her time in the Master's program, she did significant work to support the Department as a teaching assistant, course reader, research assistant, guest lecturer, and tutor. Faculty in the Department at the time remarked on the insight, patience, and good humor she brought to the task of introducing students to philosophical methods and ideas. In her coursework, Elizabeth also distinguished herself through her breadth of knowledge in phenomenological texts (many of which she had examined critically on her own) and through the way she put them into conversation with the literature in

philosophy of science to arrive at her own quite original position.

After her M.A., Elizabeth commenced her studies in the Philosophy Ph.D. program at Fordham University, New York City's Jesuit University. While there, she developed and deepened her expertise in French phenomenology and existentialism, process philosophy, philosophy of science, logic, and political theory. Her dissertation was titled "Whitehead's Theory of Inheritance," and her Ph.D. was conferred in February of 2003.

Elizabeth worked as a Lecturer in the San José State Philosophy Department starting in Fall semester of 2005. In her time on our faculty, she taught a wide array of courses that included "Intro to Aesthetics," "Professional & Business Ethics," "Philosophy of Science," and a frosh MUSE seminar. For the last dozen years, however, the teaching zone she dominated was "Computers, Ethics & Society," an upper-division course required of all San José State University Computer Science majors. She regularly taught four very full sections of this course each semester (plus additional sections in Summer). Among other things, this means that Elizabeth had an outsized impact on the general level of ethical awareness and careful ethical decision-making of a large proportion of the computing professionals in Silicon Valley and beyond.

In the Philosophy Department, Elizabeth was an early adopter of the online learning management systems that gave her students opportunities to engage deeply with course material, and with each other, outside of class time. It should be no surprise, then, that Elizabeth was also among the first members of our Department to design and teach fully online courses. Colleagues lauded her course design for "Computers, Ethics & Society," which she taught online with no scheduled synchronous meetings, observing:

*She has designed a really top notch online course. She has included extensive readings, notes, general instructions about every part of the course, and links to wonderful cases. ... Like all good online courses, this one requires a tremendous commitment of time thought, and effort from the instructor. Elizabeth keeps the course current by including a large number of cases culled from current issues in computing ethics. She also "sits in" on all discussions, even while teaching fifty students in each section! I have no doubt that she could lighten her load by dummifying down the content so that students could do peer grading, and she could automate exams at the risk of 'multiple choicing' much of the subtle content right out of the course, but I admire her integrity in sticking to her commitment to teaching a quality online course.*

It's possible, perhaps even likely, that some of the students who enrolled in Elizabeth's online courses expected something more akin to online traffic school than a rigorous philosophical exploration that would require them to read primary sources carefully, or to mount clear and sophisticated arguments, or to work well in group assignments. But whatever they expected, Elizabeth reliably brought them around to understanding the value of the effort she asked them to put in, and she helped them develop critical thinking and ethical decision-making skills that are surely serving them out in the wider world.

### **Anand Jayprakash Vaidya (1976-2024)**

It is with great sadness that I write this remembrance of Anand Jayprakash Vaidya. Anand was our beloved friend and colleague. He devoted his life to his work and to helping others. Anand was always empathetic and selfless, and as such he was a magnet, a center around which everyone loved to gather. Anand left us with a void that no one can replace. There are no words

to express what a loss this means for all of us in our department. It was a privilege to have known him, and we are grateful for the time we did get to spend with him. Anand lives in our hearts and in our cherished memories.

Anand was born in Chicago, Illinois. At the age of five his family moved to Saudi Arabia. When he was fifteen Anand's family returned to the US, and they lived in California. Anand began his undergraduate studies at Humboldt University, and he then transferred to UC Los Angeles where he graduated with a bachelor's degree in philosophy. Anand earned his PhD degree from UC Santa Barbara. In 2005 Anand was hired as an assistant professor at SJSU. In 2010 Anand earned early tenure and promotion to associate professor. In 2016 Anand was promoted to full professor.

