

14th Annual SUNY Oneonta
Undergraduate Philosophy Conference
April 16-18, 2009
Abstracts (4/7/09)

Brian Ballard
University of California, Santa Cruz (Santa Cruz, CA)

Discussant:

Mental Causation and the Physical World: A Moorean-Reidian Approach

Abstract: Many people accept the completeness thesis, which says that the physical world is causally complete, that every physical event that has cause has a physical cause. However, this leads to well-known problems of mental causation, problems that may require us to give up on mental causation if we are to go on accepting the completeness thesis. I argue that, if we do indeed face such a dilemma between the completeness thesis and mental causation, what we should give up on is the completeness thesis, since mental causation has a much stronger epistemic status.

Michael Barkasi
Kutztown University of Pennsylvania (Kutztown, PA)

Discussant:

The Mathematics of Aristotle's Theory of Time

Abstract: Aristotle's discussion of time in the *Physics* IV has received relatively little attention in modern times. The attention that it has received has often been critical and charges of inconsistency and circularity are often leveled against it. This is an unfortunate fact, given that Aristotle's overall recognition that time is dependent on measurement is a bit of genius not to be reproduced again until Einstein. In this paper, I focus on the mathematics of Aristotle's account of time. First, I focus on the role of measurement in defining time for Aristotle, and discuss Aristotle's derivation of the continuity of time from the continuity of motion and magnitude. Then I argue that Aristotle uses this measurement-dependent view of time to solve some initial topological problems he outlines at the beginning of his discussion of time. The upshot of this discussion is that I offer an elegant and simple interpretation of Aristotle's discussion of 'now' that shows how the 'now' can be both like the point on a line and like the unit of measurement. No attempt is made to give a complete interpretation of the passage.

Jake M Bartholomew
University of Alaska (Anchorage, AK)
Discussant: Michael Corry (SUNY Oneonta)

The Forger & the Oeuvre

Abstract: This paper serves as an attempt to provide a less biased account of forgery as an artistic act. Rather than dealing with the forger as a negative example of what art is not, this essay endeavors to consider the social and historical aspects of the artistic field and considering how these have colored our conception of the forger, as well as what the methods and successes of the forger imply for aesthetic philosophy. While lesser forgeries deserve criticism for being inferior works of art, it seems that the main reason for their exclusion of the forged work of art is that it does not obey the rules of the artistic field which allow it to function with relative autonomy. The art world relies on a conception of the artist and artistic production as being for art only, ignoring the existence of art as a product of consumption. By getting their work Accepted as part of the *oeuvre* of another artist, the forger collapses the method of value creation and, hence, the method by which art is allowed to ignore

the artist's need for financial gain. If we treat the forger with charity, it can easily be seen that they are merely exiled producers of a particular sort of art, and that the distinction between a forgery and a work of art done by an artist under their actual name, while important, is less so than aesthetic philosophers would have us believe, especially with the considerations afforded to us by Post-modern artists.

Kevin Busch

University of Chicago (Chicago, IL)

Discussant: Will Hancock (SUNY Potsdam)

Darwin's Benevolent Idea

Abstract: Darwin's device of Natural Selection, formalized in 1859 in *On the Origin of Species*, is well known across many disciplines distinct from the sciences. Less known, however, is his application of this device to a theory of morality—of what “moral sense” consists in. This paper is first an examination of Darwin's moral theory and his claim that in order to discover what “moral sense” is we must look in the realm of “instinct”. However, I immediately follow a brief account of Darwin's reasoning with a twofold challenge to his moral theory. One discovers, upon closer scrutiny, the limits of Darwin's Natural Selection, and cannot help but marvel at the question mark of what our instincts actually *are*, for they certainly do not consist in what Nature happens to deem most “useful”.

Shae Deven Chang

University of Hawaii (Manoa, HI)

Discussant: Geoffrey Vanderwoude (SUNY Potsdam)

Undressing the Machine: Necessitarianism and the Impossibility of Other Possible Worlds in Spinoza's System

Abstract: In Ip33 of the *Ethics* (1677) Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) argues for the conclusion that “[t]hings could not have been produced by God in any other way or in any other order than is the case.” In this paper I will briefly examine this argument and the necessitarianism underlying it, and then explore in greater detail whether Spinoza would allow for the possibility of other worlds based on this conclusion. I argue that this actual world is the only possible world for Spinoza, given Spinoza's prior commitment to an affirmative doctrine of absolute necessity governing the universe and everything in it (Ip16). I see this as a first step to understanding his theory of freedom.

