**ABSTRACTS**

**in alphabetical order**

**Gabriel Abend (University of Lucerne)**

**‘Making Things Possible’**

I argue that what-makes-it-possible questions are a distinct and important kind of sociological research question. What is social phenomenon *P* made possible or enabled by? Results won’t be about *P*’s causes and causal relationships, but about its enablers and enabling relationships. I examine the character of what-makes-it-possible questions and claims, how they can be empirically investigated, and what they’re good for. If I’m right, they provide a unique perspective on social phenomena, they show how the social world doesn’t come ready-made, and they open up new avenues for research.

**Joel Backström (University of Helsinki/Åbo akademi)**

**‘Longing and impossibility’**

My presentation aims to reveal crucial aspects of the problematic of moral possibility/impossibility by elaborating a heterodox perspective on ethics. Moral life, I argue, is characterised by a basic conflict and tension between (1) culturally variable regimes of moral value, whereby individuals internalize and to various degrees ‘personalize’ the anonymous rule of collective normativity, and (2) an I-you orientation, an openness, concern, and longing between individuals, manifest in how one addresses and responds to the other; in joy, sorrow, helping or challenging them, and in bad conscience and longing for forgiveness if one betrays them.

Values-regimes prescribe certain behaviours, modes of thinking and feeling, and proscribe others, branding them shameful, selfish, disgusting, etc., at the extreme rendering them morally unthinkable, ‘impossible’. What is rendered impossible varies between regimes – consider the differences between an aristocratic warrior ethos and modern liberal morality – but all values regimes operate according to a logic of possibility/impossibility. By contrast, the openness between ‘I’ and ‘you’ doesn’t restrict or enforce behaviour. There are no rules and no impossibilities. This isn’t chaos or carte blanche for violence, but the very freedom of longing for the other, oriented by the longing itself. The longing is for open, unforced contact, and so by its nature excludes forcing the other or submitting to forcing by them.

The concerned longing between ‘I’ and ‘you’ is the very vitality of life and the source of moral meaning. Values-regimes live off this vital energy, even as they restrict and pervert it into destructive channels – centrally by branding instances of the longing ‘impossible’. I will elucidate and concretize the sense and dynamics of this conflict using illustrations from the realm of sexual relations and gender roles, which are pervasively (de)formed by collective pressures against love of the ‘wrong’ kind, between ‘the wrong people’.

**Jon Bebb (University of Manchester)**

**‘Representing Normal Possibilities’**

Prior work in developmental psychology has demonstrated that young children consider events that are morally bad to be physically impossible. That is, they don’t distinguish between events that break the laws of nature and those that violate moral norms. On its own, this could be simply explained as simply being the result of the children not having the kind of sophisticated reasoning skills needed to fully grasp the different saying that an event “cannot” happen and saying that it “should not” happen. However, what is interesting about these findings is how they have recently been used to lend support to a particular way of modelling how we reason about modality that is intended to provide a unified explanation for the effects that normality has on our reasoning within other domains.

There is currently a considerable amount of experimental evidence that what we consider to be normal affects the kinds of judgements we make when reasoning about topics as varied as causation, freedom, mental states, and our use of modal language. Knobe and Phillips offer a unified explanation of all these effects which says that they are a result of people generally only considering possibilities within a contextually defined set whose boundaries are shaped by considerations of what is physically possible/probable and what is morally permissible.

The main issue with this account is that it fails to properly explain why this way of representing modality applies in so many different domains and also fails to specify the mechanism through which the set of considered worlds is shaped. In this paper I address this issue by drawing on my own account of normality where “normal” is taken to be a univocal term that is contextually underspecified along two different axes: one prescriptive and one descriptive.

**Jordi Chilton (KU Leuven)**

**‘Deep disagreements and moral progress’**

Suppose we engage in a discussion about the morality of abortion and our argumentative exchanges are ineffective because there is not enough shared background to mutually appreciate our respective arguments and evidence. It becomes apparent that our disagreement is not just a clash of beliefs: it is something deeper. We may be in a systematic and persistent disagreement rooted in contrary worldviews, where there seems to be no mutually recognized method of resolution because we reason and analyze evidence using different frameworks. These peculiar disagreements are what philosophers have called deep disagreements.