Anand was an excellent researcher, a brilliant scholar and a prolific writer. He produced volumes of work. In his nineteen-year career Anand published over sixty-five articles, book chapters, book reviews, and items of public philosophy. He edited and coedited nine anthologies and textbooks. Anand stood out for the quality of his work and the diversity of topics he researched. Anand was trained as an analytic philosopher, writing his doctoral dissertation on *The Epistemology of Metaphysical Modality*. Anand focused on theories of consciousness in a cross-cultural, multi-disciplinary manner. Anand was particularly interested in a comparison between Indian Philosophy and the Analytic tradition. In his work, Anand used an interventionist model that shows how applying ideas from one tradition can alter the debate in another. Anand's work extended to metaphysics, epistemology, logic and critical thinking, philosophy of education, business ethics, and artificial intelligence.

Anand was a star, and he was in high demand. He was constantly invited to give talks and run workshops. Anand was an internationally renowned scholar, and his

work took him all over the globe. Anand was a top scholar in Indian Philosophy, and in 2022 he was invited as visiting professor of Indian Philosophy at UCLA.

Apart from academics, Anand was a self-taught guitarist and musician. He loved Indian music and Jazz. Anand frequently went to concerts, and he performed in clubs several times himself. In 2013 Anand married writer Manjula Manon. Anand and Manjula build a life together with their shared hobbies. They both loved hiking, yoga, and meditation. In 2016 they undertook a yoga teacher training course, and they both became certified yoga teachers.

Anand was diagnosed with stomach cancer in January 2023, and he passed in October of last year. Anand is survived by his beloved wife Manjula, his father, his brother Tony with whom he was very close, and his niece Karina, whom he loved dearly. Anand was taken in his prime and his untimely passing is hard to accept. We will always miss him and never forget him and all that he has done for philosophy and for us.  
*(Karin Brown)*

## Humanities Advocacy Day on Capitol Hill

In March, Department Chair Janet Stemwedel accompanied Dean Shannon Miller of the SJSU College of Humanities & the Arts and Professor Kathy Harris, H&A Director of Public Programming, to Washington, DC, to participate in the Humanities Advocacy Day organized by the National Humanities Alliance. What follows is Janet's "Diary of a New Advocate."

### **Monday 3/10 @ 3:30 pm EDT**

The day before we hit Capitol Hill, at the annual meeting of the National Humanities Alliance, the mandatory "huddle" of advocates by state sees more than a dozen

Californians gathered around three tables, looking at our schedules for Capitol Hill meetings the next day. The University of California system is well-represented, with advocates from UCLA, UCSD, UCSC, UCR, and UCI (at least – it’s hard to keep track), fully half the campuses of the UC system, plus their government relations guy. Meanwhile, there are the three of us from SJSU representing the entirety of the Cal State University system (and our government relations guy is pinned down in another meeting). Does it feel like we have a bit of a climb ahead of us? Yes, it does!

The UC government relations guy starts talking about the general game plan for our meetings with the legislators’ staffers. Because my nervousness presents as assertiveness, I pipe up: “There are so many of you and just the three of us. Will we get drowned out in the meetings?” Oh no, our UC siblings reassure us, they would never do that! Why don’t we go first, they suggest. Sounds good to us!

### **Tuesday 3/11 @ 8:30 am EDT**

We gather at the Lutheran Church that is a designated “waystation” for us advocates and make sure we have a sufficient number of leave-behind folders for the meetings we’ll be taking jointly with the UC contingent. After checking email with the wife in the church basement, we start our walk in brisk air and bright sunshine towards the Hart Senate Office Building. It’s possible that the three of us break into a few bars of “Do You Hear the People Sing” on the way.

### **Tuesday 3/11 @ 9:00 am EDT**

On our approach to the Hart Senate Office Building, we see a gigantic line forming at the main entrance. Luckily, there’s a less-trafficked entrance on the side of the building, with a security line that requires less waiting.

We’re in! We find a bench in the sun-drenched atrium and wait together for the appearance of Ryan (the Cal State

University government relations guy) and Andrew (his intern). Upon their arrival, they give us the relevant information for the meetings we have with Congressional staffers but **without** advocates from the UC. We try to digest that information as efficiently as we can, looking for “hooks” to help us connect funding for the NEH (and support for the humanities more broadly) with things the Congressional representatives officially care about.

