

2017 Victorian Postgraduate Philosophy Workshop

Postgraduate Philosophy Group

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About

After successful Workshops the last two years, we have decided to host another this year. The Workshop came about through recognition of a lack of opportunities for Victorian postgraduate philosophers to meet and find out about each others research, outside of formal conference contexts. The one-day Victorian Postgraduate Philosophy Workshop aims to provide a chance for postgraduate philosophy students to present their research to a wider audience than they otherwise would have at their home institution, but in a less formal environment than that of large conferences.

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Keynote

Many Hands and Many Times

Holly Lawford-Smith¹, David Axelsen², Adam Slavny³, and Kai Spiekermann⁴

¹University of Melbourne, ²London School of Economics, ³University of Warwick,

⁴London School of Economics

In a ‘many hands’ case, many people perform actions that do not do harm alone, but have the cumulative effect of harming. For example, one extra molecule of pollution from each factory won’t make a difference to air pollution and so won’t harm anyone, but the cumulative effect of an extra molecule of pollution from every factory may well make such a difference. In this paper, our interest in many hands cases is comparative: we use them to draw out a related problem, which we call the ‘many times’ problem. We see it as the temporal version of the many hands problem. A single individual can perform a number of actions which taken alone do not harm, and yet which when added together do. For example, an individual may discriminate against someone (yet in a way that falls short of violating her rights), may emit a small amount of carbon, may fail to contribute to ending extreme poverty, may walk by a homeless person without giving them money, may buy a sweatshop t-shirt, may make a sexist, racist, or classist joke, may fail to ‘call out’ a sexist, racist, or classist joke, and so on, and so forth. But how do these harms agglomerate, and how and when is an individual blameworthy for performing many such (individually) harmless acts over time? There is discussion of how these cases work across persons, as we have just seen. But how do they work within the same person (or, to put this in another way, across time-indexed person-slices)? Is there an overlooked version of the many hands problem that shows up within persons?

Abstracts

(Completion Seminar) Inference and Cooperation

Ross Barham

The University of Melbourne

In the object-choice task, the experimenter hides a treat under one of three upturned buckets, then points to the bucket containing the treat. When, either, chimpanzees or human infants regard the experimenter as a competitor, both are able to follow the gesture to the correct bucket. However, if they haven't been primed to regard the experimenter as a competitor, then only the human is able to capitalise on what is physically the same gesture as was made in the competitive context; chimpanzees proceed randomly. I undertake a Brandomian analysis of the inferentialistic structure of the various cognitive processes minimally required to explain this discrepancy as revealed by Michael Tomasello. In doing so, I show that the concept of cooperation goes hand in hand with the concept of objectivity.

Why work and spend? A structural explanation

Pascale Bastien

University of Melbourne

The dominant consumer lifestyle in affluent societies has been described by Juliet Schor as the work and spend cycle. Since its emergence in the second half of the 20th century, this lifestyle has been much discussed; however, analyses of consumerism often implicitly rely on an individualistic explanation for engaging in the work and spend cycle, and therefore fail to address the structural constraints within which individuals exercise agency. In this paper, I draw on Sally Haslanger's framework to show that a structural explanation for working and spending not only provides insights into the reasons why individuals engage in the consumer lifestyle, but also allows for a normative evaluation of the underlying structure. This has important moral and political import, since previously ignored issues of social justice may come to light, which in turn may create a space for potential alternative social structures.

Defending Schopenhauer's Metaphysics of Compassion

Andrew John Cantwell

Monash University

In *On The Basis of Morals* (1839), the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) advances a highly original theory of compassion. In his view, in a world of “colossal” egoism, compassion is “the great mystery of ethics” and defies a purely empirical explanation. In response, he proposes a metaphysical explanation of compassion as the literal participation in another’s suffering. David Cartwright argues that Schopenhauer’s concept of compassion is incoherent insofar as it is grounded in this metaphysical notion of participation. Instead, Cartwright advances his own psychological model of the participative process: a “naturalized” or wholly empirical version of Schopenhauer’s theory of compassion. In this paper, I argue contra Cartwright that Schopenhauer’s metaphysical notion of compassion, when viewed charitably and with regard to its many intricacies, is conceptually coherent.