The main resources used in this paper are Edwin M. Curley's translation of Spinoza's *Ethics* in *The Essential Spinoza*, Jonathan Bennett's *A Study of Spinoza*, and Edwin Curley's *Behind the Geometrical Method*.

Jeffery Culver

DePaul University (Chicago, IL)

Discussant:

Language: A Problem of Particularity

Abstract: In analyzing the problems of language, seeking the help of philosophers is an understated must. In *Language: A Problem of Particularity*, those inconveniences are relieved by taking a comparative view of the resolutions brought about by John Locke and the Chinese skeptic Zhuangzi. Based around the generalized problem that language has functioning due to particularity in the universe, the two authors are delicately probed for their insights to this issue. As a result an interesting, and multifaceted hybrid approach allows greater access to working with language, and as a result minimizes the inconveniences that plague all languages.

Michael DiSiena

Siena College (Loudonville, NY)

Discussant: Matthew Chick (SUNY Potsdam)

The Love of Death in Richard Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde"

Abstract: Richard Wagner's famous opera *Tristan und Isolde* contains a multitude of philosophical insights. Of particular interest to this paper, is the relationship of love and death exhibited by Tristan and Isolde. To undergo this exploration, we will utilize various concepts in the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer as presented in *The World as Will and Representation* as well as the traditional understandings of Eros and Agape.

Adam Edmonson

University of Central Missouri (Warrensburg, MO)

Discussant: Nicole Hauk (SUNY Oneonta)

Religion, Speciesism, and the Past and Future of Ethics Toward Animals

Abstract: It is the purpose of this paper to briefly examine the long and varied history of ethics toward animals from the philosophers of Greece and the scripture of the ancient Jews, to the early Christians, the Romans before and after Constantine, the Enlightenment thinkers, and onward. The paper focuses mainly on the evolving and resurfacing human attitudes toward and beliefs about nonhuman animals, and the way in which they should be treated, rather than focusing on specific incidental or perennial behaviors of humans toward nonhuman animals. The argument put forward by Peter Singer in his book *Animal Liberation* is the *locus classicus* for my ethical discussion of the subject. I attempt to extract from the various observations, by Singer, myself, and others, a general trend which can be used to predict and affect the future of ethics toward animals in Western civilizations, focusing on the role of religion, speciesism, systematic desensitization, and the human propensity toward rationalization and cognitive dissonance. I have argued the case for a revision of human ethics toward animals for the better, but seek beyond that to bring this somewhat overlooked subject into the light of rational philosophical discourse, whatever the outcome.

Christopher Paul Graves

The University of Houston-Downtown (Houston, TX)

Discussant:

Karl Marx's Critique of Modernity through His Understanding of Ideology

Abstract: In *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Rene Descartes' consolidates his understanding of the subject, arguing that the essence of the subject lies in her capacity for rational thought—and, importantly, not in her embeddedness in a socio-historical context, her rootedness in a body, or in her practical, worldly activity. Although Descartes put forward this view of the subject more than three centuries ago, it still continues to inform and remain dominant in the modern western world. Unbeknownst to Descartes, however, is that he gives expression to and buttresses what Karl Marx denounces as bourgeois ideology. It is the purpose of this paper to flesh out Marx's meaning behind bourgeois ideology in an effort to understand his critique not only of Descartes, but also, more importantly, of modernity and capitalism.

Whitney Paige Green

University of Illinois at Chicago (Chicago, IL)

Discussant: Elisabeth Levine (SUNY Oneonta)

Is the Female Orgasm an Adaptation?

Abstract: The question of the evolutionary utility of female orgasm is profound for many reasons, but most importantly, it will influence our ideas regarding human sexuality and equality between the sexes. The prevailing theory in evolutionary biology is that the female orgasm is not an adaptation; despite arguments to the contrary, non-adaptive accounts of the female orgasm suggests that it is

fundamentally less-purposeful—and more supererogatory—than the male orgasm. By answering this question, we can gain insight into the essential nature and potential of male and female sexuality. After having read several books and articles on the subject, I have evaluated the arguments for and against adaptationist accounts of the female orgasm. What I have found is that there is a substantial amount of confusion built into the debate, due largely to a lack of harmony in its terminology. I show that, given the validity of the non-adaptive account, the female orgasm does not appear to be an adaptation (if we employ a rigorous definition of the word); however, by undermining some of the key features of the non-adaptive account, and by providing some alternative insights from the psychological community, I show that there are many good reasons to suspend our judgment on this question, if not conclude that the female orgasm is an adaptive trait.