Our counterparts from the UC start arriving in the atrium. We ride the elevators up and present ourselves for our first meeting.

### **Tuesday 3/11 @ 10:00 am EDT**

Staffers for both California Senators, Alex Padilla and Adam Schiff, sit with us around a big conference room table that is somehow still not big enough to seat all the advocates, so the group comes close to also filling the chairs against the wall that make the second row of seating around the table. As negotiated on Monday, our SJSU team goes first. We have a tight five minutes, with Dean Shannon Miller describing the economic impact SJSU has in Santa Clara County, the Silicon Valley, the Bay Area, and the entire state, passing it to Kathy Harris, the Director of Public Programming for the College of Humanities & the Arts, to talk about the impacts of that programming and about how the federally funded NEH supports our programming while also helping us attract state and private funds. Then it’s my turn to talk about the impact of humanities in a classroom of STEM majors, helping them understand the ethical landscape of scientific knowledge-building careers and how to navigate that landscape.

The UC delegation picks it up, highlighting the NEH-funded projects on their campuses. As they race around the table to contribute their pieces, the Associate Dean from UC-Irvine gives a big shout out to the Cal State system and to his alma mater, Cal State Fullerton. This is a heartwarming reminder that we don’t need to fight



amongst ourselves for pieces of the pie. We can find ways to bake more pie.

After this meeting, we pose for a quick picture next to Sen. Padilla's name on the wall outside his office, and then we race outside to make our way to the next meeting, in the Longworth House Office Building.

### **Tuesday 3/11 @ 11:00 am EDT**

Having rushed across the mall and through another security line, we are now meeting with a staffer for Congresswoman Zoe Lofgren. We thought we'd be sharing this meeting with at least part of the UC delegation, but it's just us, at least until the last 12 minutes or so of the half-hour we've been scheduled, when a delegate from UC Santa Cruz appears – apparently rushing was the right way to get to this meeting on time! We repeat our tight five minutes and emphasize the footprint of SJSU (and of its humanities programming) with the Congress-woman's district. As we thank her aid and file out, there's some nervous whispering that her staffer hadn't taken copious notes like the staffers in our 10 am meeting did.

### **Tuesday 3/11 @ 12:00 pm EDT**

We're in one of the cafeterias in the basement below the House office buildings, grabbing some lunch and coffee. The room is packed. In addition to staffers and even some members of Congress, there are loads of people there to advocate for all sorts of issues. Are we telling our story about the importance of NEH funding to the Cal State system – and about the importance of the Cal State system to the wellbeing of the great state of California – compellingly enough that it won't get lost in the noise? We can only hope – well, hope and also tweak our tight five to make sure there is not a second wasted.

### **Tuesday 3/11 (@ 1:00 pm EDT**

We travelled through the basement tunnels (so no need to go through another security

line) to arrive at the Cannon House Office Building and the office of Congressman Jimmy Panetta. It's just the Cal State team in this meeting with the Congressman's staffer, so things are a bit more conversational. In that conversation, Kathy asks the staffer what we can do to help. The answer? Make common cause with colleagues in red and purple districts to help the voters better understand what colleges and universities add to the economy and to the community. OK, we can do that!

### **Tuesday 3/11 @ 3:00 pm EDT**

After a bit of down time and another trip through the basement tunnels, we arrive at the office of Congressman Eric Swallwell, which is a hive of activity – so much so that his two staffers who are meeting with us walk us to an alcove in the corridor so we can circle up for a conversation. Despite this being a standing (up) meeting, the Congressman's staffers take a lot of notes. They seem pretty enthusiastic about the mix of numbers and stories we are sharing with them. We mention to them that a perk, should the Congressman join the Congressional Humanities Caucus, is that his staffers would be invited each year to three or four National Humanities Alliance outings to sites of cultural significance around DC. Who doesn't like a field trip?

### **Tuesday 3/11 @ 4:00 pm EDT**

We're back at the Longworth House Office Building for our last meeting with Congressman Sam Liccardo. Again, the office is jumping – there are votes happening that feel like they've been scheduled on the fly, so staffers are scurrying to stay on top of supporting the Congressman. By now, our spiel about SJSU and the Cal State system, about humanities and arts, about economic impact and human impact, feels almost self-propelled. The staffer asks good questions, and takes notes. We do our best to give useful answers and to end on a note of hope.

