

Graduate workshop on Fiction & Philosophy
Lund University, Department of Philosophy
April 14-15th 2016

Schedule & Abstracts

Thursday 14th of April LUX:B251

13:00-13:15 Welcome and introduction

13:15-14:00 Elisabeth Schellekens Dammann – "Understanding Fiction: Concepts, Character and Coherence"

14:15-15:00 Ylwa Sjölin Wirling – "How much fiction is there in fictionalism?"

ABSTRACT: Fictionalism has become a popular approach with respect to various areas in philosophy. The idea behind fictionalism is that claims within some discourse X do not aim at literal truth, but should be regarded as "fictional" or "like fiction". Fictionalist approaches relies to some extent on an analogy between the discourse in question and fiction, although it is not clear how far-reaching the analogy is supposed to be. In this talk, I inquire into one possible way to run the analogy. It is common for fictionalists to say: Like fiction, discourse X is useful/valuable even if the claims within it are untrue. This prompts the questions: What is the (relevant) value/utility of fiction and what is the value/utility of the discourse in question? I suggest a candidate I call Epistemic Utility. The idea is that fiction and discourse X in similar ways can provide or assist us in acquiring knowledge or understanding. I discuss different ways to unpack this idea, and focus on issues where the study of fiction and literature on the one hand, and philosophical fictionalism on the other, may have intersecting interests.

PRESENTATION: Ylwa Sjölin Wirling is a doctoral student in theoretical philosophy at the University of Gothenburg. Her research is primarily located within metaphysics, epistemology and meta-philosophy/meta-metaphysics. Her dissertation concerns modal epistemology, more specifically how more attention to metaphysical detail and utilization of the notion of grounding explanation can help enhance modal epistemologies.

15:15-16:00 Daniel Helsing – "Evolution, fiction, and popular science"

ABSTRACT: From an evolutionary point of view, the existence of fiction poses an explanatory challenge. Naively, one would expect fiction to be shunned as deliberately conveyed falsehoods or as time-consuming unnecessary. Yet fiction is ubiquitous in the human species. This challenge has been addressed over the past decades within the field known as literary Darwinism or Darwinian literary studies. In this talk, I review some of the most common accounts of fiction within this field. Furthermore, I discuss whether these accounts may shed light on literary non-fiction as well, in particular popular science dealing with physics and astronomy. Popular science is an interesting genre because modern science, with its non-intuitive scales and non-teleological explanations, challenges the human mind in unique ways, and popularizers need to convey science in a way that is understandable and enticing for humans. I argue that popular science indeed does draw upon some of the same cognitive abilities and has some of the same functions as fiction, and I illustrate this through examples from contemporary popular science.

PRESENTATION: Daniel Helsing is a PhD candidate in comparative literature at Lund University. His dissertation deals with contemporary popular science, and he is particularly interested in ways in which popular science meets the conceptual, emotional, and existential challenges that modern science poses.

16:00-16:30 Coffee break

16:30- 17:15 Hege Dypedokk Johnsen – "Plato and the poets"

ABSTRACT: It is a tenacious view that Plato criticizes the poets and poetry because (i) poetry is imitation; (ii) the person who renders the poem is ignorant of the things which he imitates; (iii) poetry addresses itself to the lower faculties of man, with which he cannot grasp truth, and (iv) poetry cannot be ascribed truth (cf. Rep. 608a6–b2). However, although Plato scorns poetry as something we must take precautions against and not take seriously, due to (i)–(iv), Plato frequently quotes and echoes poets, and has Socrates and other characters praising the poets and poetry. Indeed, Plato himself writes as a philosopher poet. Plato writes philosophical dramatic dialogues, in which we readers get to know the characters' views, arguments, dreams and desires; and while portraying these Plato does not distinguish biography from fiction. This appears to be a paradox. At its core, the subject of "Plato and the Poets" addresses the classical question – and ancient quarrel – regarding the relation between philosophy and fiction. Our answers to this question, in turn, have bearings on how we should interpret Plato's texts: As traditional philosophical treatises, as pieces of fiction, as something in between these two categories – or as something else entirely? In my talk, I'll discuss Plato's use of the poets and poetry, and argue for the dialogues' mixed nature between fiction and treatises.

