Philosophy Department Speaker Series

Fall Term, 2017

Unless announced otherwise, all lectures are held on Fridays at 3:30pm

DeGroot School of Business B107

**(New Location)**

September 15:  Ronald de Sousa (University of Toronto)

"Muses, Fluffers, and the Curse of Satisfaction"

Abstract: Plato was perhaps the first but certainly not the last philosopher to take a dim view of desire. Lust, in particular, offers a model of desire reducible, in Shakespeare's famous phrase, to 'expense of spirit in a waste of shame': and other poets and philosophers have argued that desire is essentially pain, that its object is often not what we think it is, and that satisfaction (in the limited measure in which it is even possible) only makes it worse. This talk begins by distinguishing semantic satisfaction (getting what you thought you wanted) from emotional satisfaction (actually enjoying what you are getting). It discusses some findings of recent brain science and psychology, due to Kent Berridge and others, that show that the natural and expected correlation between wanting something and getting pleasure from it can be disrupted. This helps to explain the phenomenon of 'dust and ashes'—the absence of emotional satisfaction following semantic satisfaction—as well as other ways in which 'satisfaction' can fail to prove satisfying. Such explanations, however, don't altogether resolve the problem of the 'curse of satisfaction'.

September 22:  Richard T.W. Arthur (McMaster University)

"Monads as Constituents of Bodies in Leibniz's Metaphysics"

Abstract: One of the enduring puzzles about Leibniz’s metaphysics is how Leibniz could claim that monads, understood as immaterial, could constitute the material bodies of experience. In this paper I sketch how I think Leibniz intended this to be understood. First, I situate his introduction of his monads as a solution to the problem of the composition of the continuum. With this in place, I distinguish Leibniz’s notion of constitution from composition, and show how this can be construed to deliver his conclusions by constructing a kind of "characteristic" using his definitions and symbols.

September 29th and October 6th:  No Talks Have Been Scheduled
October 13th: Fall Recess

October 20: Claudine Verheggen (York University)

"Davidson's Treatment of Wittgenstein's Rule-Following Paradox"

Abstract: The aim of this paper is first to show that Wittgenstein and Davidson both argue for semantic non-reductionism, the rejection of any account of meaning that does not invoke semantic notions, in similar ways, and that consequently they conceive of the use they both take to be essential to meaning in a similar way. Both think that a full account of meaning requires us to consider this use within a semantic context, so that we cannot say what speakers mean by their words, and what words mean, without saying what speakers use their words to mean, and we cannot answer the question what makes it possible for someone to have a language without thinking of her as already having one. However, whereas Wittgenstein makes only very general remarks about the kind of use that is essential to meaning, Davidson has much more to say about the topic and, as a result, provides a significantly richer and more constructive way to address the paradox about meaning and rule-following developed by Wittgenstein.

October 27: Doreen Fraser (University of Waterloo)

"The non-miraculous success of formal analogies in physics"

Abstract: When physicists develop a successful new theory, philosophers often infer that the new theory is approximately true in some respects. This is the core intuition of scientific realism, captured by the 'no miracles' argument: that success in science is explained by getting something right about the world. However, a heuristic strategy that has been successfully deployed in quantum theory undermines this realist intuition. New quantum theories have been developed by drawing on purely formal analogies to theories that apply in different domains (i.e., the formal analogies are guided by the mathematical structure shared by the two domains, but the mathematical structure is given entirely different physical interpretations in each domain). For example, the Higgs model in particle physics was developed by analogy to models of superconductors. I will argue that the success of formal analogies in quantum theory is explicable, and that the explanation carries lessons about both the shortcomings of scientific realism and the role of analogical reasoning in science.

November 3: David DeVidi (Waterloo)
"On what there is, what there isn't, and none of the above"

Abstract: It is a philosophical commonplace that logic and metaphysics have been closely related disciplines “from the beginning.” The close relationship has survived, and indeed thrived, throughout the rapid evolution and diversification of logic over the past 150 years—including through rocky stages where logic was thought to be the key to rubbing out metaphysics altogether. While keeping formal details to a minimum, I will focus not on attempts to eliminate metaphysics, but on the suggestion that the tools of formal logic allow us to illuminate our metaphysical commitments. I will suggest that certain results in some non-classical logics have not yet received due consideration in the metaphysics literature. They yield a more nuanced picture of our metaphysical commitments, and thereby also a more nuanced picture of what is real, what is not, and what the other options are.