Deep disagreements over moral issues may pose a threat to moral progress. They are instances in which our worldviews take us in different directions, preventing us from going together. Despite increasing interest in moral progress (see Sauer 2021), and the epistemology and value of moral disagreements (see Rowland 2021), little attention has been paid to the implications of deep moral disagreements for moral progress. My paper sets out to fill this knowledge gap by showing that deep moral disagreements can contribute to moral progress. Initially, I outline multiple strategies for constructive dialogue in deep moral disagreements. These strategies allow disputants to make progress towards increases in the amount of common ground shared, reducing the gap in their intersubjective understanding. Subsequently, I assess the requirements for the success of each strategy, their contributions to moral progress and the risks they may entail. Last, I defend that the choice of one strategy or more depends on the specific challenges of, and the unique opportunities offered by, each deep moral disagreement. I argue that this requires focusing on four aspects of deep moral disagreements on a case-by-case basis: the characteristics of the disagreement, the character of disputants, the common ground they share and, lastly, the social context of the deep disagreement.

**Alice Crary (The New School for Social Research)**

**‘Political Possibilities’**

Anyone with an ear for trends of political discourse will be aware that objectivity-talk is sometimes taken to be racist, colonialist, sexist, or elitist. There is a dialectic, one prominent in our public culture, that starts from the idea that some claims to objectivity are tools of oppression and proceeds to the idea that the epistemic ideal picked out by the word “objectivity” can be re-envisioned along more just lines. Questions about what objectivity is like, and what falls under it, are the purview of philosophy, yet many central philosophical discussions of objectivity fail to offer support for this familiar liberating pattern of thought, instead simply rehearsing assumptions about what objectivity amounts to that underlie complaints about its oppressive potential. It is, however, not obvious that these assumptions about objectivity owe their widespread acceptance wholly or even primarily to their philosophical merits. There is a substantial historical corpus that provides support for the view that their appeal is in real part a function of alignment with political, economic, and technological developments of capitalist modernity, developments that many social theorists take to be structurally connected to the very forms of oppression that some appeals to objectivity serve. These different considerations suggest that the apparently unremarkable philosophical task of rethinking objectivity can be an exercise of resistance, a step toward developing modes of thought suited for illuminating grievous injustices of our time and toward equipping ourselves to reassess the possibilities open to us for more just and liberating forms of life.

**Konstantin Deininger (University  of Vienna)**

**‘“There’s Nothing Else to Think But …”: On the (Im)Possibilities of Moral Certainties’**

In ordinary moral life, we find propositions that seem so obviously true that few, if any of us, would dispute that they are certain—such as “slavery is unjust and insupportable” (cf. David Wiggins). Such propositions are, according to some philosophers, certain because they are non-bipolar, meaning they have no intelligible counterpart. In this paper, I critically reflect on how the discussion about moral certainties is configured. I examine the basic assumptions of non-bipolar moral propositions and demonstrate their conceptual problems within the debate.

According to Cora Diamond, non-bipolar propositions guide or block moral thought in the sense that there is “nothing else to think but …”. An example of a moral certainty in this vein is “killing is wrong” (cf. Nigel Pleasants). I will agree with the authors that there are moral propositions that are undoubtable; doubting them should count as thinking that has gone astray. In other words: moral certainties set limits to what is possible to disagree about within morals. I challenge that the examples given count as full moral certainties. Moral certainties function as regress stoppers that set limits to thinking just as the certainty that 7 + 3 = 10. Propositions like “killing is wrong” are *not* non-bipolar as they have an intelligible counterpart that is meaningful—there might be justified killing like self-defense. Accordingly, I will denote them as certain propositions as they structure thinking with respect to content but cannot account for non-bipolarity. “Proper” moral certainties, which I will denote as transcendental certainties, function like arithmetic, i.e., like non-bipolar *rules* such as “equals are to be treated equally”. This, however, does not entirely weaken the point of certain propositions, as vindicatory explanations can press to the conclusion that there is really nothing else to think but that, e.g., slavery is unjust and insupportable.

**Matt Dougherty (University of Vienna)**

**‘The Ethical “Excluded Zone”’**

“The excluded zone” is John Haugeland’s (1998) term for the logical space in any constituted domain of inquiry (such as natural science) consisting of the impossible but conceivable ways in which the entities inquired about within that domain can behave. ‘The impossible’ in this sense is what the laws of the domain say the entities *governed by those laws* cannot do; whereas ‘the conceivable’ is all that those entities could be recognized as doing. Haugeland’s thought was that inquirers in constituted domains like natural science must be able to recognise phenomena beyond what the domain’s laws allow and yet be committed to the zone of impossibility-but-conceivability – the excluded zone – being empty. That the excluded zone can appear *non*-empty to inquirers is what enables empirical testing, and that it can *mistakenly* appear non-empty to enquirers is what makes such inquiry hard.