This really does feel hopeful. As distant as the federal government can feel from our everyday efforts to do our best for our students, our programs, our colleagues, and our communities, the staff of each of our elected officials made room for us and really listened to what we were telling them. They seemed moved by what we had to say. I think they know that the Cal State University system is the beating heart of higher education in California, a smart investment with impressive yields (including some that it's hard to quantify). Now all there is to do is stay in touch with these electeds to make sure they remember what we shared with them and why it matters.



From left: Janet Stemwedel, Kathy Harris, and Shannon Miller.

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**HAVE NEWS YOU'D  
LIKE TO SHARE WITH  
THE SJSU PHILOSOPHY  
DEPARTMENT  
EXTENDED CINEMATIC  
UNIVERSE?  
EMAIL IT TO US AT  
[PHILOSOPHY@SJSU.EDU](mailto:PHILOSOPHY@SJSU.EDU)  
SHARING IS CARING!**

## Ethics Bowl news

Since January 2024, Kyle Hertsch has been coaching SJSU's Ethics Bowl and Bioethics Bowl teams.

In November 2025, SJSU hosted Santa Clara University in a scrimmage match, held in the spiffy new Digital Humanities Center in the ground floor of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Library.

Then, in early December, the Ethics Bowl team flew to San Diego to compete in Regionals, where they were a hair's-breadth from the score they needed to compete in Nationals.

Nonetheless, the team will be travelling to Nationals this Spring to watch the competition and to assist SJSU Ethics Bowl coach emeritus Michael Jordan as, in his new role as Chair of the Association for Practical & Professional Ethics' Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl Council, he runs the national competition.



Ethics Bowl teams from SJSU and Santa Clara University face off in a scrimmage match in the Digital Humanities Center.

## Philosophy gets spooky

On October 31, 2025, in conjunction with SJSU's "Parents' Weekend," the department had an open house that was also a *haunted* house, highlighting the spooky side of philosophy (and handing out candy and stickers). Our offerings included:

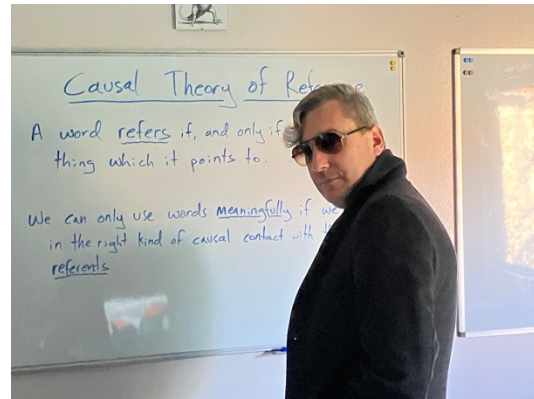
**Emmie Malone** (dressed as Velma) digging into the philosophical lessons of *Scooby-Doo*. Did you know that Scooby and Scrappy are extremes between which you should be seeking the mean? Well, now you do!



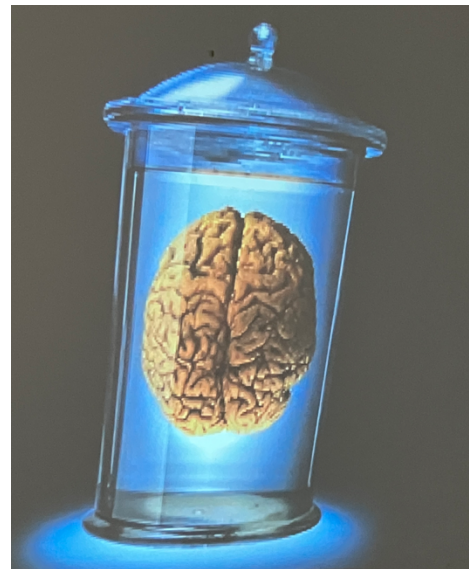
The disembodied voice of **Carlos Sanchez** reading a ghost story from his grandfather (a story included in his book *Blooming in the Ruins*) on a loop. (Our student assistant,

listening to the two-minute story for three hours, went home prepared for some ghost-focused nightmares.)

