

Mountain-Plains Philosophy Conference Abstracts (2017)

Section 1: Value Theory (Thursday, 10/12, 6:00-8:50pm)

Always choose to live or choose to always live?

Daniel Avi Coren

Bernard Williams (1973) famously argued that if given the choice to relinquish our mortality we should refuse. We should not choose to always live. His piece provoked an entire literature on the desirability of immortality. Intending to contradict Williams, Thomas Nagel claimed that if given the choice between living for a week and dying in five minutes he would always choose to live. I argue that (1) Nagel's iterating scenario is closer to the Makropulos scenario (Čapek's) that inspired Williams's piece; (2) Nagel's mathematical induction premise is implausible. I discuss some useful implications for the broader discussion of Williams's arguments.

Lowering Expectations for Expected Moral Value Theory

Jay Geyer

According to what may be called 'Expected Moral Value Theory' (EMVT) agents should take into account the expected moral value of their actions when making choices under moral uncertainty by, say, maximizing expected moral value. A prominent objection to EMVT concerns its requirement that agents be able to compare value across different moral theories. Jacob Ross (2006) has proposed a solution that succeeds at unravelling this problem's central knot. However, Ross' solution marks a departure from the way EMVT is usually understood, suggesting a more modest project. I advance this modest project, which deftly handles some problems otherwise facing EMVT.

The Real Gap in Kant's FUL Derivation

Scott Forschler

In recent decades, a debate has arisen over whether Kant's derivation of the Formula of Universal Law (FUL) has a significant logical gap which Kant's argument failed to bridge. The discussion largely closed when several authors argued that Kant's premises are stronger than the critics suggested. But the entire discussion was confused because neither Kant's critics nor his defenders on this issue clearly distinguished between Kant's universalization conditions and the criterion for rational willing within these conditions. While the latter strengthen Kant's premises, on the former the premises are inadequate for supporting the FUL.

Section 2: Metaphysics and Epistemology (Friday, 10/13, 9:00am-11:50am)

Phenomenon Creation via Interactive Intersubjectivity

Maja Sidzinska

According to Joseph Rouse (2015), a (scientific) phenomenon should not be considered naturally given, for in order to be *identified*, it has necessarily already been conceptualized. So how should scientists go about articulating a phenomenon?

Helen Longino's *interactive intersubjectivity* can help (1993). Interactive intersubjectivity is a means of conducting scientific debate that requires that there be public forums for debate, engagement with dissent, recognition of standards, and testimonial justice.

Problems with brain organization theory research (BOT), as outlined by Rebecca Jordan-Young (2010), provide a case in point, as BOT is plagued by changing categorical definitions and connotations of terms.

Locke on Testimony

Mark Boespflug

Locke's treatment of testimony has been deeply underestimated. Scholarly discussions of it are almost non-existent, yet, its significance is threefold. First, though Locke's reflection on testimony has been largely eclipsed by that of his successors—especially Hume—I argue that Hume actually employs Locke's approach. Second, Locke's view of testimony is of much importance to Locke scholarship in that testimony occupies a central role in the *Essay* being one of only two "grounds of probability." Finally, Locke's discussion of testimony is valuable in its own right insofar as it is not focused solely on when testimonial beliefs are justified, but when testimony justifies a variety of doxastic states.

Universals and the A Priori: A Defense of the A Priori—A Posteriori Distinction

Andrew Rubner

Timothy Williamson has argued that there is no epistemic difference between a priori and a posteriori knowledge, since the offline cognitive processes that underlie both types of knowledge are the same. I show that Williamson's argument fails. First, I show that the offline cognitive process Williamson claims to be sufficient for a priori knowledge cannot account for a priori knowledge about universals. Second, I show that the offline cognitive process Williamson claims to be sufficient for a priori knowledge about particulars is not reliable enough for such knowledge unless some a priori knowledge about universals is presupposed in the process.

Section 3: Ethics & Social Justice (Friday, 10/13, 1:30-4:20pm)

A critique of Fabre on national right

Marcus William Hunt

Fabre takes a cosmopolitan view of justice, but attempts to reconcile this with the claim that nation states can have a non-instrumental right to exist, under a right to association. I will explain Fabre's view and then subject it to three criticisms: first that what Fabre calls a 'right' to exist is better characterized on her view as a permission, second that Fabre's view is at odds with the common-sense judgment that the structuring of rights within a nation state can be unjust, third that Fabre's conclusion sits awkwardly with her wider account of human rights.

Moral Obligation and Punishment

Jonathan Spelman

In this paper, I present an argument against objective versions of consequentialism. In particular, I argue that obligations are such that if an agent violates some kind of obligation, then he is subject to the relevant kind of punishment. (An agent who violates a legal obligation, for example, is subject to legal punishment.) This, in turn, entails that agents who violate moral obligations deserve punishment, for moral obligations, unlike other kinds of obligations, are necessarily just. If that is right, that is, if those who violate moral obligations deserve punishment, then objective versions of consequentialism are false

Prioritarian Educational Justice: An Ethical Problem for Charter Schools?

Kirsten Welch

The past few decades have witnessed an explosion of charter schools in the United States. Despite the stated mission of many such schools to serve disadvantaged student groups, charter schools have faced criticism from advocates of a prioritarian principle of educational justice. In this paper, I defend charter schools from this critique, arguing that, although the prioritarian principle of educational justice is an important guideline to take into consideration, other practical concerns that have ethical weight ought to influence decision makers when it comes to the support of the charter school movement.

Section 4: Metaphysics & Phil. of Religion (Saturday, 10/14, 9:00-11:50am)

Physicalist arguments against the afterlife

Yuval Avnur

Most secular people think that there is no afterlife because empirical evidence, or “science,” suggests that everything, even our minds, is dependent on physical things. Since an afterlife requires non-physical things, empirical evidence suggests that there is no afterlife. However, even setting aside afterlives that don’t require non-physical things, and even granting that empirical evidence supports physicalism, the conclusion doesn’t follow. We lack empirical evidence against at least one sort of afterlife. For, things would look empirically exactly as they do now if there were something for us beyond this life.

Against the Divine Deception Objection to Skeptical Theism

Perry Hendricks

Skeptical theism is a popular response to evidential arguments from evil—it is seen by many to block the crucial noseem inference that such arguments often rely on. However, many critics have claimed that skeptical theism entails an unacceptable amount of skepticism. In this essay, I first lay out a popular articulation of skeptical theism, and explicate two arguments against it, that claim that skeptical theism entails skepticism about divine. My project in this essay is to show that those who hold certain epistemological views (namely, externalism and/or phenomenal conservatism) have reason to reject both arguments. I also offer a counterexample to both arguments, which, if successful, gives non-externalists and non-phenomenal conservatists a reason to reject the arguments. So, the goal of this essay is largely conditional: if one is an externalist and/or a phenomenal conservatist, then she can reject the arguments leveled against skeptical theism.

Aristotelian Forms

Tyler Eaves

In *Metaphysics Zeta 13*, Aristotle appears to be arguing for a problematic conclusion. He appears to be arguing that no universal can be substance and this is problematic because two commonly held interpretations of Aristotle’s metaphysics are that forms are substance—indeed they are the primary substances—and that forms are universal in that there is one form that, together with bits of matter, constitute the members of a given species of natural object. I will argue that this appearance is just that, an appearance only. What Aristotle argues for in *Zeta 13* is a conclusion that does not spell trouble for either of these two commonly held interpretations and is compatible with his overall theory of substance.