The Argument Against Equal Freedom of Speech

Chris Cousens

La Trobe University

Philosophical accounts of free speech typically frame it as a right applied equally to all citizens. This is usually justified by some version of the harm principle: infringements upon free speech tend to constitute a greater harm than the speech itself, therefore most speech should be unrestricted. Unfortunately for this view, a speech act account of slurs and hate speech demonstrates that some speech-related harms can only be instantiated when certain people speak. Because only the speech of some groups constitutes the harm justifying restriction, only the speech of those groups can be justifiably restricted.

A case for the formalisation of theology

Tobias Dinh

University of Melbourne

Formalisation of theories has always been an important topic in philosophy, particularly of science and mathematics. I propose a case for the formalisation of theology. I offer some motivations and arguments on why we should care about formalisation in theology. I then present two examples of where I think formalisation in theology has been fruitful: one from Dennis Bielfeldt who uses model semantics to prototype theological agreement and disagreement, and one from Fr Jozef Bochenski who formalised Aquinas’ theory of analogy, consequently proving some interesting results. Many of the inspirations and ideas will come from the underdeveloped work of the early 20th century movement, the Cracow Circle.

Multiple Threats: One puzzle responsibility theorists cannot solve

Nicholas Evans and Cade Shadbolt
University of Melbourne

If assigning liability via the responsibility account – the view that as a matter of justice, unavoidable threats of harm should be distributed according to the degree of responsibility an agent bears for the threat – can justify killing one agent then, because liability on this view works according to pair-wise comparison, there is no upper-limit to the number of liable agents who can be defensively killed either. This is not necessarily a problem for killing large numbers of culpable threats, but it is a problem when we consider killing large numbers of minimally-responsible ones. In this paper we examine attempts to deal with this problem; concluding that none are successful.

Towards a New Semantic Theory of Meaning

Giles Field
Deakin University

Semantic theories of meaning are interested in the relationship between symbols and things in the world. Both propositional accounts and the Davidsonian approach take the concept of truth to be integral to this project but this can be argued to limit their use in non-literal language. I want instead to sketch a theory that separates ‘to mean’ and ‘meaning’ and ignores truth function so that pragmatics, fiction, sarcasm and idioms can be encompassed in a working theory.

Voluntary assisted dying: The construction of ‘dying’

Courtney Hempton
Monash University

The Victorian government has recently introduced legislation to establish ‘voluntary assisted dying’ as an ‘end of life’ option. I will trace the development of the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2017 (Vic), with a focus on the values operationalised in the construction of voluntary assisted dying as part of regulated medical care. I argue that in devising voluntary assisted dying exclusively for those medically prognosed to be at the ‘end of life’, the state constructs a new medico-legal category – dying – and in doing so, distinguishes between lives that are terminable, and lives that are not.

The Ethics of the Image- Kierkegaard and Ricoeur on Imagination and Morality

Wojciech Kaftanski

ACU

Are we in any way morally accountable for cherishing a false or harmful idea? By appealing to Kierkegaard's and Ricoeur's renderings of imagination, I claim that there is a form of responsibility attached to how we visualize or conceptualize things, not just to what we do. I will demonstrate my point through an analysis of the relationship between selfhood and imagination in Kierkegaard and Ricoeur.

Schelling and the Sixth Extinction

Vincent Le

Deakin University

This talk argues that Schelling provides the earliest philosophy for rethinking nature in the Anthropocene. Firstly, Schelling repudiates both Fichtean idealism for subordinating nature to our self-interest, and Spinozist realism for mechanising nature as per climate change denialists. Moreover, Schelling proposes to safeguard nature by paradoxically anthropomorphising it further and modelling it on the human subject. In this way, Schelling's 'naturphilosophie' permits us to extract two environmentally ethical principles. The 'dependency principle' states that humans are dependent upon nature rather than nature being dependent on our posing it. Finally, the 'contingency principle' stipulates that nature is itself contingent and precarious.

