PHILOSOPHY RESEARCH SEMINAR, PHILOSOPHY TEA AND PHILOSOPHY SOCIETY

SEMESTER B 2015/16

Join us on alternate Thursday afternoons – all welcome!

21 Jan Professor Robert Stern (Sheffield)

Note the irregular times: exceptionally, Phil Soc and the Philosophy Tea will come before the research seminar this week.

2.15 Phil Soc 'The Radical Demand in K. E. Løgstrup's Ethics', followed at 3.15 by Philosophy Tea. Location: W113 (Law Court Building)

This talk will introduce the central ideas of the Danish philosopher and theologian K. E. Løgstrup (1905-81). We will look in particular at his key text The Ethical Demand (1956), in which he defends an account of ethics as involving the responsibility to care for the interests of the other, and how this is one-sided, radical, silent and unfulfillable - and rests on the idea that life is a gift.

4.00 Research Seminar: 'Løgstrup's Ethical Demand: Between Hegel and Kierkegaard'. Location: Z103 – Central Committee Room. This room is in the MacLaurin Building, which is a 2-minute walk from the de Havilland Campus (walk past the Law Court building (on your left) and cross the main road to the first building in sight on your right).

My aim in this paper is to explore the way that Løgstrup's ethical demand (and later the sovereign expressions of life) are a kind of middle way between two extremes he finds in Kierkegaard, between the conventional norms of 'life in the crowd' on the one hand, and Kierkegaard's own religious demand on the other - where he thinks that because Kierkegaard only sees two options here, he misses the middle position, which (Løgstrup thinks) is more defensible in various ways. At the same time, the ethical demand incorporates some crucial elements of Kierkegaard's thinking, such as the sense that one must make a choice for oneself how best to fulfil the demand, in a way that is isolating and that does not happen at the level of conventional norms or Hegelian Sittlichkeit, which can just be applied and followed. My main aim would not be to defend Løgstrup's critique of Kierkegaard, but to show how this critique shaped the structure of Løgstrup's own thinking about the ethical demand, and how it relates to conventional norms on the one hand, and religious ethics on the other.

4 Feb Dr Christopher Hamilton (King’s College London)

Location: Z103 – Central Committee Room. This room is in the MacLaurin Building, which is a 2-minute walk from the de Havilland Campus (walk past the Law Court building (on your left) and cross the main road to the first building in sight on your right).

2.00 Research Seminar: ‘Sick Men’s Dreams, Monkeys and Women: Hume on Toleration and Polytheism’

The aim of this paper is to explore Hume's Natural History of Religion. I shall argue that, beneath the surface of Hume's text, which presents an argument whose aim is to explore
polytheism and monotheism from (what has come to be seen as) a standard Enlightenment conception of the development of religion in intellectual and emotional confusion, we find a series of reflections that are driven by various anxieties about the fact that human life is (in the words of William James) built "on the shambles". I shall argue that Hume, in the *Natural History of Religion*, is trying to arrive at a place which is free from the shambolic nature of human life and that we can see this to be so, and the hopelessness of his aim, in the tensions his text embodies in its understanding of men, women and the animality of human life.

**4.00 Philosophy Tea** followed by **4.30 Phil Soc: ‘On the Meaning of Life in Recent Analytical Philosophy’**

In recent years, there has been a fair amount of work in analytic philosophy that seeks to explore the question of the meaning of life. The first aim of this paper is to discuss briefly some of this work, focusing on a couple of specific representative examples of such, highlighting what I take to be their main weaknesses. I shall then argue that, despite the differences between them, the main contributors to the debate, and not only the two examples considered, share a certain outlook on the meaning of life, that this outlook, at best, captures only a part of what we are concerned with when we think about the meaning of life, and that there is another approach which, though ignored or overlooked in the contemporary literature, is at least as important, probably more important, than that usually adopted in the literature. I shall then explore this other approach and argue that it opens up a highly productive space for thinking about the meaning of life.

**18 Feb Dr Ian James Kidd (Nottingham)**

Location: Z103 – Central Committee Room. This room is in the MacLaurin Building, which is a 2-minute walk from the de Havilland Campus (walk past the Law Court building (on your left) and cross the main road to the first building in sight on your right).

**2.00 Research Seminar: ‘Thinking Together: Virtue, Metaphor and Sociality’**

Philosophy is often perceived as an aggressive, combative discipline, to the delight of some, and the despair of many others. These rival perceptions reflect competing metaphilosophical claims about the proper aims, nature, and practice of philosophy that are often expressed using certain metaphors. I consider two such metaphors - of philosophy as 'war' and as a 'way (of life)' - and suggest that such metaphors can be appraised in terms of their implicit normative stipulations about the character or qualities a good philosopher ought evince. After rejecting the 'philosophy as war' metaphor, an alternative metaphor of philosophy as a 'way (of life)' is sketched using ancient Greek and Chinese sources. This metaphor is attractive specifically because it encourages various virtues of sociability integral to collective philosophical practice.

**4.00 Philosophy Tea** followed by **4.30 Phil Soc: ‘Beautiful Souls, Vicious Minds, and the “Aesthetics of the Intellect”’**

Certain people attract and impress us because their conduct - speech, thoughts, actions - express admirable qualities, or virtues, such as carefulness, honesty, or kindness. Other people, by contrast, repel and disturb us: their conduct manifests insensitivity, carelessness, and other vices. Ancient Indian, Greek, and Chinese philosophers explored these relations between conduct and virtue by describing exemplary people - 'sages' - whose conduct
manifests deeply-cultivated virtues. Such sages are often described as *beautiful*, but it is not clear how or why this might be so. In this talk, I suggest that there is a special sort of beauty that exemplary virtuous people enjoy. If that is right, then living philosophically is not just a way to a good conduct, but to a beautiful character.

