

Bill Watson

504 East Pennsylvania Avenue, Champaign, IL 61820
(612) 408-9745 | fwwatson@illinois.edu

Academic Appointments

University of Illinois College of Law, Champaign, IL
Assistant Professor of Law, 2024–Present

Harvard Law School, Cambridge, MA
Climenko Fellow and Lecturer on Law, 2022–2024

Education

Cornell University, Ithaca, NY
Ph.D. in Philosophy, 2023

- Committee: Andrei Marmor (chair), Emad Atiq, Julia Markovits
- Dissertation: “Explaining Legal Agreement and Disagreement”

University of Chicago Law School, Chicago, IL
J.D., with high honors, 2014

- The University of Chicago Law Review, Book Review & Essays Editor
- Order of the Coif and Kirkland & Ellis Scholar

University of Saint Thomas, Saint Paul, MN
B.A. in Philosophy and English, *summa cum laude*, 2011

Legal Employment

The Honorable Jay S. Bybee, Ninth Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals, Las Vegas, NV
Law Clerk, 2017–2018

Kirkland & Ellis, Chicago, IL
Associate, 2014–2017
Summer Associate, Summer 2013

International Human Rights Clinic, University of Chicago Law School, Chicago, IL
PILI Fellow, Summer 2014

Professor Martha C. Nussbaum, University of Chicago Law School, Chicago, IL
Research Assistant, 2012–2014

Articles

An asterisk (*) denotes publication in a peer-reviewed journal

Originalism's General-Law Turn, NW. U. L. REV. (forthcoming 2026) (with Nina Varsava)

The Plain-Meaning Fallacy, 67 B.C. L. REV. 1 (2026)

What Are We Debating When We Debate Legal Interpretation?, 105 B.U. L. REV. 1407 (2025)

Obstructing Precedent, 119 NW. U. L. REV. 259 (2024)

**Metalinguistic Negotiation in Legal Speech*, 42 LAW & PHILOSOPHY 487 (2023)

**Explaining Legal Agreement*, 14 JURISPRUDENCE 221 (2023)

**How to Answer Dworkin's Argument from Theoretical Disagreement Without Attributing Confusion or Disingenuity to Legal Officials*, 36 CAN. J. L. & JUR. 215 (2023)

**In Defense of the Standard Picture: What the Standard Picture Explains that the Moral Impact Theory Cannot*, 28 LEGAL THEORY 59 (2022)

Essays, Reviews, Etc.

Talking about Law at the Founding and Today, NOTRE DAME L. REV. (forthcoming 2026)

Exclusive Legal Positivism, in ELGAR CONCISE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF LEGAL THEORY AND PHILOSOPHY (forthcoming 2026)

Non-Frilly Non-Positivism, JOTWELL (July 8, 2025) (reviewing EMAD H. ATIQ, CONTEMPORARY NON-POSITIVISM)

In What Sense Is Law a Moral Practice?, 17 WASH. U. JUR. REV. 87 (2024) (reviewing SCOTT HERSHOVITZ, LAW IS A MORAL PRACTICE)

How to Choose an Interpretive Method, JOTWELL (June 26, 2024) (reviewing Francisco Javier Urbina, *Reasons for Interpretation*)

Did the Court in SFFA Overrule Grutter?, 99 NOTRE DAME L. REV. REFLECTION 113 (2023)

The Decline of Natural Law and the Rise of Exclusive Positivism, 75 SMU L. REV. F. 174 (2022) (reviewing STUART BANNER, THE DECLINE OF NATURAL LAW)

Textualism, Dynamism, and the Meaning of "Sex," 2022 CARDOZO L. REV. DE NOVO 41 (2022)

Literalism in Statutory Interpretation: What Is It and What Is Wrong with It?, 2021 U. ILL. L. REV. ONLINE 218 (2021)

Works in Progress

A paper on the rule of law (with Colleen Murphy)

A paper on legally best versus legally right answers to legal questions

A paper on *Loper Bright* and the judicial duty to say what the law is

Selected Presentations

Originalism's General-Law Turn

- National Conference of Constitutional Law Scholars (Mar. 6, 2026)
- Law & Philosophy Conference, USC School of Law (Feb. 6, 2026)
- Faculty Workshop, University of Minnesota Law School (Jan. 29, 2026)
- Faculty Workshop, University of Iowa College of Law (Sept. 11, 2025)

Talking about Law at the Founding and Today

- Notre Dame Law Review Symposium (Feb. 13, 2026)

The Plain-Meaning Fallacy

- Constitutional Law Colloquium, Loyola Law School (Nov. 7, 2025)
- Chicagoland Junior Scholars Conference, Loyola Law School (Sept. 27, 2025)
- Junior Faculty Roundtable, Boston College Law School (Mar. 14, 2025)

What Are We Debating When We Debate Legal Interpretation?

- Philosophical Discussions Between the Common Law and Civil Law, ITAM School of Law (Jan. 23, 2025)

What Is Overruling?

- Symposium on *Philosophical Foundations of Precedent*, Notre Dame Law School (Oct. 30, 2024)

Obstructing Precedent

- Law and Philosophy Workshop, Harvard Law School (Nov. 15, 2023)
- AALS Jurisprudence Junior Scholars Workshop (Aug. 4, 2023)
- Rutgers Law School Camden Faculty Workshop (Feb. 8, 2023)

Teaching

University of Illinois College of Law

- Constitutional Law, Spring 2026, Fall 2024
- Jurisprudence, Spring 2026

- Legislation and Regulation, Fall 2025, Spring 2025
- Independent Study on Constitutional Theory, Fall 2025, Spring 2025

Harvard Law School

- Legal Research and Writing, Spring 2024, Fall 2023, Spring 2023, Fall 2022

University & Professional Service

Committee Service

- University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Senate (2024–2026)
- Lectures Committee (2025–2026)

Supervised Student Writing

- Brenton Hanisch, *Navigating Historical Water: Lower Courts' Application of Rahimi's Second Amendment Framework* (selected for publication in U. ILL. L. REV.)
- Arman Ahmed, *Forever Marked: DNA Databases, Conditional Release, and The Fourth Amendment*
- Brendan Byrne, *A Matter of Time: Defining the Scope of Congressional Power under the Foreign Commerce Clause*
- Jimmy Herdegen, *Exporting Executive Power: Outbound Investment Controls and the Major Questions Problem*

Referee for Journals

- *Canadian Journal of Law & Jurisprudence*
- *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy*
- *Jurisprudence*
- *Law and Philosophy*
- *Legal Theory*
- *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*
- *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Law*
- *Yale Law Journal*

Award

AALS Section on Jurisprudence Future Promise Award (2026)

Admissions

State of Illinois (inactive); Northern District of Illinois; Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals