

Call for Papers

Centre for Ethics Graduate Conference, University of Toronto
“Theory and Practice: The Limits of Ethics for Guiding Action”

March 15 and 16, 2013, with Keynote Speaker:

Colin Farrelly, Queen’s University

Western social and political thought has long been concerned with the limitations of theoretical inquiry in beneficially guiding human behavior. From Aristotle’s debate with Plato on the nature of the ideal city to Marx’s famous assertion that “the philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point, however, is to change it!”, philosophers have long debated the relationship between theory and practice. More recently, this debate has resurfaced as a challenge to ‘ideal’ theories of justice and politics associated with twentieth century Anglo-American thinkers such as John Rawls and G.A. Cohen. The critique of ideal theory is also evident in the continental philosophical tradition through the work of Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser. The so-called ‘realist’ challenges to such theories are manifold. On the one hand, they include an antipathy to theorizing utopias and aspirations toward consensus and ‘full compliance’ with theoretically established norms. On the other hand, contemporary ethical realists tend to promote greater empirical accuracy in normative theorizing. This tendency is motivated by a desire to replace broad normative claims with more context-specific reasoning.

This latest form of the realist challenge to ideal theory has triggered myriad rejoinders and restatements. Nevertheless, questions abound. How is this latest attempt to theorize the limits of ethical and political theory distinct from its precursors or analogues in Western and non-Western traditions? How do these discussions inform and transform contemporary debates about global justice? How are we to theorize the relationship between individual agency and collective responsibility in the context of ethical dilemmas such as climate change? Can the purview of ethical discourse be more robustly extended to the firm or do recent corporate scandals reflect the limits of ethical theorizing? Taken together, these questions reflect the broader theoretical controversies and practical considerations associated with the limits of ethical inquiry.

We invite papers from all disciplines that seek to address these questions and controversies. The conference will be comprised of five thematic panels: 1) Comparative Approaches to the Limits of Ethics; 2) Traditional Responses to the Limits of Philosophy; 3) Ethics at the Border: Rethinking the Limits of Global Justice; 4) Agency and Responsibility – Collective and Individual; 5) Prerequisites of Business Ethics in Theory and Practice. See below for more information on each.

Applicants are asked to fill out the attached form and e-mail it to graduateassociates@gmail.com by **Friday January 18, 2013**.

Limited travel funding will be available for accepted papers.

Graduate Associate Conference
Centre for Ethics Graduate Association, University of Toronto, March 15-16

Name:

University:

Department:

Paper Title:

For which section(s) would you like this paper to be considered?

- Comparative Approaches to the Limits of Ethics**
- Traditional Responses to the Limits of Philosophy**
- Ethics at the Border: Rethinking the Limits of Global Justice**
- Agency and Responsibility – Collective and Individual**
- The Prerequisites of Business Ethics in Theory and Practice**

Paper Abstract (300 words maximum)

Descriptions of Panels

Comparative Approaches to the Limits of Ethics

Should theory guide action or should action inform theory? A dominant tradition within Western political theory insists on the temporal and logical priority of theory over action. This has been challenged in the West, especially in the modern era, by Marxism and other critical voices influenced by Marxism. However, if we shift our focus to the non-West, not only is this tradition of prioritizing theory over action questionable, but the very validity of this “classical question” appears to be precariously positioned. Around the world, the ways in which activists solve real world problems and transform people’s perspectives through political actions provide abundant resources for theoretical formulations. Moreover, in the modern period, particularly under conditions of colonialism, we find most thinkers from non-Western societies as first and foremost political activists – e.g Gandhi, Mao, and Fanon to cite just a few examples. For these political activists/thinkers, existing theoretical apparatuses – either in their own tradition or from the West – are limited for their existing context. Traditional theories offer little in terms of negotiating with the modern world, while theories of West are intrinsically enmeshed in the structures of power being resisted by the people in the non-West. What these political activist/thinkers have accomplished exemplifies the possibilities of alternatives, which calls for innovation and deep skepticism towards the Western distinction between theory and practice. This panel seeks papers which address the Non-western world’s ambivalence or challenges towards prioritizing theory over practice or the very distinction between theory and practice.