**Noah Friedman-Biglin** (dressed as Morpheus from *The Matrix*) offering reassurance to those panicking at the possibility that they might be brains in vats.



Of course, the reassurance came in the form of a causal theory of reference, which is scary in its own way. That's philosophy for you!



**Riana Betzler** (dressed as a Victorian lady scientist) transformed her office into a Spiritualist Laboratory, complete with

(flameless) candles, ectoplasm, and a Ouija Board.



Riana spoke about the research William James conducted with the Boston planchette, a “recording” version of the planchette commonly used with Ouija boards. (None of the visitors to the Spiritualist Laboratory actually wanted to *use* the Ouija board during their visit. Make of that what you will.)



Finally, **Janet Stemwedel** assembled a “murder-board” in the corridor to tackle the question, “Could it be wrong to love TRUE CRIME as much as we do?” It turns out that a murder-board, like a philosophy class, often provides more additional questions than answers.

Chances are very good that we will have another haunted open house in the temporal vicinity of Halloween 2026!

## Here be dragons (& ethical decision-making)

Dungeons & Dragons, a fantasy tabletop role-playing game whose players create characters to face adventures together through a fantasy setting under the guidance of a Dungeon Master (DM), is seeing a resurgence. What is not widely known – except, perhaps, by Philosophy faculty and students who are avid D&D players – is that D&D campaigns engage players in activities that constitute **coordinated, cooperative ethical decision-making**. Starting in Summer 2024 and running through the entirety of AY 2024-2025, a team of faculty and students from the department carried out a project, supported by an Artistic Excellence Programming Grant from the SJSU College of Humanities & the Arts, called “Dungeons & Dragons (& cooperative ethical decision-making).”



Our project **reimagined** D&D as a training ground for reflection and practice about ethical decision-making, and especially its

dimensions in environments where our actions and choices are deeply entangled with those of the others with whom we share a world. D&D offers a unique venue to engage with and explore different philosophical theories that shows (rather than tells) the usefulness of ethical theories to help navigate complicated situations, and highlights dangers philosophers have warned about for generations (like egoism or the banality of evil).

In this playful environment, players from across SJSU majors were encouraged to apply the philosophical concepts to their characters' experiences, helping to bridge the chasm between knowledge and wisdom, effectively setting them up to make use of these important concepts in their everyday lives. Moreover, this approach to ethics helped players **reimagine** and **reconceptualize** the project of being ethical as more than faithfully following a fixed set of rules, recognizing that being ethical requires decision-making that is responsive both to conditions in the world and to the needs and aspirations of the other people (or elves) with whom we share that world.

Our team created a series of about a dozen compact adventure scenarios (playable in 2-3 hours) that engaged players in compelling group decision-making. The narrative framing device connecting these stand-alone adventures was “Adventure Capitalism LLC,” the business entity (headed by an actual dragon) for which players acted as “gig adventurers.”

The year of adventures culminated in a “Final Adventure” and reception at the Hammer Theatre Rooftop Terrace.

Armed with “strategy sheets” that offered detailed descriptions of the ethical dimensions of the challenges the players might face, in accessible language, the Final Adventure required each player to develop a *unique* argument to the “final boss” (the dragon CEO of Adventure Capitalism, LLC) for their freedom and/or better working conditions.



The players were able to turn to non-playable characters (NPCs) from earlier adventures for assistance with this, allowing them to earn extra points for their arguments (or for battle) before trying to persuade the dragon. Ultimately, each argument had to speak to the interests or values of two distinct NPCs, and each player had to address the dragon’s objections, to succeed. The beauty of these game mechanics is that the student players were learning and being evaluated in an out-of-the-classroom context that felt 100% like play.



Having written and played these adventures, we are hopeful that we’ll be able to play them again with new groups of students in the coming months, possibly even in the context of periodic department Game Nights that even include games beyond Dungeons & Dragons. Stay tuned!

## Departmental Student Prizes

The department has a number of prizes, awarded each May in conjunction with Spring Commencement, to honor the achievements of our students. These named awards also honor their namesakes (or their memory) and their achievement in and love of philosophy.