Haugeland thought, following Wilfrid Sellars (1948), that any domain of inquiry which claims to be objective requires its own excluded zone; for only then can the entities which the domain inquires about be authoritative or normative for how they are understood. In this talk, I ask whether an *ethical* excluded zone might contribute to a conception of ethical inquiry as objective.

On the assumption that ethics, too, is a constituted domain of inquiry and that *people* (as governed by its laws) are the entities which that domain inquires about, I delineate the zone of the ethically-impossible-but-conceivable. I then propose an account of how this zone functions in ethical inquiry. I focus on three difficulties for ethical inquirers: that the inquirer and the inquired-about are the same entity in ethics, that the ethical excluded zone *frequently* appears non-empty, and that ethical laws seem to concern a different kind of necessity from natural scientific laws, making ethical laws non-predictive.

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**Konstantin Eckl (University of Vienna)**

**‘The limits of moral emotions - possible and impossible uses of the Yuck Factor in Bioethics’**

(co authored with **Konstantin Deininger)**

In this paper, we develop a robust argumentative schema for the use of disgust in bioethics by exposing the boundaries of its possible use in vindicating moral judgments.

Owing to increasing challenges to purely rationalistic approaches to morality both from philosophical as well as from empirical avenues, the role of emotions in morality is becoming increasingly central to ethical theory. For the field of bioethics specifically, where questions about e.g. bioengineering tend to elicit strong feelings of revulsion, the concept of the ‘yuck-factor’, of the productive but arational influence of disgust on moral deliberation is a particularly relevant case for further deliberation.

There are, however, obvious limits to what such a purely emotional tool can accomplish - the kind of non-arbitrary, universal and intersubjectively communicable judgments which classical, rationalist morality has traditionally aimed at and which, especially in animal ethics, are often required to argue against prevailing emotional intuitions, cannot be guaranteed by a purely emotional standard for moral justification.

In our paper, we show how the ‘yuck-factor’ can be productively used through addition of just such a standard. Contrasting Leon Kass’ overreaching use of the yuck-factor with Mary Midgley’s limited use, we will show that emotions can aid in forming non-arbitrary, vindicated moral beliefs only insofar criticism of rationalism is kept measured: While the empirical-psychological claims of classical rationalism can be doubted, rationalism’s transcendental-logical claims - that the ideal function of classical rationality, that of approximating knowledge of the objective structure of the Universe - must be upheld to avoid relativism. In other words, emotions can be used to arrive at even vindicated moral beliefs, but only insofar the standard applied to those emotions is a rational one.

Thus, we will end up with a schema for bioethicists which defines how much vindication one can retain while taking the modern challenges to classical rationalism seriously.

**Kyle Fruh (Duke Kunshan University)**

**‘The Compulsion of Moral Heroes: Practical Necessity Rather than Illusion, Obligation or Virtue’**

Moral heroes have an uncanny knack for taking a different view of their feats than the one the rest of us customarily take: whereas we see their heroic acts as extraordinary, beyond the call of duty, a frightful choice, they often describe it as what anyone would have done, as required of them, as something they had no choice but to do. I call this contention, made variously by Holocaust rescuers, civilian first responders, and organ donors, the ‘non-optionality claim.’[[1]](#footnote-1) I canvas three approaches to understanding it: a deflationary approach[[2]](#footnote-2) that dismisses the non-optionality claim as something akin to false modesty, a moral interpretation[[3]](#footnote-3) that casts the non-optionality claim as an authoritative articulation of moral duty, and a virtue approach[[4]](#footnote-4) that emphasizes the exercise of unperfected virtues in unusually difficult circumstances. All these approaches are, I argue, deficient in pronounced ways. I elaborate an alternative that deploys Bernard Williams’s notion of practical necessity[[5]](#footnote-5) and argue that it fares significantly better. The practical necessity account of the non-optionality claim enables us to accept the latter as importantly true without the hazards of generalizability, to attribute responsibility for heroic actions to the agent despite the will being constrained, and is furthermore suggestive of a broader understanding of moral heroism that accommodates contributions of personological features of agents but nonetheless displaces traditional conceptions of moral character and virtues from their influential leading role in thinking about moral heroism.

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**Aviad Heifetz (The Open University of Israel)**

**‘Simone Weil on moral impossibility and moral dexterity’**

For Simone Weil, our reading of the world implies what we cannot but do. In times of peace we read in the humanity and fragility of our neighbor somebody we cannot but respect, in times of civil war, in within our frantic group, we read in our neighbor somebody we cannot but try to annihilate. This led Simone Weil to ask what kind of work on ourselves can change our reading.