Traditional Responses to the Limits of Philosophy

The so-called ethical and political ‘realism’ associated with Bernard Williams and Raymond Geuss is often discussed as a novel, controversial attempt to correct for aberrations in modern ethical and political thought. Yet this correction has been inspired by historical progenitors, many of whom were engaged both in elaborating ‘ideal’ theories and grappling with the limitations of ideal theorizing in helpfully guiding human behaviour. To what extent are the contemporary advocates of ethical and political realism restating traditional views? Are there thinkers who made important contributions in this area whose work is underrepresented in the latest version of realism? To what extent can our thinking about the limits of philosophy be helpfully informed by traditional responses to this problem? Papers are invited that respond to these and related questions concerning traditional responses to problem of limits.

Ethics at the Border: Rethinking the Limits of Global Justice

What duties do states, and their members, have beyond their borders? Are obligations of justice global in scope? Or, alternatively, are they constrained by national borders? What is the moral standing of states? What are the limits of ethics in a globalized and interconnected world? This panel invites papers that address such questions and other contemporary debates in international political theory and global ethics. Papers are invited that discuss liberal, cosmopolitan and discursive democratic perspectives on issues of global justice, as well as critical perspectives that challenge these frameworks, particularly in light of global social structures and international inequalities. Major themes that this panel would embrace include: the historical roots of international relations theory; global distributive justice; the possibility of global discursive democracy; cosmopolitanism; the moral relevance of borders; nationalism, patriotism and special duties; sovereignty, the relation of international law and the international order.

Agency and Responsibility – Collective and Individual

In everyday moral thinking there is a tight connection between agency and responsibility. I am responsible for my actions and I have responsibilities that render certain actions mandatory or forbidden. While this connection might be quite intricate and not easy to spell out, there is at least one sense in which the relationship is quite straightforward: absent special circumstances, it is only *my* actions that are morally tied to *my* responsibilities. The picture becomes more complicated if we claim that groups of individuals can be bearers of responsibilities. It would be convenient to think that collective agency is related to collective responsibility in the same way that individual responsibility and agency are related. Whether this is so, however, is unclear. Moreover, there are interesting and pressing questions concerning the connections between the responsibility of an individual and that of the collective. Unless these problems are addressed we face the possibility that ethical theorizing has little to say about how to act in group contexts. This panel will be comprised of papers which explore questions related to issues of collective and individual agency. What is a collective agent? How can a collective agent be held accountable if it fails to act according to its responsibilities? What are the consequences for the individual members of a group? Does collective responsibility create moral loopholes for individuals? Does collective agency threaten to take us beyond the limits of ethical theorizing?

The Prerequisites of Business Ethics in Theory and Practice

What is the subject of business ethics? Most scholars studying business ethics focus on the content of business ethical norms. There is less consideration given to the character of individuals working in business and making everyday decisions. While within management there is a large and growing literature on leadership, it does not sufficiently speak to the literature on business ethics, focusing rather on what makes leaders more effective and efficient, with ethical considerations being at best a secondary or tertiary concern. This section invites papers which explore issues related to the proper theoretical scope of business ethics and necessary prerequisites for ethical business conduct in actual practice. Some questions which might be explored include: What are the limits of ethics when applied to the content of business decisions? What should be the subject of business ethics? Should business ethics be about the content of business decisions or the behavior and moral disposition of individual decision makers? Should we promote business ethics by developing mechanisms and normative frameworks that will promote acts considered ethical (codes of conduct, regulations, etc.) or through the ethical training and disciplining of individuals working in business? If the latter, what sorts of training, broadly understood, might promote the most effective practice of business ethics in the long term?