



EAST TENNESSEE STATE
UNIVERSITY

Department of Philosophy
and Religious Studies

*65th Anniversary
Reunion*

November 15th, 2025

East Tennessee Room, D.P. Culp Student Center



EAST TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

Resolution of Appreciation

For the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies On the Occasion of Its 65th Reunion

From the East Tennessee State University Office of the President

- WHEREAS** The Department has served East Tennessee State University with distinction for 65 years, pursuing questions in every dimension of human life and applying its techniques to problems across all fields of study and endeavor; and
- WHEREAS** The Department has consistently demonstrated that philosophy majors excel academically, ranking among the top scorers on the Graduate Record Examination, the Law School Admission Test, and the Graduate Management Admission Test, while achieving some of the highest medical school acceptance rates; and
- WHEREAS** Under the leadership of expert faculty, the Department has emphasized the development of critical thinking, clear communication, and analytical reasoning skills that employers consistently identify as essential qualifications for new hires; and
- WHEREAS** The Department has prepared generations of graduates for success in diverse fields including law, medicine, and business, with alumni consistently crediting their philosophical training for teaching them to approach problems logically, evaluate ideas critically, and engage thoughtfully with ethical issues in their professions; and
- WHEREAS** Philosophy education at ETSU has equipped students not only with practical skills but also with the capacity to wrestle with life's most enduring questions about existence, morality, knowledge, and justice, fostering more responsible thinkers who better understand pressing social issues; and
- WHEREAS** Faculty members have contributed significant scholarship to their fields, publishing books and articles that advance philosophical discourse, address contemporary challenges, and bridge the gap between academic inquiry and public understanding; and
- WHEREAS** The Department has strengthened the College of Arts and Sciences by fostering interdisciplinary collaboration across the humanities and beyond, with philosophy students frequently pursuing double majors in fields including history, theater, political science, psychology, microbiology, and economics; and
- THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** that East Tennessee State University extends its deepest appreciation to the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies on the occasion of its 65th reunion. The Department's dedication to developing critical thinkers, creative problem-solvers, and engaged citizens has enriched countless students and strengthened the intellectual foundation of this university and the broader community for 65 years. We celebrate this milestone and look forward to the Department's continued excellence in the years to come.

Brian Noland
President, ETSU

November 14, 2025

Welcome

East Tennessee State Normal School was founded in 1911, and by January 1912, the library had already purchased a copy of Plato's Republic. Philosophy has been part of our institution's spirit from the very beginning, even though it took nearly 50 years to establish a formal program.

When that program finally began, Dr. Robert Mielke was its sole instructor, teaching every course from Ancient to Medieval to Modern Philosophy, from Logic and Ethics to Comparative Religion. His enthusiasm drew students in, and by 1971 the department had expanded to five full-time faculty and was teaching hundreds of students each year.

Over the past 65 years, the department has evolved alongside the university. We've added courses, minors, and concentrations; transitioned from the College of Education to the College of Arts and Sciences; and moved from Warf-Pickel to Rogers-Stout. We've adapted to changes in society, technology, and higher education, yet our mission has remained the same: to teach students how to think clearly, creatively, and compassionately.

From Dr. Mielke's time to today, we've shared the same message with prospective students. Philosophy strengthens critical thinking, communication, and problem solving, and offers a foundation for any career or calling. The humanities cultivate curiosity, empathy, and self-understanding, qualities our world needs now more than ever.

Convincing others of their value takes effort, but our collective well-being depends on it. Celebrating our history reminds us why that work matters and inspires us to keep it going.

My sincere thanks to everyone who made today's gathering possible, to our speakers, organizers, those who traveled to be here, and all who chose to spend their Saturday supporting this department and its enduring mission.

