

2022-2023 Thomas Jefferson Award

Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, PhD
Morehead-Cain Alumni Distinguished Professor
Department of Philosophy

Remarks made by Prof. Marc Lange, Department of Philosophy at the award presentation during the January 20, 2023 meeting of the UNC-Chapel Hill Faculty Council

Geoffrey Sayre-McCord is the Morehead-Cain Alumni Distinguished Professor of Philosophy. He has been a member of our philosophy department since 1985.

I could spend my introduction telling you something about Geoff's world-renowned research into moral theory, David Hume, Adam Smith, and meta-ethics or I could tell you about how, in 2015, Geoff founded Carolina's interdisciplinary program in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics, which has quickly grown to be one of our most popular minors and has been a prototype for many of the other PPE programs that have since been founded across the country.

Or I could tell you about how, almost 20 years ago, Geoff brought into existence UNC's Parr Center for Ethics, which is our campus hub for inquiry into and discussion of ethical questions.

Or I could tell you about how, in 2012, Geoff launched the National High School Ethics Bowl, which is headquartered here at Carolina and which annually energizes literally thousands of high-school philosophers through its 34 regional high school ethics bowls culminating in the national bowl held in Chapel Hill, and which has served as the model for the national ethics bowls in other countries.

Or I could tell you about Geoff's many key contributions as Chair of the Philosophy Department for ten years, as founder and leader of the national PPE Society, and in a range of other roles.

But none of this would adequately convey Geoff's irrepressible vitality, warmth, wit, and sheer talent as an inspiring teacher and philosophical interlocutor.

To get any sense of those qualities, you would have to take a stroll with Geoff across the campus on a warm spring Carolina afternoon and watch students alter their paths to greet him. You would have to watch as Geoff remembers each student's name and what they were interested in and what they were up to when he last spoke with them, perhaps years earlier.

You would also have to attend an optional student review session for Geoff's legendary introductory ethics course (Philosophy 160) and see that some of the students there are not currently enrolled in the course but had taken it in some previous semester. They are attending the review session in order to have one more opportunity to experience Geoff's teaching.

You would have to hear Geoff in the classroom working through with his students one of his provocative vignettes, drawn from his own experiences and illustrating the disparity of power, the pain of misplaced faith, our responsibility of our own beliefs and actions, and the lure of luxury. Geoff has described philosophy as "a contact sport. You can't do it without bumping up against ideas, taking hold of them, and testing their mettle. So, I work to engage students actively, and reflectively with ideas. And my aim is to give students the tools they need to appreciate, challenge, evaluate, and refine their ideas about how to live, what is worth accomplishing, and how the world works."

This is precisely the kind of education that Jefferson believed people *must* have in order for our experiment in self-government to succeed. I am immensely pleased and proud to introduce my colleague and friend, Geoffrey Sayre-McCord.