November 10: Lynne Tirrell (University of Connecticut)

"Toxic Speech"

Abstract: Applying a medical conception of toxicity to speech practices, this paper calls for an epidemiology of discursive toxicity. Toxicity highlights the mechanisms by which speech acts and discursive practices can inflict harm, making sense of claims about harms arising from speech devoid of slurs, epithets, or a narrower class I call ‘deeply derogatory terms.’ Further, it highlights the role of uptake and susceptibility, and so suggests a framework for thinking about damage variation. Toxic effects vary depending on one’s epistemic position, access, and authority. An inferentialist account of discursive practice plus a dynamic view of the power of language games offers tools to analyze the toxic power of speech acts. A simple account of language games helps track changes in our discursive practices. Identifying patterns contributes to an epidemiology of toxic speech, which might include tracking increasing use of derogatory terms, us/them dichotomization, terms of isolation, new essentialisms, and more. Using this framework, I analyze some examples of speech already said to be toxic, working with a rough concept of toxicity as poison. Finally, exploring discursive toxicity pushes us to find ways that certain discursive practices might “inoculate” one to absorbing toxic messages, or less metaphorically, block one’s capacity to make toxic inferences, take deontic stances that foster toxicity, etc.

November 17: Kirk Lougheed (McMaster University)

"Disagreement, Deep Time, and Progress in Philosophy"

Abstract: The recent literature in the epistemology of disagreement examines the question of how one ought to respond to awareness of epistemic peer disagreement about her belief that P. There is an ever-growing body of literature on this topic that, ironically enough, represents widespread disagreement about how we should respond to disagreement. I will use the
epistemology of disagreement to help address the question of whether there is any progress in philosophy. I argue that the widespread disagreement throughout the history of philosophy, and right up until the present day indicates that philosophers are highly unreliable at arriving at the truth. If truth convergence indicates progress in a field, then there is little progress in philosophy. I conclude that this need not make us give up philosophizing: That we are poor philosophers is a contingent, rather than necessary fact about the human species. Perhaps given the existence of deep time there will eventually will be truth convergence in philosophy.

November 24: **Georgia Mouroutsou** (Western University)

"Plato's Phaedo: Are the Philosophers' Pleasures of Learning Pure?"

**Abstract:** My question in this paper is whether the philosophers’ pleasures of learning in the Phaedo are pure of pain. This is a question that, though to my knowledge it has not yet been asked about this dialogue, is very important for the development of Plato’s critical project on pleasure, for the pleasures of learning are characterized as pure in both the Republic and the Philebus. In agreement with the analysis of the pleasures of learning in the Philebus, I will argue that necessarily, in contrast to bodily pleasures, the philosopher's pleasures of learning are neither preceded nor followed by opposite pains. I argue, on the contrary, that it is their nature to be free, necessarily, of such pains. That said, the philosophers’ intellectual endeavors are not characterized by immunity from all intellectual pain, but by the philosophers’ particular attitude toward intellectual pain.

For my purposes, I will focus on the initial example of bodily pleasure that Socrates introduces (60b3-c7) and Socrates’ intellectual activities related to learning in his autobiography (the first voyage, 96a6-99d2), and will also consider the misology passage (88c1-91c5). If the picture and the conclusions I draw are accurate, then Plato’s philosophical project on pleasure is unified in the following respect: although we are far before the Philebus’ analysis of pleasure, Plato already in the Phaedo thinks of the relation to pain as fundamental to the nature of (different kinds of) pleasure.

December 1: **François Tanguay-Renaud** (York University)

"Policing Necessity"

**Abstract:** to follow
Philosophy Department Speaker Series
Winter Term, 2018

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Kenneth Taylor Hall B124

**(New Location)**

January 12: Emilia Angelova (Concordia University):

"Hegel after Nancy: On the Necessity of Freedom and History in The Phenomenology of Spirit."

Abstract: I develop a reconstruction of the account of negativity in the Phenomenology of Spirit, starting with the remarks in chapter 6, "The Ethical Order," about the power of the abstract pure universality of the death of the individual, which enacts a Law as ground, the "negativity of the Notion." For Hegel, I show, this ground as Law already has within itself the moment of consciousness. This "within itself" makes possible that the Law of the natural world is raised to consciousness, through its connection with the law of the polity or the "community," their mutual transition into one another." The latter has superiority for it is "openly valid." This is discussed under the heading of the divine law of the Family. Hegel judges the bother-and-sister kinship as superior, since it goes "against the admixture with a natural relation and with feeling." (The basis is the death of Polynéices and reciprocally, the deed of proper burial by Antigone, from sophocles' Antigone.) Jean-Luc Nancy draws from the debate staged between the Ancients and Moderns in Hegel and proposes a reinterpreted notion of the "restlessness of the negative." In my account of negativity, I stress that Hegel is better understood as proposing an ontological dialectical structure underlying the social bond of individual and society, closer to Nancy's community of non-oppositional singular-plural-being in the world as "being-with-one-another." I underscore especially the negativity of the Notion and how it plays out in Nancy's own terms of "plasticity," "trembling," and "recognition" of self in another, and why in "truth" we are always referred back to the opening of the question: what does it mean to say "other," what does it mean for the other to appear as other at all?
19 January: Susan Mills (MacEwan University, Edmonton)

