

**Dominican Colloquia in Berkeley: Philosophers & Theologians in Conversation
What Has Athens to Do with Jerusalem? July 16-20, 2014**

Abstracts for Plenary Presentations

Michael Dodds: “‘Of all the gin joints...’ Causality, Science, Chance, and God”

Abstract: Chance is rampant in the world – from romantic encounters in Casablanca to elementary particles in quantum mechanics. But what is chance? Is it just a word for our ignorance of the true causes of some things or is it a real, ontological feature of the cosmos? And if it’s a genuine aspect of nature, how does it fit with the scientific study of nature and how has it fared in the transition from Newtonian to contemporary science? As an aspect of nature, how is it related to God’s action in the world? Is there a place for chance in a world governed by an omnipotent deity? Is a providential divine plan possible in a world that includes chance? And if so, does the presence of chance diminish the “chances” for its success? This paper will first trace the “fortunes of chance” in its encounter with science and then consider how the notion of chance, emerging from contemporary science, has influenced the discussion of divine action. Finally, it will turn to the philosophy of Aristotle and Aquinas to address the question of the relationship between God and chance.

Edward Feser: “From Aristotle to John Searle and Back Again: Formal Causes, Teleology, and Computation in Nature”

Abstract: Talk of information, algorithms, software, and other computational notions is commonplace in the work of contemporary philosophers, cognitive scientists, biologists, and physicists. These notions are regarded as essential to the description and explanation of physical, biological, and psychological phenomena. Yet a powerful objection has been raised by John Searle, who argues that computational features are observer-relative rather than intrinsic to natural processes. If Searle is right, then computation is not a natural kind but rather a kind of human artifact, and is therefore unavailable for purposes of scientific explanation. I argue that Searle’s objection has not been, and cannot be, successfully rebutted by his naturalist critics. I also argue, however, that computational descriptions do indeed track what Daniel Dennett calls “real patterns” in nature. The way to resolve this aporia is to see that the computational notions are essentially a recapitulation of the Aristotelian notions of formal and final causality, purportedly banished from modern science by the “mechanical philosophy” of Galileo, Descartes, Boyle, and Newton. Given this “mechanical” conception of nature, Searle’s critique of computationalism is unanswerable. If there is truth in computational approaches, then this can be made sense of, and Searle’s objection rebutted, only if we return to a broadly Aristotelian philosophy of nature. Finally, I explore ways in which computationalism, understood in Aristotelian terms, provides conceptual common ground between natural science, philosophy, and theology.

Alfred J. Freddoso: “The Vindication of St. Thomas: Thomism and Contemporary Analytic Philosophy”

Abstract: Fifty years after the “overthrow” of St. Thomas and Thomistic Scholasticism in Catholic intellectual life in general and in Catholic philosophy and theology in particular, we are now witnessing a revival of Aristotelianism and Aristotelian Thomism in a place where one would have least anticipated it, mainstream Anglo-American analytic philosophy. This phenomenon has been relatively well-documented in the case of moral theory, but is less well known in two areas that from a Thomistic standpoint are more fundamental than moral theory, viz., philosophy of nature and philosophical anthropology. In my presentation I will discuss this revival, along with some cognate developments within recent Catholic theology, with an eye toward giving some direction to the new generation of Catholic philosophers and theologians.

John O’Callaghan: “Can We Prove the Existence of God? A Problem about Names”

Abstract: In the question “Does God Exist?” the term ‘God’ functions as a proper name. So to ask whether we can prove that God exists is to suppose that we can prove something exists according to that proper name. But that presupposition raises certain historical and philosophical problems for the project of proving that God exists. A first historical problem involves the ideal of Aristotelian demonstration that Aquinas employs in his 5 Ways. According to Aristotle there can be no demonstration of a particular. Demonstration is general. A second historical problem is whether ‘God’ is in fact a proper name, and in what contexts it is, if it is. Aquinas tells us in question 13 of the Summa that ‘God’ is not a proper name in philosophical contexts; it may be used as a proper name in the context of Sacred Tradition, but even there it is not the proper name of the being who reveals Himself to Moses. But this suggests that the existence of God cannot be philosophically demonstrated. I will argue that this is Aquinas’ position, and that it is a philosophically cogent and good position to take.

Michal Paluch: “Analogical Synthesis: An Impossible Project?”

Abstract: Analogy is one of the most important points of contact between philosophy and theology. For centuries, it has helped explain how we are (not) able to reach God with our words. Articulated by Aristotle and then developed by his Neoplatonic and Arabic commentators, analogy found its classic expression in the work of Aquinas; on that basis, it has become the subject of passionate debate up to our day. This paper will provide an opportunity to enter into this debate by presenting (1) a concise description of Aquinas’s position, (2) the reasons for continuing dissensions, and (3) a consideration, in light of contemporary criticism, of the possibility of making analogy a viable mode of expression for our time.

John Searle: “The Future of Philosophy”

Abstract: The situation of philosophy today is somewhat analogous to the situation of the Greeks at the time of the transition from Socrates and Plato to Aristotle. Socrates and Plato took skepticism very seriously and struggled with piecemeal issues. Aristotle did not regard the skeptical paradoxes as a serious threat to his overall enterprise of attempting to do systematic, constructive, theoretical philosophy. I think we now have the tools to move into a twenty-first century version of an Aristotelian phase. Because of the nature of the subject, I do not believe it is possible to project a future course of philosophy with anything like the confidence that one can project the future course of the sciences – though, of course, that is not at all an easy thing to do in itself. What I will, therefore, do here is take two areas of philosophical investigation which are very much alive at the present moment, and discuss their present status and future prospects. These are (1) the traditional mind-body problem and (2) the philosophy of science. While my reflections may include some guesses about what I think will happen in these areas, they will also contain critical remarks and expressions of hope for future research in the coming decades.

Robert Sokolowski: “The Theology of Disclosure”

Abstract: The theology of disclosure uses philosophical resources of phenomenology to clarify the manner in which Christian realities are manifested to us, particularly the Christian understanding of God as Creator and as Triune. It can also address, as the lecture will show, the distinctive character of the Eucharist, grace, and the theological virtues of faith and charity. Phenomenology can make its contribution to theology because it focuses primarily on the truth of being and the truthfulness of the human person, and because it can counteract the modern rejection of ancient and medieval thought. Phenomenology can also clarify the role of human speech; the lecture will discuss how speech signals intellectual activity and enables us to grasp the intelligibility of things. A central component of the lecture will be the importance of making distinctions in bringing things to light, whether in philosophy or theology.

Linda Zagzebski: “Omnisubjectivity: Why It Is a Divine Attribute”

Abstract: What I mean by “omnisubjectivity” is the property of having a complete and perfect grasp of the conscious states of all conscious beings from the perspective of that being. I argue that God must be omnisubjective if he is omniscient and omnipresent. God has as perfect a grasp of what it is like to be each of his creatures as those creatures have themselves. I then explore the implications of this attribute for the doctrines of the Trinity and grace, and end with some reflections on God’s relationship with animals.