PROPOSAL FOR A NEW A SEMINAR AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Comparative Philosophy Seminar

The Religion Department,
Columbia University in the City of New York

Convener

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Rapporteurs

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The Proposal

In the past decade, innovations in imaging technology have provided scientists with a virtual window into the brain. The immensity of this previously unknown landscape has overshadowed normative concepts of mind and spawned a host of new ideas concerning human consciousness. Nevertheless, an “explanatory gap” persists between mind and body. The trouble, it seems, is how to reconcile one’s subjective first person experience (what philosopher Thomas Nagel describes as ‘what it is like to be. . .’) with an objective third person perspective. Better known as the “mind-body problem,” it is a philosophical debate that raises many intriguing and important questions about identity and what it means to be a person. It is little wonder this problem has remained — cross-culturally — an important topic of conversation between scientists, doctors, and philosophers alike.

With increased specialization in professional scholarship, genuine multidisciplinary collaboration has become much more challenging to achieve. It is encouraging that issues such as ‘consciousness’ have attracted the attention of thinkers from a variety fields. However, this unique environment is already threatened. Recently the editors of The Journal of Consciousness Studies have warned readers that, “there is a serious danger that the emerging multi-disciplinary field of consciousness studies could Balkanise and different groups of scholars will end up ‘circling the wagons’ and talking among themselves.” Frank Tannenbaum was well aware of such dangers when he founded the University Seminar program at Columbia. He wrote, “[t]he primary aim of the University Seminar is the attempt to see things whole, to merge the disciplines for the purpose of getting a unified view. The aim is synthesis, insight, wisdom, the understanding of the full incidence of the ongoing phenomenon to which any collegium is devoted.”

For two days in February (2006), twenty-four remarkable scholars — from fields as diverse as neuroscience and Sanskrit literature — crossed departmental lines and convened to discuss mind, body, and human consciousness at Mind and Reality: A Multidisciplinary Symposium. The event has been celebrated for both its popularity (over 500 in total attendance), and its contribution to the dialogue, heralded by Presi-
dent Bollinger, between the Mind Sciences and Humanities. At the close of this landmark event, hosted by the Center for the Study of Science and Religion, there was great enthusiasm amongst the participants to continue the conversations and collaborations initiated that weekend. Mind & Reality Project Director, Christopher Kelley (Ph.D candidate in Buddhism) responded, and together with students in the Religion and Philosophy departments, formed a new student group on comparative philosophy (recently recognized by the Graduate Student Advisory Committee).

This past April (2007), the comparative philosophy student group invited Mark Siderits (a visiting scholar and former Mind & Reality participant) to present new philosophical research on Buddhist ideas about free-will and agency. With a dedicated interest in inter-disciplinary dialogue, the group also invited Columbia’s own, professor Carol Rovane from the Philosophy Department. Their lively and productive debate reiterated — the need for and value of — a more dedicated forum for committed scholars interested in talking with peers about perennial philosophical issues such as ‘consciousness’ and ‘identity.’ To that end, Professor Gary Tubb (whose support and guidance was integral to the success of the Mind & Reality Symposium) with assistance from graduate students Christopher Kelley and Roy Tzohar (Ph. D candidate in Buddhism), has put forth this proposal for a new University seminar on comparative philosophy. The primary aim of this seminar on comparative philosophy is to establish an ongoing multi-disciplinary conversation on some of the so called “big questions” in contemporary philosophy and cognitive science. By broadening the dialogue to include non-Western philosophies and religions, it is not presumed that better or more correct solutions will be found; rather, that it is through considering diverse perspectives that new questions can be raised.

**Scope & Support**

Central to the debate on ‘consciousness’ are philosophical questions such as: ‘who am I?’ ‘What am I?’ What is it to be a person?’ ‘How do I find out?’ In the first season of this new seminar on comparative philosophy, the goal will be to examine the issue of ‘personal identity and ‘personality.’ Meetings will focus
on specific philosophical questions (such as those above) and the various theories (both Western and non-Western) that have been put forth by thinkers from a variety of disciplines (i.e. philosophy, science, psychology, anthropology, & religion). Guest speakers will be invited to submit ‘target essays’ that will help unify the conversation and act as ballasts for group conversation and debate. The minutes from these meetings will then be organized as ‘responses’ to these essays/lectures, thus forming a valuable dialectical compendium on the subject of ‘identity.’

Other related areas of inquiry might include issues of methodology in relationship to identity. For instance, we might examine certain forms of meditation and yoga, and look at how they function as tools for epiphany in Buddhist and Hindu philosophy. Of equal interest will be what can be said about these practices in terms of psychology and neuroscience. Such discussions could lead to an examination of religious experience itself, and the non-dual mental states espoused by Buddhist and Hindus alike. Obviously the role of conceptuality and language will be central to our conversations here.

**Innovation**

Lastly, in an effort to help participants better communicate, and to support greater inter-institutional participation, a private (password protected) website will be launched. This site will host both the minutes and audio recordings of Seminar meetings. The website will be interactive and allow for long distance participants to express their candid opinions and reactions to ‘target essays.’ This feature will enable valuable commentary from important scholars that may not otherwise be able to attend. Such technology proved quite successful for the Mind & Reality Symposium and is familiar to most modern scholars.