"The ‘best system’: Descartes on natural sensory error and God's goodness"

Abstract: Immediately following Descartes's statement in Meditation Six about the "proper purpose" of sensations, Descartes recognizes a serious problem with the fact that, on occasion, our senses do not fulfill their purpose and sensory error occurs. If this were a problem of wrong judgement, Descartes could explain it as an error on our part, that is, as a misuse of our faculties. But it is not that kind of error. Rather, it is an error in the nature that God gave us, and that is a problem. On pain of contradiction with God's perfection, natural sensory error should never happen, and yet it does.; thus, Descartes needs a theodicy. So it is that near the end of Meditation Six, Descartes declares that our God-given sensory system-with its occasional errors and all-is the "best system that could be devised."

In this paper, I will unpack what "the best" means in this context and how this defense of God's goodness is supposed to work as a solution to the problem of natural sensory error. Subsequent to that analysis, I will argue that this defense is inconsistent with the freedom of Descartes's God. In particular, I will argue that Descartes's God is not an architect in the sense of creating within the constraints of a fixed end. For this reason primarily, I maintain that Descartes is not at his own best when it comes to resolving the problem of natural sensory error. Nevertheless, with an eye to Descartes's medical ambitions, I will add that the problem is not all that devastating—indeed, it is complementary-to his philosophy beyond the Meditations.

January 26: Colleen Murphy (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign)

"Transitional Justice and the International Rule of Law"

Abstract: Societies emerging from periods of conflict or repression and trying to democratize characteristically try to address past wrongs using processes other than criminal punishment. There is, however, deep disagreement as to whether justice is achieved with alternate measures such as amnesty or a truth commission. I argue that transitional justice is not aimed at giving perpetrators what they deserve, but rather is aimed at transforming a society in a just manner. Multiple kinds of processes can contribute to this transformation. I then discuss and dismiss one source of possible tension between the flexibility transitional justice may permit and the uniformity the international rule of law seems to demand.

February 2: Nick Stang (University of Toronto)

Abstract: To follow.
February 5 (MONDAY):  David Enoch

**ROOM CHANGE - IWC E201**

**Abstract:** To follow

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February 9: **Megan Stotts** (McMaster University)

"A Behavioural Metaphysics for Social Institutions”

**Abstract:** It is a commonplace observation that social institutions are deeply dependent on humans. That is, the existence of social institutions such as the government of Canada, the Catholic Church, and the English language depends on humans in a way in which the existence of forests, oceans, and solar systems does not. A well-established view in the literature is that, in particular, the existence of social institutions depends on collective acceptance—that is, on our shared mental states. I will argue that the collective acceptance approach to social institutions is untenable. A natural response to the problems that the collective acceptance approach faces is to portray social institutions as grounded in other kinds of human mental states, but even then, there is cause for concern. I argue that instead, we need an entirely non-mental account of the metaphysics of social institutions. My positive proposal is to ground social institutions in a certain kind of copying behaviour among humans. This view respects the insight that social institutions are deeply dependent on humans, but with a twist: the existence of social institutions depends on what we do, not on what we think.

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February 16  No Talk

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February 23  Recess

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March 2  **Alexis Shotwell** (Carleton University)

"Claiming bad kin: Responsibility for a suffering world"

**Abstract:** Utah Phillips is often quoted as having said: “The Earth is not dying, it is being killed, and those who are killing it have names and addresses.” This shift from the passive (“someone is dying”) to the active (“this person murders”) constellates social relations of suffering and dying on the planet today. Understanding that the bad things that are happening are not accidents but active choices may call on us to take sides and get organized. When we understand what is happening, those of us who benefit from harm and wrong-doing may want to take the side of the
oppressed, the murdered, the wounded. We may also respond by disavowing our connection to the people killing the earth and its people and critters. We may try to claim kin relations with the people who are targeted by social relations of racism, rather than claiming kin with the social relations of harm that benefit us. In this paper, I ask what it could mean for white people and settlers who benefit from historical and current effects of chattel slavery, colonialism, racial distributions of environmental devastation, and capitalism to claim kin with the people producing these effects. If we are complicit in the pain of this suffering world, how might we take responsibility for our bad kin?

March 9: Dustin Olson  (Russell Visiting Professor)

Abstract: To follow.

March 16: Michael O'Rourke

“Talking over the fence: Dialogue and integration in interdisciplinary research.”

Abstract: To follow.

March 23: Candace Delmas

Abstract: To follow.