

Analytic Metaphysics Workshop (One Day)  
Department of Philosophy, The Chinese University of Hong Kong  
Date: 09/09/2023

Keynote Speaker:

Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra (Oxford)

Invited Speakers:

Andrew Brenner (HKBU)

Tien-Chun Lo (CUHK)

Dan Marshall (Lingnan)

Nick Rimell (CUHK)

James Dominic Rooney (HKBU)

Abstract:

Taking the advantage of Professor Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra's Tang Chun-I Visiting Professorship at CUHK, this one-day workshop will bring together Rodriguez-Pereyra and five HK-based scholars in the field of analytic metaphysics to engage in profound discussions, share groundbreaking insights, and explore the fundamental questions that shape our understanding of reality. Throughout the day, our speakers will engage in presentations and discussions that traverse a rich array of cutting-edge topics in analytic metaphysics, including but not limited to grounding, identity, modality, and properties.

Schedule:

10am-11am Andrew Brenner 'Is Nothing Really "Simpler and Easier" Than Something?'

Moderator: Jiji Zhang (CUHK)

11am-12pm Tien-Chun Lo 'On (Temporal) Existentialism'

Moderator: Nick Rimell (CUHK)

12noon-1.30pm Lunch

1.30pm-2.30pm Dan Marshall 'A Moderate Theory of Overall Resemblance'

Moderator: Tien-Chun Lo (CUHK)

2.30pm-3.30pm Nick Rimell 'Anti-essentialist arguments against necessitism and permanentism'

Moderator: Adam Bradley (Lingnan)

3.30pm-4pm Afternoon tea

4pm-5pm James Dominic Rooney 'Non-modal Metametaphysics'

Moderator: Rafael De Clercq (Lingnan)

5pm-6pm Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra 'Against Zero-grounding'

Moderator: Dan Marshall (Lingnan)

7pm-9pm Dinner

Abstracts:

(1) Andrew Brenner 'Is Nothing Really "Simpler and Easier" Than Something?'

It has often been thought that it is surprising that there is something rather than nothing because, as Leibniz put it, nothing is "simpler and easier" than something. The idea seems to be that, in virtue of its relative simplicity, an empty world is the default. In this paper I question this assumption. In fact, I argue, an empty world is not obviously simpler than a world in which things exist. In a world in which nothing exists, there are still various truths -- e.g., modal truths, moral truths, mathematical truths, truths regarding laws, truths regarding counterfactuals. These are non-ontological truths, because they are not truths regarding existing things. If something were to exist, however, then it could in principle simplify our total theory by explaining the obtaining of all these non-ontological truths. If that's right, then a world in which something exists might very well be simpler than a world in which nothing exists. While the existence of something complicates the world in one respect, it may simplify the world in various other respects, by explaining why various non-ontological truths obtain.

(2) Tien-Chun Lo 'On (Temporal) Existentialism'

In 'On existentialism', Alvin Plantinga (1983) uses the term 'existentialism' as a name for the view that the existence of some properties, especially individual essences, and propositions, especially singular propositions, depends on the existence of individuals that these properties and propositions are about. For instance, according to existentialism, both the property of being identical to Socrates and the proposition that Socrates is a philosopher modally depend for their existence on the individual Socrates in the sense that necessarily, if the latter does not exist, then the former will not exist. Robert Adams (1981) and G.W. Fitch (1996), among others, argue that the foregoing sort of (modal) existentialism is incompatible with the following theses: (a) S5 for metaphysical modality, which in effect implies that metaphysical possibilities do not vary from world to world, and (b) contingentism, i.e. that possibly, some individual may fail to exist. In this paper, I will develop a temporal analogue of Adams's and Fitch's arguments for the inconsistency between these three theses to target a similar view, which I call 'temporal' existentialism. According to temporal existentialism, whether an individual has, or will have, certain properties as its essential properties depend on how it will be in the future. I will argue that temporal existentialism is incompatible with the following two theses, which are structurally similar to (a) and (b): (a\*) the view that metaphysical possibilities do not vary from time to time, as defended by Cian Dorr and Jeremy Goodman (2020) and (b\*) S5 for metaphysical modality. After presenting my argument, I will discuss some possible ways out. Given that both (a\*) and (b\*) are highly plausible principles, I conclude that the argument provides a good reason for rejecting temporal existentialism.

