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University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
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EDUCATION

Ph.D.	Philosophy, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign	2026
B.A.	Philosophy, Brooklyn College, Brooklyn, NY Minor: Psychology	2019
M.F.A.	Fine Arts, Parsons School of Design, New York, NY	2005
B.F.A.	Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA	1999

RESEARCH INTERESTS

AOS: Philosophy of Mind, the Mind Sciences & Artificial Intelligence, Philosophy of Science, Aesthetics

AOC: Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, Metaphysics, Philosophy of Biology

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Dissertation: *Expanding Neurophilosophy: Minds, Aesthetics, and Artificial Intelligence*

Committee: Jonathan Livengood (Chair)

Gualtiero Piccinini, John Hummel, Noël Saenz, John Schwenkler

Neurophilosophy is a research program that seeks to inform and reshape philosophical inquiry by importing neuroscience research into various theoretical problems. However, despite major developments in neuroscience, neurophilosophy's impact on philosophy, outside the philosophy of mind, has largely been limited. My dissertation aims to reaffirm neurophilosophy's value by showing how neuroscience research can provide new perspectives across a broad range of philosophical domains. This not only includes contributions to well-traveled philosophy of mind issues (e.g., multiple realization and phenomenal consciousness), but also includes contributions to fields that either rarely engage with neuroscience research, such as the philosophies of art and aesthetics, or engage with newly emergent technologies (e.g., large language models), like the philosophy of artificial intelligence.

PUBLICATIONS

1. Durso, D. (2026). How Solving a Dopamine Puzzle Might Resolve the Paradox of Painful Art. *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* (upcoming)
2. Durso, D. (2026). On Stochastic Picassos and Why Vision Language Models Cannot Replace Artists. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (upcoming)
<https://doi.org/10.1093/jaac/kpaf051>
3. Durso, D. (2026). Painting with Zombies: Neuroaesthetics and the Teleological Problem of Phenomenal Consciousness. *Global Philosophy* 36, 3.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10516-025-09774-1>
4. Durso, D. (2025). Why Prosocial Octopuses Challenge the Autonomy of Psychological States. *Synthese* 206, 241.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-025-05317-8>
5. Durso, D. (2025). Art as Artifact: An Empirical Approach to Locating its Hedonic Function. *Journal of NeuroPhilosophy*, 4(2).
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17292115>

WORKS IN PROGRESS

1. “Expanding a New Mechanical Ontology: Objects as Functional Mechanisms” (*R & R with Erkenntnis*)
2. “Reframing the Hard Problem of Consciousness as the Hard Problem of Aesthetic Experience” (*under review*)
3. “LLMs and the Problem of Uncommon Ground” (*under review*)
4. “Neuroaesthetics: A Primer for Philosophers” (*under review*)
5. “A Derivative Demon: Reconstructing Laplacian Determinism within a New Mechanical Ontology”
6. “LLMs, Plant Minds, and the Consequences of a Coarse-Grained Criterion”
7. “Functions Over Parts: A Mechanistic Account of Material Constitution”
8. “On the Causal Powers of Neurochemicals and the Consequences for Artificial Consciousness”
9. “Affording Creativity: A Necessary Constraint on the Feasibility of Creative Action in Artificial Agents”
10. “Sexual Selection and the Hotwiring of Aesthetic Reward”
11. “Realizing the New: A Mechanistic Account of Emergence”

PRESENTATIONS

1. “How Solving a Dopamine Puzzle Might Resolve the Paradox of Painful Art”, (*Poster Session*), American Philosophical Association Central Division Meeting, Chicago, IL (February 2026)
2. “LLMs, Plant Minds, and Why Multiple Realization is Not Enough”, International Society for the Philosophy of the Sciences of the Mind 3rd Annual Web Conference, (October 2025)