Rhett Greenfield

Saint Mary's College of Maryland (St. Mary's City, MD)

Discussant: Andrew Stoecker (SUNY Oneonta)

Getting Clear About Human Nature: Young's Dilemma

Abstract: Human nature is a difficult philosophical concept. Normative theories, the humanities, and the social sciences all accept that talking about human properties and behaviors is meaningful and relevant. All of these methods of investigation take humanity as one of their objects, as a phenomenon that admits of classification and analysis. While some of the descriptions that emerge from these fields are highly constrained by their specificity, claims about humanity as a whole—claims about *human nature*—also emerge. Iris Marion-Young has stated that there exists a dilemma regarding theoretical conceptions of human nature: a theory of human nature seems necessary to provide a substantial ground for normative theories on the one hand, but such theories may also be inherently oppressive instances of reification. I argue that a theory of human nature is necessary for not only normative claims, but the social sciences as well, and—drawing upon Rousseau and J.S. Mill—go on to develop a thin theory of human nature in terms of needs and the actions we take to fulfill them. I explain how such a theory offers us a way of resolving Young's dilemma and go on to point out its similarities with the ideas of Alasdair MacIntyre.

Landon Hedrick

Northwest Missouri State University (Maryville, MO)

Discussant: David Naples (SUNY Oneonta)

The Presumption of Positive Atheism

Abstract: In this paper I consider the issue in the philosophy of religion regarding the burden of proof in debates about the existence of God. After reviewing the positions of some of the philosophers who have written on this topic, I take an in-depth look at what sort of case could be made in favor of putting the burden of proof on atheists (i.e. what sort of case could be made to justify a presumption of theism). After rejecting one such argument, I offer an epistemic argument in favor of putting the burden of proof on theists (i.e. an argument for a presumption of positive atheism) and I attempt to justify this argument. Lastly, I consider some possible objections to the conclusion that I have come to and I offer clarification and rebuttals as needed. I conclude that the only reasonable presumption is the presumption of positive atheism, which puts the burden of proof on theists.

Alan Herbert (Aish)

University of Hawaii (Manoa, HI)

Discussant: Andrew Stoecker (SUNY Oneonta)

The Problem of Intellectual Elites in Ibn Tufayl, Pascal, Nietzsche, and Leo Strauss

Abstract: Ibn Tufayl (known in Europe as Abubacer) was a twelfth century Islamic philosopher. His treatise, *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, is a discourse on rational thinking, religion, and mysticism. History seems

to note that individuals, like Ibn Tufayl, who are imbued with an outstanding ability to reason, tend to also create theories on social order. They hint at hierarchical arrangements of society, guided by an intellectual elite similar to that of the Indian Brahmin class. The challenge for these philosophers is in formulating a system in which a ruling elite acts for the proper welfare of society. However, from this distinct synthesis of thought the possibility exists that a self-serving intellectual leadership could instead emerge, resulting in a corrupt tyranny. This paper will explore Ibn Tufayl's intellectual ideals along these lines in comparison with the seemingly similar perspectives of three respected post-Enlightenment philosophers – Blaise Pascal, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Leo Strauss.

Joseph Holmes

University of Mary Washington (Fredericksburg, VA)

Discussant:

Metaphysics, Mysticism and the Relaxation of Concepts

Abstract: Philosophy can be roughly defined as, among other things, the investigation into particularly broad and fundamental concepts. In this paper, I attempt to make a shift in focus from particular philosophical concepts towards the nature of conceptualization in general. In examining the different kinds of conceptual orientations towards reality, I will offer two, opposing types: a metaphysical orientation, which considers concepts behind, inside and constitutive of reality, and a mystical orientation, which takes concepts less seriously, and as less integral to the smooth functioning of experience. After sketching out the two orientations, I will end by offering some normative implications of this outlook with regard to the philosophical life.

Angela Hotaling

SUNY Oneonta (Oneonta, NY)

Discussant: Dave Mauch (University of Texas)

Camus and the Absurdity of Existence in "Waiting for Godot"

Abstract: Albert Camus argues in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that human life is absurd and purposeless. Humans grapple with becoming conscious of the absurdity of existence, and this realization causes one to suffer. Basically, with the Death of God, men are deserted from God, and all of the meaning that God gives. One has to unhinge oneself from the desire for life with a meaning, and live amidst the absurdity. In this paper, I compare Camus' views in *The Myth of Sisyphus* to Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*. I also mention Nietzsche's contribution to the existential tradition and how it sets up the dilemma of human existence that Camus is attempting to discuss. Man's desire for a meaningful life is present in *Waiting for Godot*, and I explore the many forms in which this desire for meaning can consume one's existence.

James R. Jones

SUNY Oneonta (Oneonta, NY)

Discussant:

Roquentin Persistence

Abstract: A great debate in metaphysics is how it is that objects persist through time while maintaining their transtemporal identities despite the problem of temporary intrinsics, in which there is a change in their intrinsic properties.