PRESENTATION: Hege Dypedokk Johnsen is a Ph.D-candidate in Philosophy at Stockholms University. Her main research interests are in Ancient Philosophy (in particular Plato), and in the Philosophy of Love.

17:30-18:15 Anna Persson- "The Blur of Habitually Supplementing Karen Blixen's Out of Africa"

ABSTRACT: In 1937 the Danish author Karen Blixen, known in the English speaking world as Isak Dinesen, published *Out of Africa*, an autobiographical account of her fifteen years in Kenya. The narrative centers on her work with her coffee plantation, Karen Coffee Co. and it is a poetic, fragmented telling of her love for a country and its people which she had to leave under difficult circumstances after the farm's bankruptcy.

When dealing with any autobiographical text the reader makes assumptions and connects the prior knowledge of the author's life and contexts; other elements of the author's production become a tool to fill in the gaps in a tale where not all is told. Through the years the response to the novel—as I choose to call it—has been diverse and the author celebrated, mythologized and criticized. The critical voices have focused on the text's colonial themes. However, a problem with some of the postcolonial readings of the text is that they conflate the narrator with the author and thereby come to overlook the subversive elements of the text (Marianne T. Stecher 179). Some of the response to this criticism has been drawn from the author's political essays and letters, used to nuance the understanding of Blixen as author and public figure. In so doing, these scholars too come to conflate narrator and author.

Some of the content comes of *Out of Africa* comes as a jolt for a contemporary reader who might come to seek mitigating material elsewhere. Susan Sontag argues in her 1964 essay "Against Interpretation" that, "interpretation...signals dissatisfaction" (6). This I do not agree with. However, I do believe and argue that inclusion of personal correspondence or political essays in the reading of *Out of Africa* does signal dissatisfaction, a dissatisfaction that comes to overshadow some of the possible ethical implications of the text, both in historical and present-day contexts. As Wayne C. Booth argues, we need to be attentive so as to see which friends we keep and which friends we think we keep (16-17). If we do, could our attentiveness, then, be used productively and open our eyes to the artist's capability of assisting us in, "cutting through the blur of habit" (Nussbaum 344)?

PRELIMINARY BIBLIOGRAPHY

Arendt, Hannah. "Isak Dinesen." *Men in Dark Times*. 1968.

Blixen, Karen. *Out of Africa*. 1937.

Booth, Wayne C. *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. 1988.

Nussbaum, Martha. "Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism." 1998

.—*Love's Knowledge*. 1990.

Sontag, Susan. "Against Interpretation." *Against Interpretation*. 1964.

Stecher, Marianne T. *The Creative Dialectic in Karen Blixen's Essays*.

PRESENTATION: Anna Persson is a PhD Candidate in Literary Studies at the Department of Culture and Aesthetics at Stockholm University. Her thesis, with the tentative title "Lived Landscapes and Ecologies of Embodiment in Karen Blixen's Works", focuses on Karen Blixen's letters, essays and short stories from material feminist and ecocritical perspectives. Her main research interests include female corporeality and landscape in Scandinavian literature, and menstruation in postcolonial literature.

19:00 Workshop Dinner

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Friday 15th of April **LUX:B237**

9:00-9:45 Eileen John – “Fiction and thinking in two directions”

ABSTRACT: In this paper I want to suggest that one reason fiction is of interest to philosophy is that it supports kinds of thinking that are models of cognitive activity. The two examples I will focus on are thinking about literary themes and thinking about fictional characters. In each case I will try to show the cognitive value of thinking ‘in two directions’ (or at least two). Theme moves us toward and away from conceptual abstraction, and we return to theme from different positions of information. Fictional characters move us toward an imagined reality and back toward awareness of representation. Typically, this thinking does not display a standard progress of reasoning. What can be valuable in such movements of thought?

PRESENTATION: Eileen John is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Warwick. Her research is in aesthetics, with an emphasis on philosophy of literature. She has taken advantage of the philosophical substance in works of fiction many times and hopes this is a defensible way to treat literature! She is co-editor of the Blackwell anthology *The Philosophy of Literature* and has served as Director of Warwick’s Centre for Research in Philosophy, Literature and the Arts.