Here are the prizes and the students who won them for AY 2024-2025:

**The Temple Prize** for the best paper of the year written by a junior majoring in Philosophy.

*Winner: Kai Parker*

**The Herman A. Shapiro Memorial Scholarship Award** in recognition of consistently excellent academic performance.

*Winner: Donovan Dix*

**The George V. and Lydia A. Pinto Scholarship Award** in recognition of demonstrated love for philosophy, involvement in the community, and commitment to social justice.

*Winner: Camron Ogle*

**The Manor Award** in recognition of special proficiency in logic.

*Winners: Jake Kao and Jordan Ramirez*

**The Arthur Ordaz Award** in recognition of promising scholarship and demonstrated interest in further philosophical research.

*Winners: Chloe Chang, Adam Pagan, Addi Somekh, and Eduardo Tovar*

**The Dr. Richard Tieszen Memorial Scholarship Award** in recognition of promising philosophical engagement in the areas of logic, philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of mind, or phenomenology.

*Winner: Michelle Avendano*

**The Dick Schubert Memorial Philosophical Virtues Award** in recognition of students who embody the virtues of intellectual courage, integrity, persistence, discipline, open-mindedness, helpfulness, and intellectual compassion and care.

*Winners: Sol Ashlynn and Elia Scalise*

**The Lucius R. Eastman Memorial Endowed Scholarship Award** in recognition of a promising new student in the Philosophy M.A. program.

*Winner: Jordan Ramirez*

Help us continue our tradition of recognizing student achievement (and honoring the namesakes of our student prizes)!

\*Contribute to the funds that fund the prizes.

\*Share memories of the people our prizes are named after.

\*Propose a new prize to honor someone.

More details in “Ways to support SJSU Philosophy” later in this newsletter.

## FACULTY NEWS

**Jason Aleksander** is the SJSU AI Faculty Fellow for the College of Humanities & the Arts. In October, with the assistance of current Philosophy BA student Mykal Philbin, he hosted a workshop entitled “Fighting Zombies with Zombies: Spooky Scary Experiments with Generative AI in H&A Courses.”

**Karin Brown** published an article “Sophie de Grouchy and the Recovery Project: Her Originality and Contribution to Philosophy”, in the *Journal of the History of Women Philosophers and Scientists* (2024). She also has an encyclopedia entry forthcoming: De Grouchy, Sophie (1764-1822) in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Romantic-Era Women’s Writing*.

**Riana Betzler** published “Failing without Taking the Class: How Policies and Structures Create a Hostile Learning Environment” (co-authored with departmental colleague **Noah Friedman-Biglin** and with Johnny C. Ramirez, faculty at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona) in *AAPT Studies in Pedagogy* (Online First: May 8, 2025. DOI: 10.5840/aaptstudies202557104). Riana is the faculty member overseeing the Philosophy Tutoring Center, ensuring that our Instructional Student Assistants (ISAs) get the professional development and other support they need. She also coordinates the department’s regular Teaching Talks, which support faculty and ISAs.

**Rebecca Chan** took the reins as one of our two undergraduate major advisors. As well, she continues to serve as a pre-law advisor for the university and as co-director of the Center for Comparative Philosophy.

**Andrew Delunas** presented “Etched in Flesh: The Philosophy of Tattoos and Tattooing” in the poster session of the Eastern APA in New York in January 2025. He was also a regular Dungeon Master for our “Dungeons & Dragons (& cooperative ethical decision-making)” project during AY 2024-2025.

**Noah Friedman-Biglin** took the reins as one of our two graduate advisors after serving for several years as an undergraduate major advisor.

**Kyle Hertsch** took the reins as coach of SJSU’s Ethics Bowl and Bioethics Bowl teams.

**Michael Jordan** took office as the Chair of the Association for Practical & Professional Ethics’ Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl Council in January 2024. This means, after 22 years of coaching ethics bowl teams, he is running the Ethics Bowl nationally. Among other things, this includes serving on the Regional Case Writing committee and co-chairing the National Competition Organizing Committee. It also means that Michael has had to step back from coaching SJSU’s Ethics Bowl teams.

