

Department of Philosophy

Visiting Speaker Series 2011-2012

Fall term (2011-2012):

September 23rd **Diane Enns, McMaster** **"Arendt in Jerusalem: Moral Agency and the Victim"**

Hannah Arendt insists that we are morally responsible for our actions, even when we are part of a victimized group. Our reticence to judge those who choose "the lesser evil" under duress, she argues, is rooted in our suspicion that we are not free agents. In this paper I consider Arendt's claims in the context of the ongoing crisis in Israel and Palestine. Given the egregious, intractable nature of this conflict and the impotence of the world's response, it is imperative that we reflect on the conditions that sustain its momentum, one of which is the denial of victims' moral agency. Arendt's emphasis on the necessity of thinking and judging can help us formulate alternative responses to cycles of violence that leave victims claiming immunity from responsibility for their own, often brutal, acts of retribution.

September 30th **Adam Riggio, McMaster** **"Overcoming the Unfortunate Heritage of Vital Materialism"**

There has recently been a strange revival of vitalist philosophy, a major topic of philosophy and biology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, this new vitalism has a very different character and purpose to the formulations of prominent vitalists like the scientist Carl Driesch and the philosopher Henri Bergson. Vitalism in its original form postulated that there were fundamental forces akin to gravity and electromagnetism (what Driesch called *entelechy*, and Bergson called *élan vital* or vital force) which living bodies alone generated and possessed. In the original vitalist philosophies, these concepts made an absolute separation between living and non-living, the empowered and the inert, the vital and the material. Contemporary vitalism, which Jane Bennett has aptly termed *vital materialism*, has a completely different purpose: as the ontology underwriting an ecologically mindful philosophy of the environment, mind, and technology. The revival of vitalism understands all matter and energy as vital, actively constituting the structures of the universe. So there is no need to segregate the vital from the inert: nothing is inert. Everything acts, and must be understood as an actor. But this is where the heritage of vitalism proves a philosophical stumbling block. Vitalist vocabulary requires a contrast of the vital and the inert in order to make sense. The purposes of Driesch and Bergson, to make life an exception to a material order of inert determinism, are antithetical to the approach of the new materialism. Making the vitalists one's predecessors makes the resultant philosophy of vital materialism schizophrenic. I hold that the solution is to abandon the vocabulary of vitalism and embrace the vocabulary of affectivity, force, and interdependence.

October 7th **Yussif Yakubu, McMaster** **"A Syndrome of Scientific Anomalies"**

Theories that engender fundamental transformations in our world view seldom come perfect from the outset for two reasons. First, the empirical discoveries and theoretical framework necessary for their full explanatory efficacy are often not yet in place. Secondly, as a consequence of the first, some of the auxiliary theories and assumptions they rely upon are often antiquated and erroneous. For these reasons, anomalies are frequent in scientific theories. In this lecture, I discuss some of the major scientific anomalies, including particularly, the paradox of altruism. I suggest that the paradox of altruism arises because one of the most fundamental Mendelian genetic principles is misapplied.

October 14th **Tracy Isaacs, University of Western Ontario** **"Forward Looking Collective Responsibility as Collective Obligation"**

What is forward-looking collective responsibility and what is its connection, if any, to backward-looking collective responsibility and to collective obligation? In this paper I will argue that the notion of forward-looking collective responsibility is not very different, if different at all, from collective obligation. I will also argue that in many cases, there is an important relationship between collective moral responsibility in the backward-looking sense, and collective moral responsibility in the forward-looking sense, and that it might not be wise to consider forward-looking collective

responsibility (or collective obligation) independently of the establishment of a causal connection to a wrong that needs addressing, and the attribution of blame. I develop my ideas using two cases: (1) Canada's historical treatment of its Indigenous people and (2) Larry May and Robert Strikwerda's claim that men as a group are responsible for the prevalence of rape in our society. Even if there is an important connection in some cases between collective obligation and collective responsibility (in the backward looking sense), it is not the case that every case of harm requiring a collective action solution is necessarily a consequence of a blameworthy collective action.

October 21st **Mark Johnstone, McMaster** **"Rational Desire in Plato's Republic"**

One of the most striking features of Plato's moral psychology, at least from a contemporary perspective, is his view that reason is a source of motivation in its own right. In this respect, as has been widely observed, Plato's view is very different from that found within the tradition stemming from Hobbes and Hume, in which reason works only to figure out how best to satisfy our pre-existing desires. However, it is not immediately clear what Plato took rational desires - that is, the desires of reason - to be. Perhaps the most famous statement of Plato's view is found in the Republic, where the human soul is said to contain three distinct elements or parts, each of which has its own distinctive pleasures and desires. Some passages in the Republic suggest that the desires of the rational part of the soul (to logistikon) are desires to do what one considers best overall. However, other passages in the Republic suggest that the rational part of the soul is especially responsible for people's seemingly basic desires to learn and discover the truth. This creates a puzzle, since these two accounts of the nature of rational desire might appear incompatible. In light of this apparent duality in Plato's view, it becomes unclear whether he was entitled to treat reason as a single, unified source of motivation, as he seemed determined to do. In this paper, I show how this apparent tension within Plato's conception of rational desire can be resolved.

