

City of Good Neighbors Philosophy Conference

Date: Sat., Apr. 6

Schedule:

9:00-9:30am	Coffee, welcome
9:30-10:30am	Leigh Duffy (Buff State), "What It Would Take To Be Enlightened"
10:30-11:30am	Nic Bommarito (UB), "Buddhist Action Theory"
11:30-11:45am	Coffee break
11:45am-12:45pm	Steve Petersen (Niagara), "Machines Learning Values"
12:45-2:00pm	Catered lunch for all attendees
2:00-3:00pm	Melissa Mosko (Canisius), "'An Uncertain Ethics: Beauvoir's Account of Risk in <i>The Ethics of Ambiguity</i> '"
3:00-4:00pm	Brandon Absher (D'Youville), "The Communicability of Philosophy: Assertion, Heidegger's Style, and the Oblivion of Being"
4:00-4:15pm	Coffee break
4:15-5:15pm	Mark Warren (Daemen), "Deflating Objectivity"

Abstracts:

Leigh Duffy (Buff State), "What It Would Take To Be Enlightened"

According to the theory of yoga, meditation and the other eight limbs of yoga are practiced in order to reach a state of enlightenment, in which one experiences pure consciousness and the true nature of the self. In this paper, I argue that for this state to even be possible, certain principles that are commonly accepted as true in philosophy would have to be false. For the yoga theory to be true, it would have to be the case that not all conscious states are intentional and it would have to be the case that there is some other way of knowing philosophical truths about the world that is neither empirical nor a priori. I encourage us to rethink our ideas about these particular principles and about our modal intuitions in general and their reliability in constructing philosophical arguments.

Nic Bommarito (UB), "Buddhist Action Theory"

Much of contemporary ethical theory has been characterized by evaluating actions by appeal to either the motives that produces them or the effects that follow. Attempts to understand Buddhist ethics in terms of this debate, I argue, has been distorting and an obstacle in cross-cultural interactions. I appeal to a particular Buddhist account of the nature of action to suggest a distinctive and philosophically attractive way of evaluating actions.

Steve Petersen (Niagara), "Machines Learning Values"

Whether it would take one decade or several centuries, many agree that it is possible to create a superintelligence—an artificial intelligence with a godlike ability to achieve its goals. And many who have reflected carefully on this fact agree that our best hope for a “friendly” superintelligence is to design it to learn values like ours, since our values are too complex to program or hardwire explicitly. But the value learning approach to AI safety faces three particularly philosophical puzzles: first, it is unclear how any intelligent system could learn its final values, since to judge one supposedly “final” value against another seems to require a further background standard for judging. Second, it is unclear how to determine the content of a system’s values based on its physical or computational structure. Finally, there is the distinctly ethical question of which values we should best aim for the system to learn. I outline a potential answer to these interrelated puzzles, centering on a “miktotelic” proposal for blending a complex, learnable final value out of many simpler ones.

Melissa Mosko (Canisius), “An Uncertain Ethics: Beauvoir's Account of Risk in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*”

TBA

Brandon Absher (D'Youville), “The Communicability of Philosophy: Assertion, Heidegger’s Style, and the Oblivion of Being”

In this essay, I argue that the opacity of Heidegger’s style emerges in response to the centrality of assertoric discourse in philosophical speech and writing. Heidegger identifies three structural features of the assertion that stand in the way of a comprehension of being. Firstly, he thinks, in assertoric discourse one relates to entities as “present-at-hand” (*vorhanden*). The privileging of assertoric discourse in philosophical speech and writing, then, motivates a particular ontological perspective that conceives being itself as presence-at-hand. Secondly, assertions identify a particular subject, paradigmatically a substance or thing, and attribute a predicate to it. For this reason, assertoric discourse has the tendency to “substantivize” the subject matter discussed, in this case being itself. Finally, speech acts generally and assertions in particular can be repeated and passed along in what Heidegger calls “idle talk” (*Gerede*). As he sees it, this tendency of discourse allows one to speak in cases where one lacks direct experience of or proper access to the subject matter. What Heidegger terms the “oblivion” or “forgetting” of being is thus in large part the result of the privileging of assertoric discourse, which renders what Heidegger calls a grasp of entities in their being nearly impossible. Ultimately, I explain how Heidegger’s notoriously dense and difficult writing style is an attempt to circumvent these structural features of assertoric discourse. These devices evoke in the reader a sense of “defamiliarization” the purpose of which, I argue, is to reawaken the question of being.

Mark Warren (Daemen), “Deflating Objectivity”

This paper develops deflationary options for explaining objectivity in various discourses: ethics, metaphysics, and mathematics. I focus on a simple discursive norm essential for

objectivity, *discursive intolerance*, which tells us that for any genuine disagreement, at least one disputant must be in error. I argue that discourses governed by this norm are characterized by two hallmarks of objectivity: *mind-independence* and the *possibility of communal error*. Inflationary accounts have a relatively easy time explaining this principle. In metaethics, for example, a traditional realist might argue that, because there are mind-independent normative facts out in the world, and because our moral discourse aims to successfully refer to them, it follows that any moral disagreement will involve a mistake on the part of one or both disputants—and indeed, that entire communities can get these facts wrong. I argue that there is a way for deflationists to secure objectivity without relying on inflationary normative facts as *explanans*. Continuing in a metaethical key: Moral objectivity isn't best explained in reference to some realm of moral facts waiting to be accurately described by a successful discourse. Instead, the objectivity of morality is a function of its purpose—the coordination of social behavior. Because moral questions are ultimately questions about what we are to do, we cannot simply agree to disagree about their answers; doing so would frustrate the purpose of moral talk itself. Discursive intolerance has a place in this discourse. In the second half of this talk, I offer suggestions for extending this approach to other domains, like modality and mathematics. I argue that my proposed solution to the metaethical issue promises insights into the limits of objectivity for both of these. Inasmuch as the arguments I offer here are credible, my hope is that we'll have as a takeaway a kind of meta-theoretical approach to all sorts of discourses, one that might put us into a position to pursue a deflationary taxonomy of objectivities.