**Jordan Liz** continues his service as one of our two undergraduate major advisors.

**Emmie Malone** joined the department in Fall 2025 as an Assistant Professor specializing in aesthetics. Here’s some of her recent and forthcoming work, to give you a sense of the breadth of her philosophical interests:

“**When Trust is Zero Sum: Automation’s Threat to Epistemic Agency**” (2025) *Ethics and Information Technology* 27(2): 1-8. *This paper was coauthored with Saleh Afroogh (UT), Jason D’Cruz (SUNY Albany), and Kush R. Varshney (IBM).* AI researchers and ethicists have long worried about the threat that automation poses to human dignity, autonomy, and to the sense of personal value that is tied to work. Even in cases where workers keep their jobs, their agency within those roles might be severely downgraded. For instance, human employees might work alongside artificial intelligence (AI) but not be allowed to make decisions or not be allowed to make decisions without consulting with or coming to agreement with the AI. Here, we argue that this is a kind of epistemic harm (which could be an injustice if it is distributed on the basis of identity prejudice). It diminishes human agency (in constraining people’s ability to act independently), and it fails to recognize the workers’ epistemic agency as

qualified experts. Workers, in this case, aren't given the trust they are entitled to. This means that issues of human dignity remain even in cases where everyone keeps their job. Further, job retention focused solutions, such as designing an algorithm to work alongside the human employee, may only enable these harms. In response to this, we propose an alternative design solution, adversarial collaboration, which addresses the traditional retention problem of automation, but also addresses the larger underlying problem of epistemic harms and the distribution of trust between AI and humans in the workplace.

**“Musical Genres as Historical Individuals” (forthcoming) *British Journal of Aesthetics*. This paper was co-authored with P.D. Magnus (SUNY Albany) and Brandon Polite (Knox College).**

Musicians, listeners, and record labels sort music into genres like jazz, punk, heavy metal, and so on. Metaphysically, what kind of thing is a genre? This paper explores the idea that music genres are historical individuals. The obvious way to develop this is to think of a music genre as being like a biological species. Although that approach has much to recommend it, we argue that it faces an insuperable difficulty: what we dub the problem of independent origins. We argue, instead, that a genre is a historical individual governed by an institution or social practice.

Emmie also presented “The Aesthetics of a Good Death: The Narrative View of the Self and Genres of Life” as part of an invited panel on the Aesthetics of Death and Dying at the 41st Annual Meeting of the Rocky Mountain Division of the American Society for Aesthetics, held in Santa Fe, NM July 18-20th, 2025. And, she contributed a piece to the inaugural issue of *Being Trans in Philosophy* (<https://being.transinphilosophy.org/>), a new zine in which trans philosophers and philosophers with trans kids talk about their experiences in the field.

**Bo Mou** recently published *Cross-Tradition Engagement on the Laws of Logic: Approaching Identity and Reference from Classical Chinese Philosophy to Modern Logic* with Routledge (2024).

**Carlos Sánchez** continues his service as one of our two graduate advisors. He is currently writing his eleventh (!) book. Even if you don't follow academic book publishing, you may have seen the acclaim for his recent book *Blooming in the Ruins: How Mexican Philosophy Can Guide You to the Good Life* (2024) in publications like the *New York Times*.

**Janet Stemwedel** managed to get herself elected to the Academic Senate in Spring of 2025 (when all she was *trying* to do was create conditions for contested elections to the Academic Senate). She also begins a term on the Board of Directors for Public Responsibility in Medicine and Research (PRIM&R) in January 2026.

## ALUMNI NEWS

**Omar Gasga Diaz** contributed enormously to our “Dungeons & Dragons (& cooperative ethical decision-making)” project. Despite having graduated with his Philosophy MA in Spring 2024, he spent Summer 2024 on the team developing a set of “one-shot” adventures – and creating the narrative structure connecting them. When we started playing the adventures in Fall 2024, Omar was our regular Dungeon Master. For his heroic contributions, Omar was awarded the “Alumni MVP” award at our May 2025 department commencement reception.