Yet unpublished course notes of Simone Weil's students from her first year of philosophy teaching (1931-1932) reveal that for her, work on ourselves is always negative: we undo our reflexes and instincts when we acquire habits like bike riding or music playing; we undo our passions (like our fears) to contain them within our sentiments (like bravery);  we undo our wildly and abruptly changing haphazard impressions with geometry and science, to establish stable perceptions.

But how can we undo our abruptly changing moral readings of our neighbors? One route towards moral dexterity is contemplating beautiful actions. Beauty, she explains (in "The beautiful and the good") in not that which aesthetically pleases us but rather that which arrests us; the good is our adherence to what we ourselves choose to follow, not compliance with any extrnally defined rule; so "beautiful actions" are not moral precepts, but almost the opposite, they are epic, mythical stories of renunciation in favor of harmony with others, stories that arrest us when we contemplate them, and cultivate in us the potential to arrest, change our reading and step out of the mob.

**Serhiy Kish (University of Pardubice)**

**‘Does deep moral disagreement exist?’**

In meta-ethics the existence of “deep” moral disagreement, i.e. diagreement that is impossible to settle, is presumed in arguments ranging from support of moral relativism (Mackie 1991), to undermining of moral knowledge (McGrath 2008). Despite being often appealed to, deep moral disagreements are rarely illustrated in non-abstract terms. This begs the question as to whether they even exist. The aim of my contribution is twofold: show that deep moral disagreements do exist in a form of “intractable conflicts” and open the door for further cooperation between philosophy and conflict studies.

In peace and conflict studies, intractable conflict is defined as prolonged, mentally and sometimes physically destructive disagreement about questions concerned with identity and morality (Coleman 2014). Most importantly, intractable conflicts – just like deep moral disagreements – resist every attempt at resolution. I shall show that in both notions’ most salient feature shares the same causes, such as strong emotionality or incommensuratebility of how involved parties describe the problem. Paying closer attention to philosophers’ abstract examples of deep moral disagreements (permissibility of abortion, morality of meat-eating), then, shows philosophers inadvertently refer to the same set of conditions that gives rise to the intractable conflicts. I therefore suggest we use the notions interchangeably.

I want to also use my contribution as an invitation for the fields of philosophy and conflict studies to cooperate more closely on conflict resolution strategies. For example, according to the *informative process model* (Rosler et al. 2022) *–* new intervention strategy for attitude change in intractable conflict –, informing disagreeing parties on why conflict persists can start a chain of events, resulting in their bigger support for reconciliation. A research question suggests itself: Could starting such a process be more effective with certain philosophical accounts of moral persuasion (e.g. Diamond 1982).

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**Camilla Kronqvist (Åbo Akademi)**

**‘What cannot be done? The possible and impossible in moral conversations on gender’**

The philosophical exploration of what is possible will in one way or other turn around the question of what *can* be done, said, thought or imagined. One’s way of answering this question will in turn refer us back to the individual’s capacity for doing, thinking or imagining something different than what there is, and/or the affordances offered by the particular contexts they find themselves in. Attending to the individual’s capacity should here include a consideration of both their physical ability and the skillful application of learned techniques, whereas attending to their context should involve a consideration of both their physical surroundings and their historically and socially formed conceptual schemes.

Sketching out this conceptual framework, I will in my talk address different senses of impossibility an individual may experience in relation to their gendered existence and relationships, as well as the kind of confinement they may experience in being perceived as being either man or woman or something in between in a series of conversations. Reflecting on the different experiences of impossibility expressed in exclamations such as “I can’t do that (as a woman)”, admonitions like “You (as a man) can’t do that!” or in realizations that something in either case “cannot be done” in different contexts, I ask what notion of impossibility could and should be perceived as a moral impossibility. To bring out the possible ethical significance of such impossibility, I contrast these cases with more clearly morally laden examples of what one “*should* not do” or “*must* not think” as well as cases in which we might do well to imagine other possibilities beyond those presently available to us.

**Olli Lagerspetz (Åbo Akademi University)**

**‘The Morally Unsayable and “Reality”: The Case of “Im Westen nichts Neues”’**

Things may be ‘morally’ unsayable to us, not because it is forbidden to talk of them, but because something is ‘too much’ to put into words or even to think. The idea that language or thought cannot capture some aspect of reality – what kind of an idea is it? More exactly: What is the nature of our resistance here?

The presentation starts with an analysis of communication in Erich Maria Remarque’s (anti-) war novel ‘Nothing New on the Western Front’. The difficulty and menace inherent in articulating the war experience are a central theme of the novel. It would jeopardise the protagonist’s sense of sharing a meaningful world with his family. Then I consider Cora Diamond’s employment of a related idea of the unsayable in ‘The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy’. While Remarque highlights the social conditions of communication, Diamond offers an individualistic meditation on the limits of philosophy, thought and language.

