2nd Ryerson Graduate Philosophy Conference

Traversing Traditions: a Polyphony of Thought

Saturday, February 22nd, 2014
Ryerson University, Toronto

Keynote Speaker: Dr. Lorraine Code (York University)

This conference has been generously supported with funding from Ryerson’s Philosophy Department, the RPGSU (Ryerson Philosophy Graduate Student Union), the Office of the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Ryerson University, and the Canadian Journal of Philosophy’s Conference Grant.
**TRaversing Traditions: A Polyphony of Thought**

**Programme**

8:30 – 9:00  Arrivals, sign-in, coffee & muffins

9:00 – 9:10  Introductory Remarks

9:10 – 9:55  *A Deistic Discussion of Murphy and Tracy’s Accounts of God’s Limited Activity in the Natural World*  
Leland Harper (University of Birmingham)

9:55 – 10:40  *This Thinking Individual: Conscience and Subjectivity in Søren Kierkegaard and Hannah Arendt*  
Carolyn Mackie (Institute for Christian Studies)

~ 15 min. break ~

10:55 – 11:40  *The Question of Sameness: Heidegger and Zwicky*  
Eben Hensby (Concordia University)

11:40 – 12:25  *William James, Intellectualism, and Vagueness*  
David Balcaras (University of Toronto)

12:25 – 1:45  Lunch: various local eateries (follow a conference volunteer or use the map)

1:50 – 2:35  *A Preliminary Widening of the Is-Ought Gap*  
Bill Cameron (University of Western Ontario)

2:35 – 3:20  *Resisting Addictive Desire: Difficulty and Epistemic Exculpation*  
Megan Hyska (University of Texas, Austin)

~ 10 min. break ~

3:30 – 4:15  *A Reconsideration of Levinas’s Critique of Plato*  
Martin Goldstein (University of Ottawa)

4:15 – 5:00  *Identity and Difference in Jacques Derrida’s “The Other Heading”*  
Joanna Sheridan (Institute for Christian Studies)

~ travel to The Arts and Letters Club of Toronto (14 Elm St.) ~

5:15 – 6:45  *Keynote Speech – Care, Concern, and Advocacy: Is There a Place for Epistemic Responsibility?*  
Professor Emerita Lorraine Code (York University)

7:00  Presenters & Organizers’ Dinner: Bangkok Garden, 18 Elm St.
ABSTRACTS

A Deistic Discussion of Murphy and Tracy’s Accounts of God’s Limited Activity in the Natural World

Leland Harper (University of Birmingham)

Seemingly, in an attempt to appease both the micro-physicists and the classical theists, Nancey Murphy and Thomas Tracy have each developed accounts of God which allow for Him to act, in an otherwise causally closed natural world, through various micro-processes at the subatomic level. While each view is distinct, they both ultimately posit that God acts in and influences the world by and through manipulation of the outcomes of either some or all micro-processes at the subatomic level. I argue that not only do each of these views skew the accounts of both micro-physics and theism just enough to preclude the appeasement of either group but that both accounts can aptly be classified as, what I term, Epistemic Deism. I go on to argue that Epistemic Deism is a weak brand of deism that ultimately provides us with little to no answers to any of serious questions discussed within the philosophy of religion, and in fact results in the development of new questions that must now be answered about the nature of God and the limitations that accounts of this type inherently place on Him.

This Thinking Individual: Conscience and Subjectivity in Søren Kierkegaard and Hannah Arendt

Carolyn Mackie (Institute for Christian Studies)

This paper explores correlations between Hannah Arendt’s understanding of the act of thinking and Søren Kierkegaard’s understanding of faith and argues that the two categories, although distinct, share certain essential qualities. Arendt’s “thinking” and Kierkegaard’s “faith” are both birthed from within a common understanding of the self as a relational subjectivity, whether this be the intra-subjective selfhood of Arendtian thinking or the heightened subjectivity of the God-relationship in Kierkegaardian faith. The two categories also share a common calling to an ethical stance that is marked by improvisation rather than codified morals. Both ultimately require that the individual assert herself in her singularity, unsupported by the validation of universal ethics.
The Question of Sameness: Heidegger and Zwicky

Eben Hensby (Concordia University)

Drawing on Heidegger and Canadian poet-philosopher Jan Zwicky, this paper challenges the notion that underlying different views of an entity there must be something that is ‘the same.’ Working from Heidegger, this paper brings forth a hermeneutic ontology from *Being and Time* as well as from later works, through a focus on the *existentiale* of understanding, interpretation, the referential totality of world, truth as *aletheia*, and the struggle of earth and world. This hermeneutics gives a foundation for thinking different ‘cultural’ worlds. The paper argues that there is not something that is ‘the same’ (e.g., objectivity) outside of all dispositions; rather, sameness is contextualized within a particular world-disclosure. To develop this position, Canadian poet-philosopher Zwicky, who directly engages with the analytic tradition, is brought into discussion with continental philosopher Heidegger. Zwicky’s work on gestalts, internal relations, truth as asymptotic limit, resonant relations, hypostatization, and the metaphoricity of being are introduced. The metaphoricity of being enables us to think how it could be that there is not something underlying the different ‘views’ of a phenomenon, and yet there are nonetheless limits in place for disclosures. Ultimately, the paper works towards understanding how we can say there are ‘many worlds in one’.