I argue that things are abstract constructions, or coherent systems of interdependent constituents as perceived by a subjective mind. The only intrinsic properties we ought to concern ourselves with are those of the indivisible constituents that compose all of reality. Using Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, I explain that these indivisibles are unorganized 'facts' that create the world, and require a subjective mind to process into meaningful information. Without us, the world is the naked and amorphous blob

that sickens Sartre's Roquentin in Nausea, and lacks things with any individual identities.

Aaron Krivitzky

Middlebury College (Middlebury, VT)

Discussant: Emma Francis (SUNY Oneonta)

The Determinist's Dilemma: It could be another way

Abstract: Determinists may only agree on one thing: reality operates on a causal system of rules, laws, and axioms. Every effect must have a particular cause. Humans begin to learn this empirically from the moment they enter the world, yet are never able to fully understand or master this phenomenon. Our lives are a constant demystification process of how our actions, thoughts, and individual lives affect the greater world around us. Perhaps we will never discover the 'grand unified theory of everything' – if it exists at all – and though it seems that we approach enlightened sensibilities about existence, morality, and science individually, it is unlikely that we will ever understand the objective totality. However, we may be *free* to ask what these 'universal laws' really are, and if they really are *universal*.

Jared Lincourt

SUNY Fredonia (Fredonia, NY)

Discussant: Joseph Holmes (University of Mary Washington)

Revaluating Nietzsche and Buddhism: Active and Passive Nihilism

Abstract: The focus of this paper will be to analyze and challenge the accuracy of the overall attitude which Nietzsche asserted in his works in regards to Buddhism as well as the certain beliefs he ascribed to Buddhist philosophy and its practices. I will specifically focus on the Buddhist concept of Nirvana and the philosophy of action. It is not to say that Nietzsche was uneducated in Buddhist thought, however in comparison with Buddhist scripture as well as with more developed interpretations of Buddhism it is evident that Nietzsche did not have a full understanding of certain significant concepts, and overall viewed Buddhism pessimistically. The main point which will be discussed is that through his misapprehensions, Nietzsche was led to establish the grounds to reject and deprecate Buddhism as a form of passive spiritual nihilism. Nietzsche misinterprets Buddhist beliefs such as Nirvana to be, like the God of Christianity, a "will to nothingness," withdrawing the individual from the present world.

Dave Mauch

University of Texas (Austin, TX)

Discussant: Sasha Meyer-Porco (SUNY Oneonta)

Little Eichmanns: An Examination of the Nazi Conscience

Abstract: There can be no doubt that the machinations of the Holocaust relied on willing participation – or, at the very least, a lack of protest – from the German people. But how could such a massive participation in genocide ever happen? In her book *The Nazi Conscience*, historian Claudia Koonz argues that there existed a "Nazi conscience" – a "community of shared moral obligation" that and urged the German people to comply with the Holocaust and set up Hitler as "a prophet of virtue" (5-17). Thus, according to Koonz, the Holocaust was morally justified in the minds of those complicit in its execution. In order to examine this "Nazi conscience", I examine its formation under what Giorgio Agamben terms a "state of exception" and the eventual breakdown of Nazism where it was faced with nonviolent resistance as detailed in Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Finally, I analyze Adolf Eichmann's claim that he lived according to Kant's categorical imperative in order to understand what this means for the existence of a Nazi conscience.

Brian Miller

SUNY Oneonta (Oneonta, NY)

Discussant: Brian Ballard (University of California, Santa Cruz)

The Illusion of Choice

Abstract: This paper examines the metaphysical nature of free will under David Lewis' view of the business of philosophy as stated in *Counterfactuals*. Using Peter Van Inwagen's definition of determinism from *An Essay on Free Will*, this paper discusses the compatibility of free will and determinism in an attempt to answer the question, "Can we provide a valid account of free will in a deterministic world?" A specific response to Daniel Dennett's compatibility argument from *Elbow Room* exposes his position as being incompatibility in disguise. Similarly this paper discusses the compatibility of free will and indeterminism. It is shown that free will is incompatible with both determinism and indeterminism, and thus the very notion of free will is incoherent. Given such a conclusion, this paper address the concept of moral responsibility in an attempt to answer the question, "Can we provide a valid account of moral responsibility in a world that is absent of free will?" Utilizing Dennett's discussion of moral responsibility as a strong foundation, it is ultimately concluded that such an account does exist.