**Kris Scott** has been named the **49ers' Inspire Change Changemaker Award honoree** and recognized on the field at Levi's Stadium for his leadership and commitment to justice and youth empowerment in his work with Fresh Lifelines for Youth (flyprogram.org). As described by FLY: “Kris has been a driving force at FLY for more than 15 years, serving in roles from frontline case manager to Managing Director of Programs. He embodies everything this award represents—his leadership, his heart, and his steadfast belief in the brilliance and potential of our young people are felt across FLY every single day. This recognition is not just about a moment on the field, but a testament to the deep, lasting change that happens when someone leads with purpose and community at the center.” Congratulations, Kris!



## Ways to support SJSU Philosophy

### Stay in touch!

Send a quick email to [philosophy@sjsu.edu](mailto:philosophy@sjsu.edu) to get added to our “SJSU Philosophy Community” list and we’ll make sure you hear about upcoming department events.

### Career connections.

Would you be interested in participating in a career panel to help our current students find cool jobs with their philosophical training? Do you have a lead on an internship opportunity for SJSU Philosophy students? Do you have an idea for an applied philosophy project that would help students connect the philosophical knowledge and skills they are learning in school to real-world problems? Please email [philosophy@sjsu.edu](mailto:philosophy@sjsu.edu) and let’s make it happen!

### Support our conferences!

We pay for conferences like our annual Alumni Conference, fund honoraria for our Visiting Speaker Series, and defray the costs of conference travel for faculty and students from the **Philosophy Conferences Fund** at the Tower Foundation.

**Checks** can be made payable to the “*Tower Foundation of SJSU*” and mailed to: San José State University, Attn: Jenn Johnston, One Washington Square, San Jose, CA 95192-0257. Please specify ‘Philosophy Conferences Fund’ in the memo line.

**Online donations** can be made at <https://give.sjsu.edu>. Enter “philosophy” in the search bar that says “search for what you love” and select “Philosophy Department

Fund.” In the “Special Instructions” field, specify that your donation should go to Tower Foundation account 034-1706-0010 (“Philosophy Conferences”).

### Support our ability to award students prizes and scholarships!

Most of the student prizes we award every Spring are supported by funds from the **Philosophy Discretionary Fund** at the Tower Foundation.

**Checks** can be made payable to the “*Tower Foundation of SJSU*” and mailed to: San José State University, Attn: Jenn Johnston, One Washington Square, San Jose, CA 95192-0257. Please specify ‘Philosophy Discretionary Fund’ in the memo line.

**Online donations** can be made at <https://give.sjsu.edu>. Enter “philosophy” in the search bar that says “search for what you love” and select “Philosophy Department Fund.” In the “Special Instructions” field, specify that your donation should go to Tower Foundation account 034-1706-0484 (“Philosophy Dept. Discretionary”).

**Richard Tieszen Scholarship Fund** at the Tower Foundation, a scholarship to benefit students with financial need created by the family of Dr. Tieszen to honor his memory.

**Checks** can be made payable to the “*Tower Foundation of SJSU*” and mailed to: San José State University, Attn: Jenn Johnston, One Washington Square, San Jose, CA 95192-0257. Please specify ‘Dr. Richard Tieszen scholarship’ in the memo line.

**Online donations** can be made at <https://give.sjsu.edu>. Please specify ‘Dr. Richard Tieszen scholarship’ in the ‘other purpose’ box.

**Lucius R. Eastman Memorial Endowed Scholarship** at the Tower Foundation, created by an anonymous donor to provide scholarships for Philosophy MA students.

**Checks** can be made payable to the "Tower Foundation of SJSU" and mailed to: San José State University, Attn: Jenn Johnston, One Washington Square, San Jose, CA 95192-0257. Please specify 'Lucius R. Eastman Memorial Scholarship' in the memo line.

**Online donations** can be made at <https://give.sjsu.edu>. Enter "philosophy" in the search bar that says "search for what you love" and select "Lucius R. Eastman Memorial Scholarship Fund."

## **Please share your news!**

We would love to include updates from alumni, current students, emeritus faculty, current faculty, and friends of the SJSU Philosophy Department in the next newsletter.

Email it to us at [philosophy@sjsu.edu](mailto:philosophy@sjsu.edu)