October 28th **Frédéric Bouchard, Université de Montréal** **"There are no organisms, just complex multi-species individuals. So what are the bearers of adaptation?"**

Organisms have always played a privileged role in our understanding of biological phenomena. Explicitly or not, biologists and philosophers have assumed that what made organisms special contra other types of organization (e.g. genes, genomes, groups, species, etc) was their relatively high structural/material homogeneity (they are made of the same type of material and have a shared origin) and functional integrity (the organism is a functional whole acting as one system). Developments in microbiology and in symbiosis research weaken the appeal of these intuitions. Most organisms are in fact composites of multiple species and the apparent superiority of organisms over other types of organisation needs re-appraisal. In this presentation, I will examine how various philosophy of biology accounts of biological individuality (J. Wilson, R. Wilson, D.S. Wilson and Sober, J. Dupré) fare against these developments. I will argue that the primacy of organisms needs to be replaced by the primacy of complex multi-species individuals and analyse the consequence of this for how we understand biological adaptations.

November 4th **Barbara Levenbook, North Carolina State University** **"Deflating the Argument from Theoretical Disagreement"**

Dworkin's well-known argument from theoretical disagreement, developed in Law's Empire, has been highly influential, spawning modifications and even abandonments of legal positivist positions. But this argument is neither as important nor as apparently sound as prominent philosophers of law have assumed. Its major premise is dubious, and the conclusion drawn from it does not follow. When background assumptions that appear to lend credence to its major premise are exposed, they turn out to be unmotivated, question-begging, or supported by weak arguments. There is, thus, no reason to regard the theoretical disagreement argument as a serious impediment to the development of a contrary theory of law.

November 11th **Kevin Toh, San Francisco State University** **"Artificial Norms and Interstitial Reasoning"**

November 18th Stefan Sciaraffa, McMaster "A General Conception of Authority"

Because authoritative relationships are so pervasive and significant, it is an important question that asks whether they are justified. In turn, answering this question requires a clear understanding of what, exactly, such relationships entail. In other words, it requires determining the structure of an authoritative relationship. Raz enumerates a number of platitudes about authority from which he reaches certain conclusions about its structure. Chief among these platitudes is the idea noted above that the subjects of an authority surrender their judgment to the authority. On the basis of this platitude, he concludes that A has legitimate authority over S only if A's directives provide S with a content-independent reason to act as directed and an exclusionary reason not to act for reasons that weigh for and against so acting. Raz also develops an account of the condition under which authority, so specified, is normally justified. Together, these theses constitute Raz's service-conception of authority. Here, I accept Raz's claim that authority is (at least in part) a relationship in which a subject surrender her judgment to the authority. However, I reject his claim that we must specify the notion of a surrender of judgment in terms of exclusionary reasons, and I argue that the conditions that Raz enumerates in his normal justification thesis are not the only conditions under which agents have reason to surrender judgment to an authority. Rather, agents may have such reason when conditions relating to coordination and democratic decision-making, respectively, obtain. In sum, I defend a general account of authority that encompasses Raz's service-conception of authority and two other forms of authority: coordination and democratic authority.

November 25th John Bell, The University of Western Ontario "On the Cohesiveness of the Continuum"

It is characteristic of a continuum that it be "all of one piece", in the sense of being inseparable into two (or more) disjoint nonempty parts. By taking "part" to mean open (or closed) subset of the space, one obtains the usual topological concept of connectedness. Thus a space is defined to be connected if it cannot be partitioned into two disjoint nonempty open (or closed) subsets-or equivalently, given any partition of the space into two open (or closed) subsets, one of the members of the partition must be empty. This holds, for example, for the space of real numbers and for all of its open or closed intervals. Now a truly radical condition results from taking the idea of being "all of one piece" literally, that is, if it is taken to mean inseparability into any disjoint nonempty parts, or subsets, whatsoever. A space satisfying this condition is called cohesive or indecomposable. While the law of excluded middle of classical logic reduces indecomposable spaces to the trivial empty space and one-point spaces, the use of intuitionistic logic makes it possible not only for nontrivial cohesive spaces to exist, but for every connected space to be cohesive. In this talk I describe the philosophical background to cohesiveness as well as some of the ways in which the idea is modelled in contemporary mathematics.