David Harker, *Professor and Chair*

65th Anniversary Reunion

AGENDA

- 8 - 8:30 a.m. Breakfast
- 8:30 - 8:45 a.m. Welcome
- 8:45 - 9:30 a.m. "How to Make Stupid Decisions,"
Dr. Stephen Fesmire
- 9:30 - 10:30 a.m. Research Interests of Alumni, with
Dr. Rowan Bell, Brett Blitch, Robert Clafin,
Dr. Zach Peck and Layla Williams
- 10:30 - 11a.m. Break
- 11 - 11:45 a.m. "Resilience Beyond Diagnosis: Disability
Ethics, Pluralism, Valor, and (Neuro)
Diversity," Dr. Heather Keith
- 11:45 a.m. -
12:15 p.m. Reflections from Alumni, with
Dr. Shannon Cook, Marius Gregg
and Dunstan McNutt
- 12:15 - 1:30 p.m. Lunch
- 1:30 - 2 p.m. More reflections from Alumni, with
Kevin Carlson, Rev. Logan Jackson
and Dr. Desirae Matherly
- 2 - 2:45 p.m. "Introducing the idea of Wisdom to
21st-century Science: The Idea of a
Two-Track Scientific Practice,"
Dr. Deepanwita Dasgupta
- 2:45 - 3:15 p.m. Reflections from former Chairs, with
Dr. Chris Hackler, Dr. Hugh LaFollette*
and Dr. Leslie MacAvoy
- 3:15 - 3:45 p.m. Break
- 3:45 - 4:30 p.m. "What's a Drug?," Dr. Austin Due
- 4:30 - 6 p.m. Break
- 6 p.m. Dinner, at Southern Craft,
Downtown Johnson City

**Dr. Hugh LaFollette is unfortunately unable to join us today. He sends his best wishes. He has also shared some reflections of his time at ETSU which will be presented by Dr. David Harker.*

2025 *Speakers*

Former & Current Faculty

Deepanwita Dasgupta was a lecturer at ETSU from 2013 until 2015. Her research interests are in the philosophy of science and history of science, with a particular focus on the non-Western contexts of scientific practice, especially the Indian sub-continent at the turn of the 20th century. Her 2021 book "Creativity from the Periphery," published by the University of Pittsburgh Press, presents the story of a nascent physics community in India during 1920-40 by using a cognitive-philosophical framework.

Austin Due see page 9 for bio.

Steve Fesmire was with our department from 1995 until 2000. He is currently professor of philosophy at Radford University. Professor Fesmire is the author of "John Dewey and Moral Imagination: Pragmatism in Ethics" (Indiana University Press, 2003), winner of a 2005 Choice "Outstanding Academic Title" award. He is also the author of "Dewey" (Routledge Press, 2015), winner of a 2015 Choice "Outstanding Academic Title" award. Professor Fesmire was a 2009 Fulbright Scholar at Kyoto University and Kobe University in Japan, a 2015-16 visiting

scholar at Dartmouth College, and a 2016 fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland.

Heather Keith taught at ETSU from 1996 until 1999. She is now professor of philosophy at Radford University, and executive director of Faculty Development. Dr. Keith is the co-author of two books on ethics and intellectual disability, and the co-editor of a book on the philosophy of environmental, social, and personal resilience. She teaches courses in applied and theoretical ethics, American philosophy, feminist theory, and the philosophy of sustainability.

Chris Hackler was a professor of philosophy at ETSU from 1969 until 1982, before joining the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences as the first director of the new Division of Medical Humanities. He has published an edited book and several articles on the topic of advance directives and end-of-life decisions, and a second edited book and set of articles on rationing and health care reform in the context of an aging population.

Leslie MacAvoy see page 10 for bio.

2025 *Speakers*

Alumni

Rowan Bell is an assistant professor of philosophy and sexualities, genders, & social change at the University of Guelph in Guelph, Ontario. They earned a Bachelor of Science degree from ETSU in 2014, with a double major in philosophy and psychology. In 2022 they graduated from Syracuse University with a Ph.D. in philosophy. Rowan studies gender as a dimension of social identity and power, through the lens of trans, queer, and gender-variant experience. They have published on gender norms and authenticity, gender metaphysics and epistemic injustice. Their recent work critiques the theoretical and rhetorical work that we ask the concept “gender identity” to do in explaining trans existence.

Bret Blitch graduated from ETSU in 2020 with a B.A. in philosophy, and is currently a Ph.D. candidate in philosophy at Syracuse University. His research interests are primarily in epistemology, with his dissertation presently focused on issues surrounding inquiry.

Robert Clafin graduated in the spring of 2019 with a B.S. in philosophy and earned his M.A. in philosophy at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh in 2022. He is now a doctoral candidate

at the University of South Florida. His research interests are in contemporary continental thought, especially phenomenology, postmodernism and 19th century post-Kantian thought. He intends to write his dissertation on Nietzsche on boredom.