The nature and scope of the ‘difficulty’ that Diamond claimed to identify is difficult to see, apparently because she had three separate agendas. She made an intervention in applied ethics; she commented on Cavell’s views on philosophy versus life; and she engaged in a struggle for the proper inheritance of ‘real’ Wittgensteinianism.

Diamond’s third aim involved the idea of philosophy addressing ‘reality’ instead of conducting ‘mere’ language-game analysis. Her exact argument needs to be gleaned from other work she published at the time. She (mistakenly) identified Peter Winch as a main proponent of the approach she opposed.

For Winch, however, to analyse language-games was precisely to analyse various human ways to make reality intelligible. Hence, for him there was no prima facie opposition between engaging in a language-game and engaging with reality.

**Sasha Lawson-Frost (Durham University)**

**‘Towards an ethics of contradiction: Simone Weil and the difficulty of philosophy’**

Perhaps one of the most distinctive and perplexing aspects of Simone Weil’s philosophical writing is her repeated and deliberate use of contradictions. For example, she describes how a person in the grip of force “still thinking, can think no longer” (IC 26); and in a discussion about Plato’s *Symposium*, describes how the two propositions “love is absolutely ancient and absolutely young” are both contradictory and true (IC 114). In her political writings, she discusses “a fundamental contradiction” at the essence of power and structures of oppression (OL 65; 72).

This use of contradictions is not accidental; rather, Weil states that all philosophical thought “has a contradiction in its centre” (LPW 31). On this view, the job of philosophy is not to iron-out inconsistencies in our thought and concepts, but to “expose honestly the contradictions essential to thought instead of vainly trying to brush them aside” (LPW 36).

In this paper, I will explore some of the ethical implications of this aspect of Weil’s philosophical method. In particular, I am interested in Weil’s idea that when “the mind comes up against” these contradictions, we can recognise them as “a criterion of the real” (GG 89). By accepting reality as something which is contradictory and impossible to comprehend, we can recognise the world as something which goes beyond our conceptual and imaginative capacities, without merely deflecting or refusing to acknowledge reality. On this reading, Weil’s emphasis on the contemplation of contradictions can be understood as an attempt to address what Cora Diamond calls “the difficulty of philosophy”: “Can there be such a thing as philosophy that is not deflected from such realities?” (2009). I suggest that Weil’s emphasis on the acceptance of contradictions in philosophy can be understood as an attempt to recognise the inconceivability of these realities without deflecting from them.

**Olof Leffler (University of Pavia)**

**‘Kantian Doubts about Categorical Imperatives’**

To explain normative authority, constitutivists argue that the norms constitutive of agency are inescapable: there is no option but to adhere to constitutive norms, so they are authoritative.

But here are some features of authoritative norms. They:

1. (i) cannot change because our desires change,
2. (ii) we can live up to them (ought-implies-can),
3. (iii) we can fail to do so (ought-implies-can-fail), and
4. (iv) failure makes us criticizable.

Can some form of inescapability capture (i)-(iv)?

*Psychological inescapability* says that some desire is constitutive of all exercises of agency (Velleman, 2009). But, contra (iv), why is not being an agent criticizable? *Further factor inescapability* explains authority using factors outside agency, such as social norms (Walden, 2018). But many social norms (e.g. sexist ones) are criticizable rather than explain criticizability, contra (iv). *Standpoint inescapability* takes there to be no possible actions except from the standpoint of agency, which includes constitutive norms (Ferrero, 2019). But then actions cannot fail to follow the norms, contra (iii).

We turn to *plight inescapability* (Korsgaard, 2009). On my interpretation, it involves agents continuously facing exercising their agency fully, absent external limits at the time of its exercise. So agents are always in a position to enact (or intentionally omit enacting) norms constitutive of agency, absent contextual limitations. Here, norms apply regardless of desires (i), agents are not faced with enacting what they are limited from doing (ii), they are *in a position* to act successfully, not always successful (iii), and as the norms they face enacting have success conditions, failure is criticizable (iv).

However, plight inescapability says that *any* constitutive norms have (i)-(iv). As different types of agents (e.g. human, animal, corporate, alien) may have different constitutive norms, different norms have properties (i)-(iv) – \_and are authoritative. Hence, plight inescapability entails relativism about normative authority.