3. “How Solving a Dopamine Puzzle Might Resolve the Paradox of Painful Art”, 83rd Annual Meeting of the American Society of Aesthetics, Baltimore, MD (October 2025)
4. “Sexual Selection and the Hotwiring of Aesthetic Reward”, Deep South Philosophy & Neuroscience Workgroup 8th Annual Meeting, Pensacola, FL (September 2025)
5. “Why Conserved Neurochemical Systems and Prosocial Octopuses Challenge the Autonomy of Psychology”, 1st Annual Meeting of the Philosophy and Neuroscience Society, St. Louis, MO (May 2025)
6. “Moving Away from the Reductionist and Anti-Reductionist False Dilemma”, (*Poster Session*), Philosophy of Science: Past, Present and Future, Minneapolis, MN (October 2024)
7. “Releasing their Ink: Why Octopuses on Ecstasy Challenge the Autonomy of Psychology”, International Society for the Philosophy of the Sciences of the Mind 2nd Annual Web Conference, (October 2024)
8. “Neuroaesthetics: A Philosophical Primer”, Deep South Philosophy & Neuroscience Workgroup 7th Annual Meeting, Pensacola, FL (October 2024)
9. “Natural Selection and Minimal Mechanism” (*Poster Session*), Philosophy of Biology at the Mountains, University of Utah (July 2024)
10. “What Neuroaesthetics Brings to the Hard Problem of Consciousness”, MindMu, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO (June 2024)
11. “The Dilemmas for the Multiple Realization of Psychological States When Octopuses Take Ecstasy”, The Indiana Philosophy Association, University of Indiana, Indianapolis, IN (April 2024)
12. “What Neuroaesthetics Brings to the Hard Problem of Consciousness”, Deep South Philosophy & Neuroscience meeting, Rhodes College, Memphis, TN (April 2024)
13. “The Dilemmas for the Multiple Realization of Psychological States When Octopuses Take Ecstasy”, MindMu, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO (March 2024)
14. “Natural Selection and the Mechanisms of Fitness”, The Illinois Philosophical Association, Illinois State University, Normal, IL (November 2023)

COMMENTARIES

1. On Steven Winterfeldt’s “The Indispensable Role of Consciousness in Epistemic Justification”, Graduate Philosophy Conference at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (April 2024)
2. On Jonathan Spelman’s “What’s Wrong with the Tipped Wage?”, The Illinois Philosophical Association, Illinois State University (November 2023)
3. On Brian Wermcrantz’s “On the Format of Object Representation: What Icons Can’t Do”, Graduate Philosophy Conference at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (April 2022)

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign 2020 - present

Sole Instructor

- Philosophy 104 Introduction to Ethics (Spring 2026)
Ethics of Artificial Intelligence
- Philosophy 105 Introduction to Ethics (Spring 2025)
Normative Ethics
- Philosophy 250 Conceptions of Human Nature (Fall 2024)
The Human Experience and Aesthetic Experience
- Philosophy 101 Introduction to Philosophy (Spring 2024)

Teaching Assistant

- Philosophy 103 Logic and Reasoning (Fall 2022)
- Philosophy 101 Introduction to Philosophy (Fall 2021)
- Philosophy 100 Introduction to Philosophy (Fall 2020, Spring 2021, Spring 2023)[¶]

Grader

- Philosophy 102 Logic and Reasoning (Fall 2023)
- Philosophy 223 Minds and Machines (Spring 2022)

Brooklyn College, Brooklyn, NY 2018
Philosophy Tutor, The Learning Center

Parsons School of Design, New York, NY 2004
Teaching Assistant, Fine Arts Department

FELLOWSHIPS, HONORS, AND AWARDS

Graduate Fellow for the Forum on Human Flourishing in the Digital Age	2025
The Schwayder Prize (best graduate paper on metaphysics)	2025
List of Teachers Ranked Excellent by their Students (Spring, Phil 105)	2025
Distinguished Graduate Student Teaching Award	2025
List of Teachers Ranked Excellent by their Students (Spring, Phil 100)	2024
Graduate Student Service Award	2023
List of Teachers Ranked Outstanding by their Students (Spring, Phil 100) ^Φ	2023
List of Teachers Ranked Excellent by their Students (Fall, Phil 101)	2021
List of Teachers Ranked Outstanding by their Students (Spring, Phil 100) ^Φ	2021
Stanley Malinovich Memorial Award for Excellence in Philosophy, Brooklyn College	2019
Departmental Honors in Philosophy, Brooklyn College	2019

[¶] Philosophy 100 is an advanced composition course.

^Φ Outstanding ratings are awarded to instructors who obtained ratings of “High” (top 10% on each item for faculty and top 10% on item one for teaching assistants).

Dean's List, Brooklyn College

2018 - 2019

SERVICE

Referee for:

The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism	2026
Erkenntnis	2026
Philosophy of Science	2025
Synthese	2024
Society for Philosophy and Psychology	2024
UIUC Graduate Philosophy Organization (GPO) President	2022
UIUC Graduate Student Representative	2020 - 2025
UIUC Website/Social Media Committee	2021 - 2023

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

Society for Philosophy and Neuroscience	2025 - present
Society for Philosophy and Psychology	2024 - present
International Society for the Philosophy of the Sciences of the Mind	2024 - present
American Philosophical Association	2022 - present
Philosophy of Science Association	2022 - present
ISHPSSB ^Ω	2022 - present
Society for the Metaphysics of Science	2022 - present
Phi Kappa Phi	2022 - present
American Society for Aesthetics	2018 - present
Phi Sigma Tau	2019 - present