Culpable Ignorance and Reasonable Expectations

Francis Li

University of Melbourne

Recently, philosophers interested in moral responsibility have moved purely from focusing on control to thinking about the excusing function of ignorance, and when it does or doesn't get agents off the hook. Many agree that culpable ignorance requires blameworthiness for the ignorance itself. One central view, volitionism, states that culpable ignorance always traces back to an akratic failure to improve one's epistemic position. This view has some revisionary consequences, which is a point of resistance for some. William Fitzpatrick proposes a vice-based view that traces culpable ignorance back to exercises of epistemic vice. Unsurprisingly, the vice-based has faced objections. My aim is to try and defend it.

An Informationist Story about Mathematical Entities and Explanation

Bruce Raymond Long

University of Sydney and University of Melbourne

I present an informationist alternative to Platonist, in re realist, and Nominalist appraisals of the nature of mathematical entities and structures and their explanatory power. Informational conceptions of the nature of mathematical entities are considered conceptually taxing due to problems with conceptions of information. I argue that, even given this difficulty, the causal informationist about mathematical entities can offer a story that is just as coherent as that given by the Aristotelian in re realist about mathematical entities, is more plausible than soft Platonism, and that debunks the Platonist *petitio-principii-cum-strawman* charge that intractable nominalism is the only viable alternative.

Equipping the Moral Technocrat: Approaches to Moral Steering

James McGuire

Monash University

A moral technocrat is an agent who operationalises insights from the social sciences to steer or guide the moral behaviour of individuals in their local circles. A common-sense way of understanding ‘steering’ in this context is to view it as a fundamentally active and direct act: the moral technocrat introduces or applies some situational feature to the physical environment (e.g. a pleasant fragrance) or to the individual (e.g. verbal encouragement) to elicit morally good behaviour. In this paper I motivate and sketch two broad additional proposals for the moral technocrat to consider. The first is a fundamentally passive approach by which the technocrat consciously restricts their own conduct so as to avoid introducing or contributing to—and thereby exacerbating—situational features that may encourage wrongdoing. The second is a fundamentally preventive approach that focuses on mitigating the potential influence of an already present situational feature that may incite wrongdoing.

Divorcing Mercy Killing from Euthanasia

Bryanna Moore

Monash University

While reference to mercy killing permeates the discourse on euthanasia, the nature of medical mercy itself is rarely the focus of philosophical inquiry. This paper explores the relationship between the concepts of mercy and mercy killing, and how they apply to medicine and euthanasia. My primary contentions in this paper are: firstly, that merciful acts, unlike acts of euthanasia, are not tied to a particular motive; secondly, that mercy is a supererogatory virtue that involves a retributive element of wrongdoing or accountability on behalf of the recipient that we are rarely willing to ascribe to the seriously ill and suffering patient; thirdly, that mercy's retributive, supererogatory nature renders it a poor clinical decision-making tool; and finally, that what is actually meant by reference to mercy and mercy killing in medicine is medical compassion, due to the undeserved nature of the suffering produced by serious illness.

When beauty and right collide. Appropriation of indigenous art

Paul Anthony O'Halloran

University of Melbourne

Appropriation in art is the use of pre-existing objects or images with little or no transformation applied to them. Appropriation of artwork, as opposed to forgery, is generally viewed positively in the Western art tradition and some believe the benefits of appropriating indigenous art outweigh the harms. This talk will argue that the benign view of indigenous art appropriation is mistaken. Three falsehoods supporting this mistaken view will be discussed.

Multiple Conclusions: An Inferential Defence

Salman Panahi

University of Melbourne

Adopting a multiple-conclusion consequence relation has some formal virtues such as simplicity, purity, and single-endedness that allows us to define the meaning of logical words separately from each other. However, there are objections towards it from an inferentialist point of view. One of these objections is that our ordinary practice of reasoning is better understood as consequence relation with disjunctive single conclusion rather than multiple conclusions.

I shall review two lines of response to this objection; one is identifying those formal virtues as inferentially important and giving inferential weight to formal virtues of multiple-conclusion deduction. And the other is to argue that some ordinary examples of reasoning can be formalized better in multiple-conclusion deduction. I will finish by dwelling around some concerns in regard to the late response.