**Matilde Liberti (University of Genoa)**

**‘Yet another distinction in Aristotle’s moral psychology: Inverse Akrasia and Moral Impossibility’**

The aim of this paper is that of linking the phenomenon of inverse *akrasia* with that of moral impossibility (Williams 1993; Caprioglio Panizza 2021), thereby distinguishing it from the phenomenon of *akrasia* proper.

When it comes to Aristotelian moral psychology, in order to make sense of an action that is both voluntary (NE 1145b12-13) and an expression of some sort of deficiency (NE 1147b10-15), scholars have looked at the practical syllogism. The two most evident deficiencies in action are those belonging to the *akratic* and – controversially – to the inverse *akratic*. The *akratic* is the one who has knowledge of the good, but she ends up doing the wrong thing; the inverse *akratic* is the one who has the wrong knowledge of the good, but she ends up doing the right thing. According to Fiecconi (2018), inverse *akrasia* is a voluntary action against one’s good *prohairesis*, marked by conflict and done out of some sort of ignorance of the first premise (2018: 15); thus, she argues, inverse *akrasia* has the same psychological blueprint of *akrasia*. I share Fiecconi’s intuition that the problem is to be found in the first premise, but I argue that the “form” of the inverse *akratic*’s deliberation is different from that of the *akratic*. The *akratic* has too many options, while the inverse *akratic* has only one, and this is why the inverse *akratic* experiences a moral impossibility when it comes to acting according to her faulty knowledge of the good.

My final suggestion is that we stop calling the cases in question instances of “inverse *akrasia*”, because they have little to share with the phenomenon of *akrasia* proper. If we understand them as instances of moral impossibility, we can see they have much more in common with virtue than with *akrasia*.

**Erich Linder (University of Vienna)**

**‘Seeing possibilities in animal ethics’**

In my paper, I aim to use the phenomenon of ‘aspect-seeing’ to address moral disagreement in animal ethics. Such a *phenomenon* can be illustrated by Jastraw’s famous rabbit-duck picture, where we can intentionally see different aspects of the same object: We can either see a duck or a rabbit, but we cannot see both, nor can we see anything we wish, e.g., a ship.

Furthermore, in contemporary Wittgensteinian studies, it has been argued that different aspects warrant different possible language games; these, in turn, allow for different discourses and actions. If, for instance, one sees the picture as a rabbit, it would not make sense to use it to illustrate what a duck looks like.

By relying on the work of Reshef Agam-Segal, I will use aspect-seeing as a philosophical method to explain incommensurable disagreement within animal research. Engaging in aspect-seeing allows to a particular self-reflecting stance suitable to explore different normative possibilities: By seeing a laboratory rat either as a tool or as a pet, we access different and incompatible normative language games.

The question then arises whether specific aspects can be characteristically moral among the normative possibilities: I will address this by discussing the notion of attention – as discussed by Silvia Panizza in the wake of Weil and Murdoch – and explore what sort of language games is warranted when one engages in it. Finally, I will argue that such a gaze allows us to access a unique non-instrumental aspect of the animal that can properly ground language games about justice.

**Agata Łukomska (University of Warsaw)**

**‘The “Thick” Concept of Evil as a Conveyor of Moral Impossibility’**

In his analysis of our contemporary moral condition in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Bernard Williams famously deplored the gradual loss of moral certainty, which he attributed, on the one hand, to our ever growing reflectiveness, and on the other, to the erosion of social ties in which a shared normative understanding of reality could be grounded. Among conspicuous symptoms of this malady, according to Williams, are the changes in our moral language, from which richly descriptive (“thick”) terms disappear in favour of purely normative (“thin”) ones. One example which he did not give, but which I want to argue is particularly interesting, is the history of the term “evil”, until the middle of the 20th century all but pushed out of use by the terms “bad” and “wrong”.

Although pessimistic about our chances of reversing this process, Williams claimed that we should try to countervail the “thinning” of our moral language by cherishing the “thick” concepts still available to us and perhaps by engaging in social practices which would allow us to acquire new ones. It is in the light of this idea that I want to examine the controversial “comeback” of the concept of evil we have witnessed since the Second World War. While many have suggested that given its absolutist overtones, its contemporary usage is at best glib, and at worst nefarious, I want to argue that in “evil” we may be dealing with an authentic “thick” moral concept. To that effect, I will try to show that, as it is used today, the term is first and foremost descriptive, and that its specific function is to mark the limits of what is morally possible.

**Geraldine Ng (Philosophy Lab CIC)**

**‘Climate change, moral hopelessness, and Nietzsche’s splendid individual’**

This paper concerns the question of individual responsibility in relation to climate change. The use of fossil fuels is harming the climate. All of us in developed societies, in some way, benefit from fossil fuels. Nevertheless, in consequentialist terms, it appears that an agent is not morally blameworthy with respect to climate change harms given the causal inefficacy of her individual actions. This verdict challenges conventional moral intuitions about responsibility.