December 2nd Christopher Wellman, Washington University "Political Legitimacy and Territorial Rights"

Few deny that states should be delineated territorially, but questions abound as to what moral rights states can claim to which parcels of territory. In other words, even if one assumes that states can be legitimate and must be territorially districted (and not everyone does, of course), why think that Norway is entitled to exclusive jurisdiction over the particular piece of territory it currently occupies? And even if Norway does have a special claim to this land, what rights does this give it against which parties? More specifically, does Norway have exclusive rights of jurisdiction (the right to make and enforce law on its territory), resources (the right to control and consume the natural resources available in its territory), and/or border control (the right to design and enforce its own immigration policy as it sees fit)?

It is tempting to suppose that legitimate states enjoy these three rights to jurisdiction, resources, and border control. It is far from clear, however, how the dominant approach to political legitimacy-functional accounts-can ground these rights. Thus, prominent authors like David Miller have recently suggested that functional theories of political legitimacy must be replaced or at least supplemented with nationalist elements. I am not convinced that invoking a nation's claim to territory can do the desired work, but I shall not press this critique here. In this paper, I shall merely explore how a functional theorist might try to ground a legitimate state's claims to jurisdiction, border control and resources. In my view, functional theorists can provide plausible accounts of the first two territorial rights, but it remains unclear how they can justify the third. Assuming that this is correct, the plausibility of non-nationalist functional theories of political legitimacy will depend upon whether natural resources should be understood as belonging exclusively to the citizens of the country in which they lie.

Winter term (2011-2012):

January 13th **Haixia Zhong, McMaster** **"Diagonalization and Truth Gap Theory"**

After Tarski, Kripke's truth gap theory probably is the most influential theory in the analysis of 'truth' and the Liar Paradox. Briefly, Kripke's idea is that though the majority of declarative sentences in a language (e.g. English) can receive a truth value ('true' or 'false'), the Liar sentence as well as other similar pathological sentences cannot. Such kind of sentences suffer from so-called 'truth gaps', thus are 'undefined' or 'ungrounded'. Despite the elegant formal construction and precise definitions, the philosophical interpretation of the nature of those 'gaps' in Kripke's theory is still an open question. As a result, there are many criticisms for this approach, especially about the expressive power of the language he constructed and the problem called 'the revenge of the Liar'. In this paper, I will first examine several important interpretations in literature as well as their problems, and then put forward my own interpretation which is based on the notion 'diagonalization' and argue how it could modify Kripke's truth gap theory so that it can respond to those important criticisms.

January 20th **Polly Winsor, Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology, University of Toronto** **"Evidence from the Experts: Darwin's Dependence upon the Essential Characters of Linnaeus"**

"No one regards the external resemblance of a mouse to a shrew, of a dugong to a whale, of a whale to a fish, as of any importance. These resemblances, though so intimately connected to the whole life of the being, are ranked as merely 'adaptive or analogical characters;...' (Origin of Species, p. 414).

Victorian taxonomists, including the anatomist who defined analogy and homology, strove to distinguish "essential" from non-essential characters. What they meant by that term owed very little to Plato or Aristotle but a great deal to the character essentialis of Linnaeus. Darwin acknowledged that he owed the Swedish founder of taxonomy an enormous debt, which he took steps to repay. Yet the role of Linnaean taxonomy as evidence for evolution was misconstrued by some of his closest supporters, and has been distorted or neglected ever since.

January 27th **Rachel Barney, University of Toronto** **Practical Reason and the Art of Living**

An exploration of the thesis, common to many of the leading ancient philosophical systems, that moral excellence is itself a craft or form of expertise.

February 3rd **Owen Thornton, McMaster** **"How and Why We Tolerate Weakness of Will"**

In this paper I argue that we embrace, rather than spurn, weakness of the will. We do so in order to hide from our own psychological features that prevent us from accepting and identifying what Bransen calls "the normatively significant features of the world". There is a great deal of difference from what we should want, if we are to behave with good character, than what we really want so that we can embrace weakness of the will.

February 10th **Christopher Tindale, University of Windsor** **"Expert Arguments and Rhetorical Proofs"**

Expert arguments and their reception continue to mystify theorists. Consideration of cases like the Andrew Wakefield case (the vaccination and autism controversy), where belief persists in spite of discredited expertise, suggest it can be more than the arguments themselves that makes a difference for lay audiences. Approaching matters from an audience perspective shifts the focus from looking at experts solely as repositories of knowledge and viewing them also as communicators. And this brings rhetorical issues into the discussion. As part of a general consideration of what rhetorical features bring to the study of argumentation, I am interested in how expert testimony is received. And to assess that I go back to Aristotle's basic "proofs" for rhetorical argument and consider their role in the communication and reception of expert arguments, using the Wakefield case for illustration.