3 March Dr Fiona Ellis (Heythrop)

Location: Z103 – Central Committee Room. This room is in the MacLaurin Building, which is a 2-minute walk from the de Havilland Campus (walk past the Law Court building (on your left) and cross the main road to the first building in sight on your right).

2.00 Research Seminar: ‘Desire and the spiritual life’

How important is desire to the spiritual life? And how important is the spiritual life in any case? Different answers have been given to these questions, for there are conflicting interpretations of the nature and value of these notions, although some of the disagreements are terminological. I clarify the relevant notions, challenge some Nietzchean reasons for rejecting a religious conception of the spiritual life, and rescue Schopenhauer from some familiar charges. I conclude that desire is central to the spiritual life, and raise some doubts about the Nietzschean version of this claim.

4.00 Philosophy Tea followed by 4.30 Phil Soc: ‘Philosophy, Naturalism, and God’

We are told often enough that philosophers should be naturalists and that naturalism involves a commitment to atheism. I agree that philosophers should be naturalists, but deny that this involves a commitment to atheism. In this talk, I explore how this can be so.

17 March Dr Eve Garrard (Manchester)

Location: Z127 – Matthews Suite. This room is in the MacLaurin Building, which is a 2-minute walk from the de Havilland Campus (walk past the Law Court building (on your left) and cross the main road to the first building in sight on your right).

2.00 Research Seminar: ‘Evil and Forgiveness’

The question addressed in this paper (by Eve Garrard and David McNaughton) lies at the intersection of theories about the nature of evil and theories about the nature of forgiveness. Because people sometimes have reservations about the idea of evil, the paper starts with a brief defence of the secular deployment of the idea of evil. We then move to an account of what evil is, and an overview of various theories of evil. After providing an outline of what forgiveness involves, we address the question of what being unforgiveable might actually amount to. If there are any unforgiveable actions, evil acts seem to be the most plausible candidates, since they are regarded by many (though not all) as the worst actions that can be committed. Four possible accounts of being unforgiveable are canvassed: (i) an act is unforgiveable if it’s psychologically impossible for it to be forgiven; (ii) an act is unforgiveable if it’s psychologically very difficult for it to be forgiven; (iii) an act is unforgiveable if there are no reasons to forgive it; (iv) an act is unforgiveable if there is a moral prohibition on forgiving it. The plausibility of each of these construals of unforgiveability is examined, and their implications for the title question are considered. A
final question then arises: even if forgiveness for evil acts is both possible and permissible, will forgiveness for the evil-doer be the end of the matter – will the perpetrator’s slate be wiped clean at last? We close by examining the idea of staining of the soul (as developed by Eleonore Stump), and its implications for our view of unconditional forgiveness.

4.00 Philosophy Tea followed by 4.30 Phil Soc: ‘Can Philosophy provide us with a secular concept of evil?’

In this talk I hope to demonstrate two things: first, that philosophy has something of importance to say to the other humane disciplines such as history and the social sciences; and second, that elucidation of the concept of evil is one example of the way in which philosophy can be of use to other disciplines. I’ll start by looking at objections to the deployment of the idea of evil which have been raised by some historians (and others), and I’ll consider whether these objections can be met by an appropriately philosophical treatment of the topic. In particular, I’ll aim to defend a secular account of the concept, and to show that it’s a significant part of our moral discourse, both inside and outside the academic context.

14 April Dr Patrice Haynes (Liverpool Hope)

Location: Z103 – Central Committee Room. This room is in the MacLaurin Building, which is a 2-minute walk from the de Havilland Campus (walk past the Law Court building (on your left) and cross the main road to the first building in sight on your right).

2.00 Research Seminar: ‘Religious Diversity: A Perspective from Feminist Philosophy of Religion’

This paper will consider ways in which feminist philosophy of religion can respond to the so-called “problem” of religious diversity. Part one will clarify how (analytic) philosophy of religion typically overlooks questions concerning the sex/gender of religious believers and practitioners in debates regarding religious diversity. In doing so the paper addresses epistemological issues regarding truth and epistemic norms, particularly as these bear on the positions of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, which have dominated debates on religious diversity in Western philosophy and theology. The second part of the paper highlights the difficulties raised for feminist thought when it pays attention to women who affirm a religious subjectivity that does not oppose the patriarchal structures of their tradition (see, for example, Saba Mahmood’s Politics of Piety). The paper offers some indicative responses to the difficulty of preserving the feminist desire to respect (religious) differences among women (and men) while also aspiring to transform patriarchal orders that systematically subordinate the interests of women to those of men.

4.00 Philosophy Tea followed by 4.30 Phil Soc: ‘Philosophy of Religion in light of African Indigenous Religions’

Philosophy of religion is increasingly criticised for its narrow focus on Western monotheistic traditions. In what ways, then, is philosophy of religion transformed – with respect to its concepts, questions and methodology – when it takes it cue from the philosophical insights emerging from African indigenous religions? In this lecture, we will explore how a focus on ritual and myth in traditional Yoruba (a people of West Africa) culture raises some intriguing philosophical questions, and, indeed, invites us to question what we are to understand by the terms “philosophy” and “religion”.