The Resource Question

Paul-Mikhail Catapang Podosky

University of Melbourne

In areas of social philosophy, theorists have made thorough use of concepts to explain the dynamics of our epistemic relations and how we collectively act, think, and feel. It is suggested that we rely on a pool of culturally shared concepts that enable us to acquire knowledge, to transmit it through social space, and to coordinate social behaviour. The pool of concepts that serve these social functions I call a conceptual resource. In this paper, I question what it takes for a set of concepts to be the conceptual resource of a group of people. I call this The Resource Question.

Nationalism, Confucianism, Universalism Chen Lai and Universal values

Wei Shi

La Trobe University

In contemporary China's Confucian Revival Movement, increasing revivalists are inclined to identify Confucian values as having universal significance. Chen Lai is a prominent and influential exemplar of this trend and proves to be an illuminating case study. Despite this, Chen hasn't received much attention from Anglophone scholars, and Chinese scholars have largely focused on his studies on history of philosophy. This paper examines how "Confucianism" is conceived and represented in Chen's writings, in order to assess his achievement in reconciling between particularity and universality and provide new insights into how Confucian scholarship has evolved amidst current China's political development.

Resource Sensitivity and the Semantic of Free Choice Permissions

Kai Tanter

University of Melbourne

While Mac is visiting Naomi's for afternoon tea, Naomi offers her some sweets saying:

1. Have a baklava or a Viennese finger

Mac is intrigued because it appears that in this context 'or' is not behaving like classical disjunction '∨'. For 1. appears to entail both

2. Have a baklava

and also

3. Have a Viennese finger

but not

4. Have a baklava and have a Viennese finger

In this talk I'll modify Chris Barkers account (2010) to explain how permissions are a resource sensitive phenomenon, using affine logic. The central idea is that permissions are like tickets which get used up when we perform actions.

Shifty Epistemology or Epistemic Injustice?

William Tuckwell

University of Melbourne

'Shifty' epistemologists argue that 'non-traditional' factors, e.g. the salience of error possibilities or practical stakes, can make a difference to whether and what we know. These philosophers suggest that as error possibilities are made salient or as practical stakes rise the standards for knowledge shift. Quite independently of the debate about whether or not to be shifty in the sense just described, the past 10 years has seen an explosion of interest in the phenomenon of epistemic injustice; the idea that there is a distinctively epistemic form of injustice. I argue that there is a tension between the proposals of shifty epistemologists and the phenomenon of epistemic injustice that gives rise to a dilemma: either we must reject shifty epistemology in order to vindicate our intuitions about paradigm cases of epistemic injustice, or we accept some version of shifty epistemology and concede that such cases are not in fact examples of epistemic injustice.

Reconceiving Gender: A Critique of Bettcher and Jenkins

Emily Vicendese

University of Melbourne

It is widely accepted in progressive milieus that trans women are women and that trans men are men. To claim otherwise is considered at best deeply offensive, at worst directly and/or indirectly psychologically and physically harmful to trans people. While feminist philosophy has a long history of analysing the concept "woman", the comparatively recent recognition and subsequent call for inclusion of transgender identities necessitates a rethink. In this talk I will critique and compare two influential trans inclusive accounts of the concept "woman", namely Talia Mae Bettcher's "resistant concept" and Katharine Jenkins' "dual concept". I will then point toward a direction that I think might be useful for a trans inclusive feminist account of sex and gender concepts.

Problem of Recognition in Mental File Project

Lian Zhou

University of Melbourne

According to Mental File Project (MFP), thoughts about a single object can be seen as a mental file, in which information a subject gets from that object is stored. Here raises one question: once encountering with an object, shall I open a new mental file for it, or shall I store information I get from that object in an existing mental file? This is the problem of recognition. In this paper I suggest that an answer to problem of recognition is related to knowledge of identity, and knowledge of identity, in MFP, is associated with Recanati's distinction between stable mental file and unstable mental file. By renewing definitions of stable mental file and unstable mental file, I draw the distinction in a way different from Recanati's. I argue that my version of the distinction is more helpful for solving the problem of recognition.