William James, Intellectualism, and Vagueness

David Balcaras (University of Toronto)

In this essay, I explore William James’s account of how experience reveals a vague world; a world of inexhaustible relations that outstrips conception. For James, the world of pure experience is fundamentally indeterminate – a mere ‘*what?*’ that we transform into a conceptual order. James’s phenomenology, combined with his radical empiricism, commits him to the existence of ontic vagueness. But if ontic vagueness is impossible, this forces a wedge between experience and reality, which James wants to dislodge. I defend James against arguments that ontic vagueness is impossible. I object at a meta-philosophical level: the arguments presuppose an implausible view of the relation between logic and metaphysics, such that metaphysical theses can be supported by purely logical theses. I argue that logic is no neutral arbiter; for one, it is undecided which logic is the correct one, and moreover, logics have metaphysical presuppositions. Key logical concepts are unintelligible unless accompanied by metaphysical claims. I argue that this response is anticipated by James in his critique of intellectualism.
A Preliminary Widening of the Is-Ought Gap

Bill Cameron (University of Western Ontario)

This paper addresses arguments to the effect that Hume’s “is-ought gap,” the view that one cannot derive normative conclusions from non-normative premises, can be bridged in straightforward or trivial ways. The author maintains that these arguments often involve suppressed premises or quietly import normative content, and therefore do not pose an obvious threat to the is-ought gap. The paper begins with a clear characterization of the is-ought gap and how this avoids some relatively uncharitable objections, then considers some more sophisticated attempts to derive an “ought” from an “is.” Applying Geach’s logical points in “Assertion,” the author shows these more sophisticated attempts to be either hiding normative content or not actually successful in deriving anything normative from purely descriptive language, and suggests that a better understanding of the is-ought gap would be reached through a more thorough development of relevant logical structures. The paper concludes by saying that although naturalists have levelled more sophisticated arguments against the is-ought gap, the difficulty in applying apparently basic arguments should give us reason to suspect that the naturalist assault on the is-ought gap may not be well-founded.

Resisting Addictive Desire: Difficulty and Epistemic Exculpation

Megan Hyska (University of Texas, Austin)

In Addiction as a Defect of the Will (2006, pp. 165-189), R. Jay Wallace characterizes addictive desires (“a-desires”) as unusual in their persistency, intensity, and linkage to one’s conception of pleasure and pain. When an addict, or a person otherwise in the grip of an “a-desire” (for instance, a starving person) does something wrong in pursuit of the object of such a desire, I take it as a premise that we view them as less guilty than a counterpart not experiencing such a desire, who commits the same act. The project here is to explain why, if we, like Wallace, take it to be possible for the addict to abstain from those morally negative actions motivated by her a-desires, the way in which these desires make abstention difficult should, to any extent, exculpate her. I consider several candidate analyses of difficulty, and conclude that none of them is clearly exculpating. I argue that it is a conception of difficulty related to the addict’s epistemic situation, rather than, say, the phenomenal unpleasantness of her task, that should be appealed to in explaining her eligibility for exculpation.
A Reconsideration of Levinas’s Critique of Plato

Martin Goldstein (University of Ottawa)

While Emmanuel Levinas claims that there is an affinity between his work and that of Plato, he even claims that *Totality and Infinity* can be seen as a return to Platonism, he nevertheless maintains that in at least one crucial way his thought diverges sharply and fundamentally from Plato’s. In opposition to the theory of anamnesis, in which Plato seems to maintain that education is really recollection, Levinas claims that ethics, which for him is synonymous with education, necessarily involves an Other who disrupts and calls the ethical subject into question, not from within but from without. In my essay, I consider Levinas’s attempt to distinguish his position from Plato’s and I ask whether his criticisms of anamnesis are reflected in Plato’s dialogue Meno. I first consider the contours of Levinas’s criticism and demonstrate that several of Levinas’s commentators have accepted his critique. Second, I turn to Meno, the dialogue in which anamnesis is first introduced. Finally, I argue that renewed attention to several important moments in the dialogue reveals Levinas’s interpretation to be problematic.

Identity and Difference in Jacques Derrida’s “The Other Heading”

Joanna Sheridan (Institute for Christian Studies)

Through an engagement with Jacques Derrida’s “The Other Heading,” I explicate Derrida’s axiom “what is proper to a culture is to not be identical to itself.” Derrida’s insight here is that cultural identity is marked by both identity and difference. In considering what kind of culture we want to have, we therefore have to consider how to properly acknowledge and accommodate both of these poles as they present themselves in culture. This requires openness to difference, to that which is other, but at the same time it does not and must not require us to give up on having an identity. I discuss Derrida’s proposals for a new European cultural identity which would be responsible be responsible for its past, responsible to others, and still remain true to Europe’s particular cultural identity. Derrida’s insistence that Europe stand up as a beacon of ethicality in the world is examined in the context of Europe’s history of raising its own particular culture to the status of a universal and violently exporting it to the rest of the world.
Care, Concern, and Advocacy: Is There a Place for Epistemic Responsibility?

Professor Emerita Lorraine Code (York University)

Taking its point of entry from a judgement that purports to disqualify an eminent medical ethicist from testifying in a debate about assisted suicide, this paper argues in favour of the ethical and political value of advocacy in contributing to appropriately just assessments of a putative knower’s responsible participation in courtroom testimony. It moves on to consider, more generally, the place of affect and care in knowing and in evaluating sensitive social issues. Against a long tradition of distrust of advocacy in/for public knowledge production, it points to the incongruity of assuming that it is impossible to care, and thence to advocate, reasonably, responsibly, and knowledgeably. While there is no doubt that advocacy is often enlisted to serve nefarious, self-interested purposes, condemning all advocacy as unacceptably partial fails to acknowledge its capacity to promote viable, socially concerned activist projects of intervention in unjust social orders, and diversity-sensitive projects of promoting social justice.