Anna Nowik

Seton Hall University (South Orange, NJ)

Discussant: Kimberly Houseworth (SUNY Oneonta)

Kantian Aspects in Marriage Counseling

Abstract: Kant's conception of the interactions between individuals is that they contain an inherent dichotomy, that is, a compulsive attraction for each other's company but an equal need and necessity to maintain personal space based on respect for the autonomy of the will in oneself and others. The modern discipline of marriage counseling contains and uses aspects of two of his theories on human interaction: the unsociable sociability of mankind and friendship. This paper seeks to identify and analyze the presence and application of Kantian thought in marriage counseling, noting efforts to develop and implement maxims of love and respect between marriage partners in order to counter the unsociable sociability of man's inclinations.

Sunyoung Park

The New School (New York, NY)

Discussant:

Arendt's Lost Treasure: Fragments of a Philosopher's Fantasy

Abstract: As a self-proclaimed storyteller, Hannah Arendt, in *On Revolution*, uses the history of modern revolutions as her 'raw materials' to construct a story whose plot is "unmistakably the emergence of freedom". *OR*, however, is hardly an epic tale of freedom's triumphant victory; it is closer to a detective novel whose plot is woven around an attempt to solve the puzzle as to why the reintroduction of freedom, of politics proper, into the modern world turned out to be an aborted experiment. When pieced together, *OR* hence projects an image of Arendt's ideal polity, one whose resurrection in today's world she perhaps hoped for. Her vision is, however, for reasons to be expounded on in this paper, a utopia by any other name, a mirage pieced together by linking the fragments of a philosopher's fantasy. This paper opens with a preliminary exposition of the political understanding of freedom Arendt develops in *OR* by reviewing her account of how the experience of freedom first became manifest and later dwindled in the unfolding of the American and the French Revolutions. It then further elucidates this freedom-politics nexus by reflecting on the internal tensions that rendered the experience of freedom ephemeral. In particular, three key principles that constitute Arendt's notion of the political and their respective antitheses will be extracted from her account of the conflict between the Jacobin Government and French revolutionary societies. Extracting these

principles, I argue, will enable us to sketch Arendt's vision of what is genuinely political. The paper concludes with a critical examination of Arendt's notion of political freedom by exploring both the practical and normative implications of her insistence on maintaining a firm division between the social and the political.

Jeremy Redlien

SUNY Oneonta (Oneonta, NY)

Discussant: Jeffery Culver (DePaul University)

What Does it Mean to Define?

Abstract: This paper shall look at the debate within metaphysics regarding whether or not the world exists separately from our minds or not and the role language, perspective, and experience play in that debate. The last part of the paper will attempt to define a few criteria for an ideal language and will propose the hypothesis that mathematics fits these criteria and is therefore the most useful language.

Zachary Robbins

Youngstown State University (Youngstown, OH)

Discussant: Daniel Fryer (John Jay College – Manhattan, NY)

Renaissance Fatalism

Abstract: This paper draws a distinction between “renaissance” fatalism and “classical” fatalism. It develops in some detail the “renaissance” fatalism perspective and relates that perspective to contemporary developments in philosophy. It also reveals the strength of renaissance fatalism against the classical criticisms of fatalism.

Jean Ryan

Elmira College (Elmira, NY)

Discussant: Jeremy Redlien (SUNY Oneonta)

A Third Interpretation of Kierkegaard's Attunement in "Fear and Trembling"

Abstract: Kierkegaard sees the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his only child at God's command as the ultimate expression of true faith. In the Attunement, four short retellings of this story are presented, each with a unique variation that results in Abraham failing God's test of faith. These four interpretations are each followed by an analogous passage comparing Abraham's failure to the process of a mother weaning her child. Scholars have put forward two interpretations of the weaning passages' relation to the Abraham's stories: Edward Mooney proposed Abraham as analogous to the mother and Isaac to the child, while Linda Williams later argued for God as comparable to the mother and Abraham as the child. I propose that the weaning analogies of the Abraham illustrations have a more inclusive, comprehensive interpretation than the above: God is the mother, Isaac is the child, and Abraham is the mother's breast or physical self.

Samuel J. Sanchez

University of Massachusetts Boston (Boston, MA)

Discussant: Amanda Davis (SUNY Oneonta)

Thinking the Nothing

Abstract: Why is it so easy to consider the Nothing? Are we entirely confident in what we mean by the Nothing? 'What is' the Nothing and how can we enter into thinking 'it'? Our entry into thinking the Nothing will prove most thought worthy, that is to think what has no 'features'. We will investigate the Nothing with respect to Martin Heidegger's What is Metaphysics? This work will be our guiding light into what appears to be a dark area in philosophy and our task will be to shed light onto this oddly familiar notion. This investigation will prove to be unlike any other in academic philosophy.