

Blackheath Philosophy Forum

2015 Program

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THEME 1 - LAW AND SOCIETY

The first three talks take up several issues bearing on the role of law in our society. To what extent should our legal and political systems be constrained by the codification of human rights? What is the relationship between law and morality? What do we mean by the 'Rule of Law'?

WHAT ROLE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS?

4 pm Saturday 14 March

What are human rights and what role should they play in our legal and political systems? Should they be codified in Constitutions or Bills of Rights? What role should United Nations conventions play in our domestic law? Do codified human rights provide essential protections for individuals and underpin social justice, or do they undermine democracy by handing power to unelected judges? Our two speakers will offer different perspectives on these matters.

James Allan, Garrick Professor of Law, University of Queensland

Brian Ellis, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy, La Trobe University

LAW AND MORAL JUSTIFICATION

4pm Saturday 4 April

Is there a valid process to create laws that are morally justified? Traditionally, philosophers have argued that moral justification is not required for valid law, or alternatively, that a particular moral theory must be obeyed for laws to be valid. Is there a middle path that provides a process that satisfies the moral requirement without accepting a particular moral theory?

Heydon Wardell-Burrows, University of Sydney School of Law

LAWYERS AND THE RULE OF LAW

4pm Saturday 18 April

Lawyers frequently talk about the importance of the 'Rule of Law'. But what do they mean by this? And is their understanding correct? Our speaker thinks lawyers make a serious conceptual mistake that leads them to over-emphasize legal institutions at the expense of broader cultural and societal factors about which lawyers have no special claim to expertise.

Martin Krygier, Gordon Samuels Professor of Law and Social Theory, University of NSW

THEME 2 – PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE

The second group of three talks takes up some issues concerning the relationship between philosophy and scientific inquiry. How is mathematics related to the ‘real’ world? How do we connect the physics of time with our subjective perception of it? Is it useful to speculate about how the world could have turned out differently by engaging in counter-factual history?

MATHEMATICS - KEY TO THE REAL WORLD

4pm Saturday 9 May

In mathematics, you sit in the armchair and think (like philosophy), but you prove results that everyone accepts (unlike philosophy), and they apply to the real world (like physics, but without the hard work of experiment). How is that possible? James Franklin explains the Aristotelian realist philosophy of mathematics of the ‘Sydney School’, which holds that mathematics is a science of the quantitative and structural properties of the world. (No technical knowledge of mathematics is needed to appreciate this talk.)

James Franklin, Professor of Mathematics, University of NSW

TIME AND TIMELESSNESS

4pm Saturday 23 May

At the intersection of philosophy and physics many important questions are asked. Does the universe have a beginning or an end? What are the universe’s fundamental components? Why do we experience the world the way we do? We often suppose that one fundamental component of our world is time. Some recent theories in physics reject this contention. What does that imply for our understanding of the world, and of our place in it?

Kristie Miller, Associate Professor of Philosophy, University of Sydney

CONTINGENCY AND HISTORY

4 pm Saturday 13 June

Suppose historical events had turned out differently. Suppose, for example, that Islamic Spain had survived and built a European empire. This is an example of counter-factual history – the positing of scenarios that did not happen, but plausibly could have. In general, professional historians do not take such scenario-building seriously. In this talk our speaker aims to diagnose and ameliorate this scepticism, and consider the conditions under which scenario-building can serve a useful purpose.

Kim Sterelny, Professor of Philosophy, Research School of Social Sciences, ANU

THEME 3 – PHILOSOPHY AND THE ARTS

The final group of talks explores the relationship between philosophy and various forms of artistic expression. Is there a sense in which musicians do philosophy? Can films provide philosophical insights into our knowledge of each other? What insights into the human condition can literature provide that philosophy cannot?

THE SCEPTICAL DEPTHS OF FILM

4pm Saturday 20 June

We have all seen films that engage with philosophical themes or ideas. For example, the romantic comedy *The Awful Truth* (McCarey, 1937) raises and answers the question ‘What is a (better) marriage?’ And the sci-fi film *The Matrix* (Wachowski Brothers, 1999) toys with scepticism about the external world. Philosophers have tended to suppose that the important question about such films is whether they engage with philosophy passively, as mere exemplifications, or whether they engage with philosophy actively - as examples of thinking capable of contributing to our understanding of whatever is in question. Our speaker will suggest another way that films are philosophical, raising deep sceptical questions about our knowledge of each other.

David Macarthur, Associate Professor of Philosophy, University of Sydney

WHAT LITERATURE CAN DO THAT PHILOSOPHY CANNOT

4 pm Saturday 11 July

This talk explores the claim that literature can provide knowledge of a sort that philosophy cannot - namely experiential knowledge of things like character, situation, and action. Our speaker will argue that the claim has some merit. Literature can expose readers to the qualities of experience, while philosophy can only describe experiences of a certain kind, and explore the relations of such experiences to other ones. Rick Benitez will argue that both sceptical doubt and philosophical reflection are vital for anyone who would hope to learn from literature.

Rick Benitez, Professor Philosophy, University of Sydney

MUSIC AS PHILOSOPHY

4 pm Saturday 25 July

Philosophers have traditionally shown a strong interest in music, usually focussed on its sub-discipline of aesthetics. Some philosophers (Adorno) have gone so far as to suggest that some musicians (Beethoven) are actually doing philosophy. I will explore whether we are dealing merely with an analogy, or whether there is a substantial, unique and illuminating way in which philosophical thinking can be extended into music, or musical-thinking into philosophy.

Goetz Richter, Associate Professor of Violin and Chair of String Unit, University of Sydney