Zach Peck graduated from ETSU in 2015 with degrees in philosophy, psychology and history. He received a master’s degree from Georgia State in philosophy and another master’s degree from the University of Georgia in artificial intelligence. He earned his Ph.D. candidate in philosophy at the University of Cincinnati and is now an assistant professor of philosophy at Ramapo College of New Jersey. His research interests lie primarily at the intersection of the philosophy of technology and social ontology.

Layla Williams graduated from ETSU with her B.A. in philosophy in 2021. In 2023 she received an M.A. in philosophy from the University of Oklahoma, where she’s currently pursuing a Ph.D. and coaching the Ethics Bowl team. She was recently awarded her department’s research and service awards. Her research is about identifying conspiracy theorists and theories, and understanding their social epistemic impact. She is also interested in pedagogy and public philosophy.

2025 *Speakers*

Kevin Carlson graduated from ETSU in 2016 with a B.A. in philosophy and economics. He attended the University of Chicago Law School before clerking for two federal judges and joining an international law firm. He is happily married in Chicago with a dog, a cat, and fond memories of his time with ETSU's philosophy department.

Marius Gregg graduated in 2013 from ETSU. After graduating, he worked for AT&T/DIRECTV as a technical writer and process manager. He is now an Anglican Franciscan and serving as a second-year chaplain resident in the Ballad hospital network. He is married and has no children but one very demanding cat.

Logan Jackson graduated from ETSU in 2012 with a B.S. in philosophy and minor in religious studies. He graduated from Duke Divinity School in 2017 with a Master of Divinity and is currently a provisional elder in the United Methodist Church, commissioned EarthKeeper, and founder of the Marine Ecotheology organization. He pastors Newbegun UMC in Elizabeth City, NC and is married with two children.

Desirae Matherly graduated from ETSU in 1997 with a double major in philosophy and English, magna cum laude. Desirae completed her Ph.D.

in English, specializing in creative nonfiction at Ohio University, where she also completed one year toward a master's in philosophy. Her first postdoc was at Ohio University for two years, and she also served as a Harper Fellow and collegiate humanities professor at the University of Chicago for three years after leaving Ohio. Homesick for Tennessee, she returned to teach for over a decade at Tusculum University, and is now an associate professor of English at Heidelberg University in Tiffin, Ohio, where she teaches professional and creative writing in between publishing essays and solar punk sci-fi.

Dunstan McNutt graduated from ETSU in 2006 with degrees in philosophy and history. He earned a dual master's degree in history and library science from Indiana University-Bloomington and has since worked as a librarian at Amherst College and University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. He is about to start a new position as an instructional designer in UTC's Walker Center for Teaching and Learning in December.

Shannon Cook graduated in 1997 with a B.A. in philosophy with a concentration in religious studies, and from the Quillen College of Medicine in 2008. She completed psychiatry residency at the University of South Carolina

2025 *Speakers*

in 2012 and a fellowship in forensic psychiatry in 2013. Dr. Cook worked for the Department of Veterans Affairs as a psychiatrist, in the inpatient arena treating addiction, post-traumatic stress disorder, detoxification from drugs

and alcohol, and medically comorbid psychiatric conditions. For the last six years, she has served as the executive psychiatrist and chief of acute mental health services for the Mountain Home VA Medical Center.

WAY BACK WHEN...



THE PHILOSOPHY CLUB

The Philosophy Club is open to students interested in philosophical aspects of the world. They have guest speakers and discussions of the different ideas formulated by philosophers – both modern and ancient.

CHANGES IN COLLEGES, SCHOOL AND NAME

In 1960, East Tennessee State College announced the new program of study in philosophy. Dr. Robert Mielke was hired to teach the courses and build the program. Initially housed within the College of Education, the department became part of the College of Arts and Sciences in 1978. At the same time, the department was approved to oversee a new minor and concentration in religious studies, as well as assume responsibility for the pre-existing humanities minor. To reflect these changes, the department's name was changed to the Department of Philosophy and Humanities. As a result of restructuring in 2024, the department joined the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, within the College of Arts and Sciences, and the department was renamed again, to the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies.

Current Faculty



Michael Allen earned his Ph.D. from Saint Louis University before joining our department in 2006. He has published dozens

of articles, two single-authored books, *Civil Disobedience in Global Perspective: Decency and Dissent over Borders, Inequities and Government Secrecy*, Spring (2017), and *Gandhi's Popular Sovereignty of Truth: Devotional Democracy* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2024); and a co-authored a further book, *Rethinking the American Animal Rights Movement* (Routledge, 2022). He is currently working on a manuscript on the philosophy of war and peace. In 2023, he received the College of Arts and Science Distinguished Research Award.

