

Scientific Report for the Postgraduate Course “Lesser Entities”

Philipp Blum, 31.1.2014

Last year’s graduate course focussed on Lesser Entities, and gave rise to four conferences, which explored the problematic status of so-called “lesser entities”, things that are neither properties nor “classical” Aristotelian substances, from four different angles. Two conferences focussed on increasingly important, though still largely neglected special topics, and two others on the work of two individuals particularly important to the issue: Kit Fine and Donald Baxter.

As in earlier years, each conference has its own detailed website (cf. the links below), containing not just the programme, but drafts and handouts of the papers given as well. To access these, the username is “philosophy” and the password “iswhatiliketodomost”.

The first conference, on the **philosophy of mixtures** (<http://www.philosophie.ch/philipp/services/mixtures.php>), succeeded in bringing together into fruitful collaboration specialists from three very different, and usually completely isolated subdisciplines of philosophy: the philosophy of chemistry, contemporary metaphysics and Aristotle scholarship. Such unprecedented cross-disciplinary collaboration was made possible by a lucky choice of participants: Paul Needham, a renowned specialist of the philosophy of chemistry (one of three, according to himself), who has both strong interests in contemporary metaphysics and in Aristotle, Theodore Scaltsas, an Aristotle scholar with an unusual knowledge of and interest in the systematical issues raised by the ancient texts, Henry Laycock and Mark Steen, contemporary metaphysicians who work on a “stuff metaphysics”, for which the philosophy of chemistry is of paramount importance, Nick Treanor, a young polymath applying the metaphysics of quantities and mixtures in the seemingly unrelated area of epistemology, and finally Stephen Wykstra, himself a chemist with a strong interest in the history of chemistry and its relevance for contemporary metaphysics. The mixture of talks by such people and the open discussion sections made for a groundbreaking conference, the first, but certainly not the last of its type.

The second conference, co-founded by the CRUS, was certainly for many contemporary philosophers THE event of the year: a one-week intensive workshop on the **philosophy of Kit Fine** (<http://www.philosophie.ch/philipp/services/fine.php>), arguably the best philosopher alive. A large number of Swiss graduate students and post-docs, together with a rigorously selected group of international young scholars (we peer-reviewed blindly more than thirty extended abstracts, of which less than a third were selected), met for a whole week to give short talks on aspects of Fine’s work, followed by comparatively long

discussion sessions and a detailed commentary / reply / critique by Fine himself. While the scheduling was certainly very ambitious, and the whole week therefore very intense, the compact format and the seclusion provided by the remote conference location provided for a very efficient and effective collaboration among the participants. According to Fine himself, it was “the most exhausting and most stimulating” conference he ever attended, not a small compliment from someone who was, during the last year only, personally present at at least four international conferences dedicated solely to his work. For many of the people attending it was the first chance to confront their ideas with Kit Fine’s sharp mind: the unique opportunity offered to test their ideas against their prime target was particularly important to the Swiss participants who typically not have had the opportunity to take courses at one of the universities where Kit Fine teaches. There is no doubt that a lot of important work will come out of this unique conference.

The third conference, on **the metaphysics and ontology of mind** (<http://www.philosophie.ch/philipp/services/ontologyofmind.php>), mostly focussed on a seemingly parochial question of temporal ontology: how to account for things, like episodes of grief, which have temporal parts (or stages), but still go on *in* time, rather than go on for some time (or, in the jargon, that endure, but do not perdure nor exdure). The existence of such things is ruled out by the orthodox classification in the metaphysics of time, which often *defines* perdurance or exdurance by the having of temporal parts. Important as it is, this special problem was just one of the many things discussed during the conference, but may serve to illustrate its general approach: to take seriously, and worthy of independent investigation, the “metaphysical” findings of philosophers primarily working in the philosophies of mind, perception and experience more generally, which so far have gone unnoticed or neglected by “mainstream” metaphysicians. In recent years, and mostly in Britain, a new strand of metaphysics-conscious thinking has emerged within “classical” philosophy of mind and the philosophy of perception, and of sensation more generally: Helen Steward, Rowland Stout, Mike Martin and a generation of younger philosophers heavily influenced by him have started taking temporal ontology more seriously, and this was the first conference to bring them all together on this particular topic. Mike Martin commented as follows: “I found the whole thing really stimulating and useful. One of the best events I’ve been at for years.”

The fourth conference, on the **metaphysics of identity and Baxterian aspects**, took the study of the interplay between metaphysical categories and the objects usually studied by “material” branches of philosophy (such as aesthetics, social philosophy, the philosophy of mathematics and of mind) yet another step further. It examined in much detail the revolutionary proposal by Don Baxter to recognize, in addition to what he calls “strict” identity, a weaker relation, which is relative to counts of things and ties things to their aspects, but which is otherwise still a type of identity. Such cross-count identity, it has been argued, would be very helpful in social philosophy (people and their roles), the philosophy of mind and ethics (mental and moral conflict), the philosophy of time

(persistence over time) and in explaining the so-called “puzzle of material constitution”, ie. the task to explain in what sense the statue formed out of some marble is in one sense, “nothing over and above” it, while it still seems to have quite different properties. The conference discussed, and critically analysed, these proposals, finding them surprisingly plausible and promising.

In sum, the aims of the doctoral school have been achieved, in some places even surpassed. I continue to believe that the SNSF “*école doctorale*” format is one of the most practical and cost-effective means to foster scientific progress and substantially improves the academic profiles of the participating PhD students. As I am currently in Barcelona, there will unfortunately not be any such summerschool this year, nor the next. I hope, however, to take up this promising tradition if, and when, I will be back in Switzerland.