I consider an alternative, Kantian argument of Gareth Williams that poses a challenge to our intuitions, so to speak, from the other direction. Gareth Williams argues that we are all complicit in climate change injustice. He argues that we participate in a “lived morality that implicates us in enormous harms”. On the one hand, the charge is hard to deny. On the other hand, given our participation in unjust social structures is unavoidable, it is difficult to ascribe individual moral blame. Call this Blameless Complicity. I argue that recognising complicity comes at considerable cost – it overcomes the problem of causal inefficacy, but raises the prospect of what I call Moral Hopelessness. Drawing on Nietzsche’s notions of Will to Power and the splendid individual, I outline a radical way out of this moral dead end.

Bernard Williams gives one of the most trenchant contemporary critiques of moral theorising, or what he calls ‘the morality system’. To better understand ethical life, he encourages looking beyond moral theory. I show that adopting an alternative, Nietzschean value system allows us to retain both an individualistic conception of responsibility and our practice of inculpation. Individuals are neither morally good nor bad. Instead, they are either splendid or weak.

**John McGuire (University College Dublin)**

**‘Conspiracy Thinking and Political Impossibility’**

Following Jacques Rancière’s analysis of *la police*, I will argue that the effective containment of radical political *dissensus* follows a self-destructive logic: those who ‘police’ can never themselves be agents of radical political change; and in the absence of substantive change, legitimacy becomes based upon the presumptive (and practically ‘invisible’) achievements of insider-experts. Be it in the interests of national security, or simply a reflection of the complexity of modern political systems, governmental ‘knowledge’ remains wholly *esoteric* to non-experts, whose own naïveté is a source of constant irritation and instability. This dysfunction reaches a crisis point when the projection of hyper-competence onto state authorities works in tandem with defensively fearful projections onto a ‘lunatic fringe’ presumed to be not only misguided but criminal in their intent.

Fearful projections are readily found in US foreign and domestic policy: when, for example, the CIA stages evidence of folkloric monsters and Satanic rituals to foment retaliation against leftist (or insufficiently anti-Communist) groups in the Philippines (1954), Brazil (1964), and Indonesia (1965; Bevins: 2020). Or, on the domestic front, when US police departments, under criticism for their brutal and illegal methods of enforcement, respond by claiming that *they*are the victims of malevolent provocateurs (including non-white citizens possessing superhuman strength, radicalised Antifa, and conspiracists of all political stripes). Here, the ‘unseen,’ ‘unheard’—often demonstrably *non-existent*—malefactors occupy the place of the really existing, disenchanted populace, thereby suppressing destabilising-but-legitimate demands in the name of defending the state against insurgency. There can be no return to political ‘normality’ under such conditions. In fact, conspiracy thinking amongst the governing and the governed becomes increasingly identical—to the point where self-radicalising conspiracists deny the legitimacy of elections even as they assume local and national office.

**David Peroutka (Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem & Charles University in Prague)**

**‘Moral necessity: Freedom when there is no choice’**

Sometimes we can be morally responsible for a decision of ours, and truly free in our decision-making, despite the impossibility to choose otherwise (in the given situation). Although this claim is not, by itself, a compatibilist thesis (as it allows there to be some other decisions whose free character excludes determinism), it does contradict (in spite of Robert Kane’s arguments) the principle of alternate possibilities (PAP) which is often supposed to rely on the ought-implies-can principle (OIC). The alleged interconnection of the two principles roughly means that we, as free and responsible agents, can be justly blamed for acting differently from how we *ought* to act only on condition that we *can* act differently (OIC), that is, on condition that there is an *alternative possibility* (PAP).

My counter-strategy is to relate the concept of asymmetry (introduced to the free-will debate by Susan Wolf) to the OIC. I will draw attention to an “asymmetrical” validity of the OIC: While in the case of decisions which we assess to be morally wrong we suppose that the agent *ought* to choose differently, in the case of morally good decisions there is no such “ought”. In this sense, the (above sketched) OIC/PAP-reasoning has its limits. It does not prevent us from believing that some (morally good) decisions can be free even when there is no alternative choice. I will try to elaborate on this idea of “moral necessity” which can be seen as a narrower conceptual contraction of what Harry G. Frankfurt calls “volitional necessity”.