Allen Coates earned his Ph.D. at Vanderbilt University and has been teaching at ETSU since 2005. He has published articles in some of the most selective philosophy journals, including *Analysis*, *Philosophical Studies*, and *American Philosophical Quarterly*. In addition to his interests in normative and meta-ethics, Dr. Coates has also published on issues concerning rationality and reasons. He regularly teaches ethical theory and topics in

analytic philosophy, is a keen runner and accomplished guitarist.



Austin Due has been professor of practice at ETSU since 2024. His research focuses primarily on pharmaceutical drugs and

other issues in medicine and medical ethics including side effects and their discovery or 'pharmacovigilance,' research-practice overlaps, regulation, nocebo effects, patient participation, empowerment, decision-making, and private industry influence.



Keith Green started teaching in the department in 1995, which makes him the second longest serving faculty member in the department's

history. He has philosophical interests in the concepts of hatred and self-hatred, but his recent published work has largely concerned the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza. He is currently writing a book on Spinoza on religion. Dr. Green has

Current Faculty

taught courses in philosophy of religion and religious studies, but also the history of modern philosophy, history of ancient philosophy, environmental philosophy, philosophy of art and Chinese philosophy.



David Harker completed his graduate work at the University of Chicago at Illinois, and has been teaching at ETSU since 2006. His

research interests are in the philosophy of science and, more recently, issues within applied epistemology, including misinformation, manufactured controversies, and the epistemology of disagreement. In 2017, he was awarded the University's Distinguished Faculty Award for Research.



Leslie MacAvoy joined the department in August 2000. She earned her Ph.D. from McGill University in Montreal, Canada. Leslie

has published extensively on the works of two early 20th-century philosophers, in particular, Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas. She regularly teaches courses on continental philosophy, existentialism and feminist theories, but over the years has also taught courses on philosophy of law, political philosophy, philosophy of technology as well as philosophy in literature.



Paul Tudico joined the department in 1998. Paul regularly teaches courses in bioethics, philosophy of law, and

practical reasoning. He's supervised many excellent student senior theses, but is perhaps best known for his masterful teaching of philosophy of conversation. Many of our majors describe their experience in philosophy of conversation as a turning point in their attitude toward reasoning and education.

Announcing



A NEW PROGRAM IN

PHILOSOPHY

EAST TENNESSEE

STATE COLLEGE

JOHNSON CITY, TENN.

There are no prerequisites for any philosophy courses offered during 1960-61. Persons in their junior or senior years should probably begin their study with courses on upper levels. The History of Philosophy (301, 302, 303) provides an excellent introduction to philosophy. Two or three courses in philosophy can be taken simultaneously.

COURSE SCHEDULE FOR 1960-61:

Fall	201 Introduction	202 Ethics	Winter	201 Introduction
	203 Logic	301 History (Ancient)		302 History (Medieval)
	301 History (Ancient)	302 History (Medieval)		411 Philosophy of Life
	411 Philosophy of Life	412 Comparative Religion		
Spring	203 Logic	202 Ethics		
	302 History (Modern)	413 Types of Religious Philosophy		

FUTURE COURSE OFFERINGS:

It is expected that the sophomore and junior sequences scheduled this year will be offered every year. Other courses will be offered about every two years, depending on the demands. The following courses have already been approved for future offering:

311 Applied Ethics, 321 Social Reformers, 405 American Philosophy, 415 Philosophical Perspectives in Education, 416 Philosophical Perspectives in Literature, 431 Recent Philosophy



Dr. Robert Mielke

A NEW PHILOSOPHY AREA

East Tennessee State College constantly is enriching and increasing its fields of study in an effort to develop and maintain as well-rounded an academic program as is possible.

One of the latest and most important developments in the field of new academic areas was the introduction at the college this fall of a program of study in philosophy.

Taught by a well-qualified scholar in the field, the program during the 1960-61 academic year will include courses in Introduction to Philosophy, Logic, History of Philosophy (Ancient), Philosophy of Life, Ethics, History of Philosophy (Medieval), Comparative Religion, History of Philosophy (Modern), and Types of Religious Philosophy.

Course offerings in the field of philosophy will be subsequently increased, with major and minor programs in philosophy eventually emerging.