10:00-10:45 Marco Tiozzo – “Why literature does not convey any moral knowledge”

ABSTRACT: Literary cognitivism is the thesis that literature is a genuine source of knowledge. Most often advocates of this view contend that literary works might convey moral knowledge. In my presentation I argue against this claim by suggesting that the study of literature rather seems to lead to moral skepticism. The main reason for this is the wide diversity in moral perspectives and outlook expressed in literary works across times and places. As a consequence I will hold that literature is unable to provide any significant contribution to moral epistemology.

KEY WORDS: Literary Cognitivism; Moral Knowledge; Moral Diversity; Moral Skepticism.

PRESENTATION: Marco Tiozzo is a Ph.D. candidate in Practical Philosophy at the University of Gothenburg. His dissertation concerns the epistemic significance of moral disagreement. The main focus is cases of moral disagreement between so-called peers, i.e. disputants that take each other to be equally likely to be right about the relevant matter at issue.

10:45-11:15 Coffee break

11:15-12:00 Frits Gävertsson – “Moral Development, Friendship and Self-deception in Dame Margaret Drabble’s *The Millstone*”

ABSTRACT: Dame Margaret Drabble’s *The Millstone* can profitably be read as shedding light on personal identity and moral development as well as how these connect to contemporary society, history, friendship, self-knowledge and self-deception in a way that ought to be of interest to contemporary ethical theory (particularly classic perfectionist theories, i.e. ethical theories that develop an account of ethics informed by an account of the good human life understood in terms of the development of human nature).

KEYWORDS: Margaret Drabble; Moral Development; Friendship; Self-deception; Self-knowledge; Historicism

PRESENTATION: Frits Gävertsson doctoral student in practical philosophy at Lund University. His Dissertation, provisionally entitled 'Studies in Perfectionist Ethics' comprises an investigation into the nature, history, and feasibility of 'classical perfectionism'—i.e. ethical theories that develop an account of ethics informed by an account of the good human life, such as e.g. eudaimonism and self-realisationism. Special emphasis is placed on structural commitments, the possibility of codification of morality given such a perspective and epistemic and developmental aspects thereof. He is interested in the possibilities that (narrative) literature allegedly affords in explicating sought after insights into moral development due its ability to depict moral growth in a manner arguably superior to argumentative philosophical form. He is also interested in literature's (and literary theory's) connection to moral philosophy more broadly construed as well as in the philosophy of the emotions and its implications for our understanding of and engagement with literature.

12:15-13:00 Charlotte Hansson Webb – “Between the idea/ And the reality”: Dualism and its Discontents in the Works of T. S. Eliot”

ABSTRACT: Though remembered as one of the defining figures of literary modernism, T. S. Eliot began his career as a budding philosopher. Attending Harvard University during a period that came to be known as the golden age of American philosophy, he studied under the influence of figures as various as Irving Babbitt, George Santayana, Josiah Royce, Bertrand Russell, William James, and—during a Parisian year abroad—Henri Bergson, finishing a doctoral dissertation in 1916 on *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley*. Completed a year before the publication of Eliot’s first volume of poetry, *Poetry and Other Observations* (1917), this complex work articulated a concern that would stand at the heart of much of Eliot’s critical and creative work: namely, the struggle to reconcile inner, subjective consciousness with the external, objective world.

This lecture explores one of the defining tensions of Eliot’s life and work: namely, the philosophical and critical impulse to overcome dualism, juxtaposed by the poetic vision of the self as inevitably trapped within its own “cranial lodging.”

KEYWORDS: T. S. Eliot, Dualism, Solipsism, Subjectivity.

PRESENTATION: Charlotte Webb is a doctoral candidate in the field of English Literature at Lund University. Her thesis explores the concept of the divided self in the works of modernist poet T. S. Eliot, connecting Eliot's poetic representations of the fragmented modern subject with late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century currents in philosophy, aesthetics and psychology. Beginning with Eliot's conceptual division between "the man who suffers and the mind which creates", her thesis goes on to examine the divisions between the self-professed "classicist" and the romantic; the analytical mind divided within itself, versus the philosophical longing for wholeness; and the divisive effects of sexual and existential disgust.