GRADUATE COURSEWORK

Philosophy of Science: Philosophy of Biology (Livengood), Philosophy of Psychology (Livengood), Philosophy of Science (Muntean)

Metaphysics, Mind, Epistemology: Philosophy of Artificial Intelligence (Scharp), The Problem of Induction (Livengood), Grounding (Saenz), Theories of Concepts (Neufeld), Metaphysics (Saenz)

Language, and Logic: Advanced Symbolic Logic (Fitts), Philosophy of Language (Del Pinal)

Value Theory: Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (Biondi)^Ψ, Rawls (Varden), Luck Egalitarianism (Bojanowski)

^Ω International Society for the History, Philosophy, and Social Studies of Biology

History: Locke's Epistemology (Weinberg), Cavendish & Shepard (Weinberg)

Relevant Science Courses: Cell & Molecular Neuroscience (Chung)^Ψ, Introduction to Neurobiology (Llano)^Ψ, Cognitive Science (Hummel), Human Behavior Genetics (Derringer), Evolution (Roseman)^Ψ, Brain, Learning, & Memory (Hineman), Evolutionary Neuroscience (Rhodes)

^Ψ Indicates audited course

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Neurophilosophy is a research program that seeks to inform and reshape philosophical inquiry by importing neuroscience research into various theoretical problems. However, outside of the philosophy of mind, neurophilosophy has had a limited impact on philosophy as a whole. This is despite significant advances in neuroscience research. My dissertation aims to reaffirm the value of neurophilosophy to philosophical inquiry by demonstrating how recent research in neuroscience can provide novel insights into various philosophical domains. This not only includes contributions to well-traveled philosophy of mind issues, such as multiple realization and phenomenal consciousness, but also includes contributions to philosophical domains that rarely engage with neuroscience, like the philosophies of art and aesthetics, or that engage with newly emergent technologies, such as large language models in the philosophy of artificial intelligence. This project also highlights, in multiple chapters, the value that neuroaesthetics, the neural study of aesthetic experiences, can bring to various philosophical domains, since recent research has demonstrated that aesthetic responses are vital in understanding a range of behavioral and cognitive functions.

In **chapter one**, I introduce research that demonstrates that conserved neurochemicals are highly relevant in the realization of various psychological states across taxa. I argue, following this research, that even though there can be cases of multiply realized psychological states, claims that psychological states are autonomous from neural states lack empirical justification since many cases of multiply realized psychological states always include the same neurochemicals.

I explore, in **chapter two**, what it means for a linguistic system to be grounded. I then argue that LLMs are referentially grounded, and this differs from the sensory-motor grounding of human language systems. I support this claim by introducing research on neurosemiotics and embodied semantics, which demonstrates that much of our semantic content is derived from worldly interactions. I ultimately argue that communication between differently grounded linguistic systems will be prone to divergences, and this will limit reliability and mutual understanding.

I discuss, in **chapter three**, the maturation of neuroaesthetics and point out how it can contribute to empirical studies of phenomenal consciousness. I demonstrate that neuroaesthetics has moved beyond an exclusive focus on neural responses to artworks. It is now a science that studies how, and importantly why, we have sensory and qualitative experiences. Thus, I argue that neuroaesthetics, when scaffolded by evolutionary principles, is poised to construct a novel framework for locating a teleological function for phenomenal consciousness.

In **chapter four**, I offer an empirical defense of aesthetic hedonism, the view that the value of an artwork is determined by its pleasure-inducing properties. Aesthetic hedonism is thought by some to be undermined by the observation that artworks that evoke negative or unpleasant sensations can be highly valued as well. I demonstrate how resolving a particular dopamine puzzle in affective neuroscience can provide shelter for the aesthetic hedonist against this painful art dilemma. I ultimately point out that the underlying endogenous opioid system, which becomes active during stressful situations, can produce hedonic sensations even in the face of painful art.

I defend the view, in **chapter five**, that artworks qualify as artifacts. Artworks have often been regarded as functionless entities; thus, many have disqualified them from possessing artifact status since orthodox views claim that artifacts must realize a proper or teleological function. I argue that artworks are artifacts since they perform hedonic functions. I introduce research from neuroaesthetics, which demonstrates that artworks act as a catalyst that stimulates the neural reward circuitry, thereby producing heightened hedonic sensations. These hedonic sensations, I claim, are the function of artworks; art appreciators seek them out and artists desire to induce them.