February 17th **No Speaker**

February 24th **READING WEEK: No Speaker**

March 2nd **James Ingram, Political Science, McMaster** **"The New Universalism"**

After being at the center of controversies of the 1980s and 90s - from communitarianism to postmodernism to human rights - universalism seems to have drifted out of the center of philosophical attention in the new millennium. This may have been partly a matter of argumentative exhaustion, as debates hardened into impasses, and partly the result of a political conjuncture in which what many saw a new imperialism borrowed the clothes of older universalisms. In my view this ending came too soon. At the end of the nineties, a new approach to universalism was taking shape that promised to address many of the defects of earlier versions. Promoted not only by philosophers and political theorists but also importantly by historians and anthropologists, this new universalism avoided the question of whether there are transcultural universals and what they might be, and focused instead on how ostensible universals are theorized, refined, and improved. In a move that could be called pragmatist or left-Hegelian, it shifted the question from theory to practice, from epistemology to politics, from what universals are to how they work. In this paper, I draw on a number of theorists, especially Judith Butler and Etienne Balibar, to develop an ideal-typical reconstruction of this new way of thinking universalism.

March 9th **Cressida Heyes, Hooker Distinguished Visiting Professor, University of Alberta** **"Anaesthetic Ethics? On the Philosophical Significance of Checking Out"**

This event will be held in Hamilton Hall 302 at 3:30pm.

The sovereign subject of neoliberal capitalism is required to exercise his autonomy iteratively, expressing his individuality qua capacity to choose in an interminable series of self-determining moments. When presented in the language of political philosophy we can lose sight of the lived experience of this subjectivity: it can be exhausting, ego-driven, obsessed with irrelevant choices, and abusively self-disciplining, committed to the fantasy of organizing and rationalizing a life of freedom in political contexts where freedom is systemically denied. This talk examines the phenomenological significance and political potential of anaesthesia, both literal and metaphorical, arguing that the lived experience of the loss of sensibility may have a political importance in modulating demands for a perpetually self-creating individual. It contrasts Michel Foucault's description of "an aesthetics of existence" with "anaesthetics of existence"--those routine, habitual strategies of pain-relief that we use to cope with the trials of everyday life. I suggest that "checking out" can be understood as both a necessary response to sensory crisis and a latent form of political resistance.

March 16th **Günther Zöller, Ludwig-Maximilians Universität, Munich** **"Homo homini civis. The Modernity of Classical German Political Philosophy"**

The paper focuses on the specifically political conception of the human individual in the moral, social and political philosophy of Kant and the German idealists, placing their political thinking into the larger historical context of modern accounts of the relation between the citizen and the state. In particular, I propose to draw on Kant, Fichte and Hegel for extracting a conception of selfhood that is mindful of the worth of the individual and attentive to its supra- and inter-individual existence in general and its existence in political or civil society and the state in particular.

March 23rd **Nancy Doubleday, McMaster** **"Peace and Health: Ways of Knowing, Opportunities and Challenges"**

The difficulties inherent in the construction of ideals, or universals, such as concepts of "peace" and "health" (and others such as "sustainability") mirror in some senses the histories, biases, preferences and other factors that can be understood to constitute "culture". However, the pursuit of peace and health as universals can seem discouraging and fruitless. Putting ideas into practice, or attempting to "be the change" in the language of Gandhi, offers access to reflexivity, and allows for creating opportunities to understand ourselves in relation to the processes by which social, cultural and ecological determinants of peace and health, as co-dependent conditions, emerge and can be nurtured. The complexity of social-ecological systems, and the competing truths evident from points within and beyond, and indeed the difficulties for determining what constitutes knowledge and truth in a moment, particularly where contrasting world-views exist, create challenges in understanding and communicating processes of change. Drawing from a caribou case study over a thirty-year period, I hope to pose a useful and challenging example for purposes of considering connections amongst ways of knowing, the role of power and orthodoxy, and the processes by which social-cultural-ecological determinants of peace and health are nurtured - or not. A brief consideration of the implications of clarifying interrelationships in this way, and of the opportunities and challenges flowing from it, will open discussion.

March 30th **Dr. Nikolay Milkov, Russell** **"The Joint Philosophical Program of Russell and Wittgenstein**
Professor, McMaster **and Its Demise"**

Between April and November 1912, Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein were engaged in a joint philosophical program. Wittgenstein's meeting with Gottlob Frege in December 1912 led, however, to the dissolution of his 'intellectual honeymoon' with Russell—their joint program was abandoned. The talk will outline the key points of that program, identifying specifically what Russell and Wittgenstein each contributed to it. It will also determine precisely those features of their collaborative work that Frege criticized. Finally, it will recast along previously undeveloped lines the defining elements of Wittgenstein's early philosophy. I shall conclude with an overview of Wittgenstein's logical-philosophical discoveries in the two years following his encounter with Frege in 1912.