### (3) Dan Marshall 'A Moderate Theory of Overall Resemblance'

This paper defends the moderate theory of overall resemblance stated by (A).

(A)  $y$  is at least as similar to  $x$  as  $z$  is if and only if: i) every resemblance property shared by  $x$  and  $z$  is also shared by  $x$  and  $y$ , and ii) for any resemblance family of properties  $F$ ,  $y$  is at least as similar to  $x$  as  $z$  is with respect to  $F$ .

In this account, a resemblance property is a property that corresponds to a genuine respect in which two things can resemble each other, whereas a resemblance family is a set of properties with respect to which things can be more or less similar to each other. An example of a resemblance property is being cubical, an example of a non-resemblance property is being either a gold cube or a silver sphere, and an example of a resemblance family is the set of specific mass properties. (A) states a moderate theory of overall resemblance, since, contra Goodman, it holds that some things can be (objectively) more similar to each other than to other things, but it also denies that all things are comparable in terms of their similarity.

### (4) Nick Rimell 'Anti-essentialist arguments against necessitism and permanentism'

Necessitism is the view that, necessarily, whatever exists necessarily exists. Permanentism is the view that, always, whatever exists always exists. Necessitists and permanentists face well-known and compelling arguments from essentialism. They typically respond to these arguments by doing two things: first, claiming that most (if not all) concrete things are only accidentally (and transiently) concrete, while many other things are accidentally (and transiently) nonconcrete; second, appealing to this claim in denying – or radically reinterpreting – the essentialist claims at the heart of the arguments in question. It is notable, then, that necessitists and permanentists also face compelling arguments that force them to adopt radically essentialist theses of their own, and perhaps also to abandon belief in the accidental (and transient) nature of concreteness. Or so I shall seek to demonstrate.

### (5) James Dominic Rooney 'Non-modal Metametaphysics'

Skeptical challenges can give principled reasons to prefer one such approach to metaphysics as opposed to another. Jonathan Schaffer, for example, argues that the triviality of responses to existence questions gives us reason to accept a conception of metaphysical reflection as aiming to provide accounts of the grounding or dependence relations that undergird what is fundamental. It is not difficult to see that there are or exist numbers between 5 and 10 and, thus, that there are numbers. What is difficult is saying whether numbers are fundamental entities, e.g., grounded in some extra-mental structure of reality, or merely conventional. In this paper, I will argue that approaches to metaphysics which center on modal intuitions open themselves up to unnecessary skeptical challenges.

EJ Lowe and Tuomas Tahko are exemplars by which I will illustrate this problem. Lowe and Tahko take a core element of metaphysics to rest upon knowledge of possible essences, which allows us to reflect upon possible beings and their kinds. While skepticism about modal knowledge might be a kind of global skepticism, these claims about metaphysics resting on modal knowledge are dialectically ineffective with scientific anti-realists of various stripes, and skeptics might justifiably appeal to such anti-realism to question whether claims about modality constitute knowledge or are a substantive kind of knowledge. By contrast, I propose that assumptions about modal intuitions are not as necessary for metaphysics as Lowe, Tahko, and their skeptical interlocutors believe. Instead, metaphysics can be much more ably defended against skeptical challenges if it consists primarily in knowledge of what is actual, rather than knowledge of what is possible. I conclude by showing that, if we modify their account of metametaphysics to center on non-modal notions, including a non-modal account of essence, many of those challenges can be avoided.

- (6) Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra 'Against Zero-grounding' (co-authored with Alexander Skiles and Tien-Chun Lo)

According to Kit Fine some truths are grounded but they are not grounded in anything. These are zero-grounded truths. Some have used the idea of zero-grounding to account for the grounds of identity truths, truths of iterated grounding, negative existentials, arithmetical truths, and necessary truths. In this paper we give two arguments to the effect that zero-grounding is an unintelligible idea, and then we show that, as should be expected with an unintelligible idea, the proposed elucidations of the notion of zero-grounding fail.