Teaching the philosophy courses is Dr. Robert H. E. Mielke, who has received extensive education in philosophy both in the United States and abroad. Dr. Mielke, who comes to ETSU from Emory and Henry College where he taught for several years, received his B. A. and M. A. degrees from the University of Minnesota and his B. D. and Ph. D. degrees from Drew University. In addition to his work in the noted American universities, he also has studied at Oxford University and the University of Zurich in Switzerland.

PHILOSOPHY AT ETSU THROUGH THE YEARS

TWENTY-YEAR CLUB

Dozens of faculty and staff have served the department with distinction throughout its history, but only nine have served for over 20 years.

- **Kim Rogers** (1971-2000)
- **Marie Graves** (1974-1975 and 1992-2015)
- **John Hardwig** (1977-2000)
- **Hugh LaFollette** (1977-2004)
- **Jeff Gold** (1978-2020)
- **Keith Green** (1995-)
- **Paul Tudico** (1998-)
- **Leslie MacAvoy** (2000-)
- **Allen Coates** (2005-)

Nine faculty have served as chair of our department:

- **Robert Mielke** (1960-74)
- **Robert Botkin** (1974-77)
- **Chris Hackler** (1977-81)
- **Jeff Gold** (1981-89)
- **Hugh LaFollette** (1989-1992)
- **John Hardwig** (1992-2000)
- **Gail Stenstad** (2000-2005)
- **Jeff Gold** (2005-2010)
- **Leslie MacAvoy** (2010-2022)
- **David Harker** (2022-)

WHY STUDY
PHILOSOPHY



at East Tennessee State University

THE UNIVERSITY

East Tennessee State University is a member of the Southern States Association of Colleges and Universities, the Association of American Universities, the Southern Association of Colleges and Universities, the Southern States Association of Colleges and Universities, the Southern States Association of Colleges and Universities, the Southern States Association of Colleges and Universities.

The university has a long and distinguished history. It was founded in 1870 and has since that time been a leader in the development of higher education in the South. The university has a strong tradition of academic excellence and has produced many notable graduates.

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A FACULTY OF UNUSUAL QUALITY

Dr. Robert H. E. Mielke, Professor of Philosophy, is a member of the Southern States Association of Colleges and Universities, the Association of American Universities, the Southern Association of Colleges and Universities, the Southern States Association of Colleges and Universities, the Southern States Association of Colleges and Universities.

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

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In Memoriam



Robert Mielke (1919-1984) was the first chair and professor of philosophy at East Tennessee State, positions he held from 1960 until 1974. In the first year

of the program, Dr. Mielke taught courses in introduction to philosophy, logic, history of philosophy (ancient), philosophy of life, ethics, history of philosophy (medieval), comparative religions, history of philosophy (modern), and types of religious philosophy. He earned a B.A. and M.A. from the University of Minnesota and Ph.D. from Drew University.

Kim Rogers (1934-2010) earned a doctorate in philosophy from The New School for Social Research in New York. He taught at ETSU from 1971 until his retirement in 2000. In 2003, Dr. Rogers published "Reason and Life: An Introduction to an Ecological Approach in Philosophy." Dr. Rogers played a significant role in the development of some of the first Honors Programs at ETSU, during the 1980s.



Robert Botkin (1935-2025) joined the department as an assistant professor in 1965. He served as department chair before becoming

an associate dean and then dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. He left ETSU in 1985 to become president of Midway College, now University, in Kentucky.



Niall Shanks (1959-2011) taught at ETSU from 1989 until 2005. A much-loved instructor, he was the author of numerous books and articles, including

"God, the Devil and Darwin: A Critique of Intelligent Design," and with co-author Hugh LaFollette, "Brute Science: Dilemmas of Animal Experimentation." Dr. Shanks debated numerous prominent creationist scientists during the 1990s and 2000s.



**SCAN QR CODE
TO DONATE!**

Every year the department awards scholarships to rising seniors in the philosophy major. Over the last few years, we have sponsored or co-sponsored over a dozen lectures from visiting scholars. We are currently exploring a collaboration with ETSU's Bud Frank Cinema to screen films with rich philosophical content. The ambition is to pair the screening with a short lecture and Q&A session, which would be open and free to the public. We are also in conversation with The Philosopher's House, in Johnson City, about partnering to provide more public-facing philosophy. If you would like to contribute to the mission of our department, you can donate by using the QR code. If you have questions or ideas about how you would like your donation to be used, please email David Harker at harkerd@etsu.edu.