Western E-vent in Early Modern Philosophy

Introductory Remarks

Benjamin Hill

This e-conference consists of papers in the history of early modern philosophy (pre-Kant) that were originally scheduled to be presented at various in-person conferences in the spring of 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic caused these in-person conferences to be cancelled or postponed. The cancellations distressed me, nonetheless because of the lost opportunities for graduate students and other early-stage researchers, for whom presentations and knowledge transfer opportunities are so important professionally. I knew that I was fortunate enough to be in a position where I could organize something to fill the gap—hence this e-conference.

I am also very pleased to be able to run this e-conference as a test event for e-conferencing more generally in partnership with Philosophers for Sustainability and their E-vents advocacy team. Climate collapse is looming and a substantial threat to our mission and activities as philosophers, researchers, and educators. Mitigation and, horrible dictu, adaptation will fundamentally alter society and our activities, more so even that the COVID-19 pandemic has and will. Philosophers, and universities, I feel, should be leaders in addressing these challenges, but unfortunately, we as a profession have thus far failed to even follow in any meaningful way limited guidelines for mitigating the unsustainability of our activities. Conferencing and travel for knowledge transfer events is not the least impactful of these activities and yet seems relatively easily and painlessly eliminated. The current model of in-person conferences and colloquia is a construct largely of post-WWII society and not necessary for doing quality philosophical research, plus it will be permanently ended by climate collapse much as it is temporarily suspended(?) by COVID-19. It would be prudent, we ought, to explore more sustainable alternatives before they are forced upon us—hence this e-conference and its format.

Just as e-conferencing is not a panacea to the unsustainable practices of philosophers and universities, neither is it a simple as booting up Zoom and reading a paper to a room full of passive listeners. With the format of this e-conference, I’ve tried to reconceive what knowledge transfer in philosophy could, and perhaps should, be like in order to test some limitations. The overall aim was to preserve as much of the value of a conference experience for authors and audience members alike as the circumstances and technology allows while eliminating as much as possible the barriers and limitations of conferencing. I focused on eliminating as far as possible passive synchronous interactions and focused instead magnifying active, bilateral interactions. I adopted a blended asynchronous-synchronous format so that more passive engagements can be done asynchronously and synchronous session time can be focused more on Q&A. I hope that you will find the balance I’m striking acceptable. One thing worth noting about the blended format I’ve adopted is that it requires all of us to rethink the temporal boundaries of the e-conference event—the e-conference does not just occur on the dates of the synchronous sessions (June 4–5, 2020) but indeterminately extends in both directions on the calendar in that the format expects audience members to pre-read the materials and upload questions and
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comments at some point beforehand and expects audience members to return afterwards to review the sessions, read the transcripts, or read the author’s considered, final responses to the questions and comments raised during the session.

Pre-session, authors and commentators are making their work available for pre-reading as well as brief highlights videos describing its most important aspects. Audience members are encouraged to post questions and critical comments in the “Comments” section of the session’s webpage. During the session, the highlight videos will be screened, followed by a brief response to the comments by the author. The remainder of the session will be devoted to Q&A drawing from the questions submitted beforehand as well as questions, including follow-ups, raised during the session. After the session, authors will have the opportunity to expand, clarify, or develop in writing their original responses to the Q&A as well as respond to questions which were not able to be asked during the synchronous session. Audience members will be able to return to all the conference materials for extended study and review and people unable to attend the original session may still benefit by watching the video or reviewing the transcripts according to their schedule.

I hope that you will enjoy this alternative format and that it will prove valuable to you whether you are an author, a commentator or chair, or audience member. Thank you.

I would like to thank the conferences and organizers who gave us permission to extend invitations to participants who originally appeared on their schedules. I would also like to thank Western Philosophy and Western Libraries for their encouragment and in-kind support of this endeavor. And I would like to thank Philosophers for Sustainability and their E-vents Advocacy team for advice and consultations regarding this event and its format.