**Yanni Ratajczyk (University of Antwerp)**

**‘Moral perception as Imaginative Apprehension: Moral Possibilities and Impossibilities’**

My aim in this presentation is twofold: (1) defending a Murdochian view of moral perception as the imaginative apprehension of reality and (2) discussing the relation between moral possibility and impossibility in the context of such a view.

First, I discuss how Murdoch’s perceptual theory of moral knowledge has been interpreted as a theory of moral perception by several scholars (see e.g., Clifton 2013, Panizza 2020). I think these approaches (especially Panizza 2020) illustrate well how Murdochian moral perception contains a gradual, deepening understanding of concrete moral reality. However, what I want to add to this approach is a discussion of the crucial role of imagination in moral perception. Murdoch was convinced that imagination helped us to construct truthful and deep-reaching images that improve our understanding of moral reality.

Second, I argue that Murdoch paradoxically held that imaginative perception leads both to the realization and the limitation of moral possibilities. On the one hand, she argues how imagination discloses possibilities we did not see before (e.g., by egoistic phantasies). On the other hand, she said that good (and thus imaginative) moral perception leads to the exclusion of certain acts: ‘If I attend properly, I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at.’ (2001: 38*)*/‘Who perceives what is real will also act rightly. If the magnetic field is right our movements within it will tend to be right’. (1966: 50). This seems to be paradoxical: how can the imagination, that freely explores the world, lead us to a condition where certain choices are out of question? I argue that we can make sense of this paradox by balancing Murdoch’s idea of imagination that explores the world by another mode of imaginative apprehension that is directed at shaping our actions in the world.

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**David Rozen (Centre for Ethics, Pardubice), Alex Putzer (Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies, Pisa)**

**‘The moral impossibility of destroying the conditions for human well-being’**

The trouble with the current climate crisis is not the lack of knowledge about what to do to mitigate it or how to reduce the suffering that it brings (IPCC 2022); it consists of the inability of human societies to transform their environmental knowledge into adequate environmental behavior. The most famous explanation of this curious discrepancy is Gardiner’s ‘perfect moral storm‘ whose central thesis states that „The peculiar features of the climate change problem pose substantial obstacles to our ability to make the hard choices necessary to address it.“ (Gardiner 2006; our emphasis) These obstacles are often described as a “motivational gap” (Peeters et al. 2015). We claim that such accounts are misleading and that a more nuanced understanding of the inability of human societies to transform their environmental knowledge into adequate behavior is necessary because, often, it is not the case of simply choosing the wrong possibility from a lack of motivation but rather a failure to see the right possibilities as real possibilities. It is so both from a lack of imagination and from an abundance of opposing motivations (as such, instead of a gap, it is rather a motivational trap). In other words, we will reveal the curious discrepancy as having the character of moral impossibility, specifically, the moral impossibility of destroying the conditions for human well-being.

In our presentation, we will show (1) that one of the fundamental reasons for the inability to transform environmental knowledge into adequate environmental behavior lies in seeing the attempts to reach planetary well-being as destroying human well-being and, therefore, not as real possibilities, and (2) that this is an outcome of the dialectic of two currently most significant attitudes towards nature – (i) the attitude towards it as a ‘reservoir of resources’, and (ii) the attitude towards it as ‘wilderness’ – that cause this false dilemma of well-being either for humans or for the planet.

**Jack Idris Sagar (University of Bristol)**

**‘Trauma, History and The Moral Impossibility of Explanation’**

In *Traumatic Realism* Michael Rothberg casts Holocaust Studies as made up of realists and anti-realists. Whereas realists believe that the Holocaust is knowable and explicable in terms already available to the modern historian, anti-realists cordon off the Holocaust, arguing its uniqueness places it beyond understanding. In this paper I explore the epistemological and ethical concerns animating the realist/anti-realist debate in Holocaust studies by exploring ethical inexplicability, the rejection of the possibility of explanation on ethical grounds.

I begin by articulating a vision of ethical inexplicability, borrowing from trauma theory (Caruth 1995; Felman and Laub 1991; Nilsson 2019). I then offer an epistemology of ethical inexplicability by drawing from the work of philosopher Alice Crary. Utilising her signature concepts of wider rationality and wider objectivity (Crary 2016), I epistemologically vindicate trauma, arguing that it involves what I call an *objective failure of experience.*

I then frustrate the realist/anti-realist distinction, arguing for a position that accommodates for the realist concern (Sanbonmatsu 2009) that anti-realism obscures the perfectly ordinary features of modernity that led to the Holocaust — and thus help to obscure drivers of atrocities today — without giving up the anti-realist commitment to ethical inexplicability. To do this I make two claims.

(1) Because, à la Crary, evidence is non-neutrally accessible, trauma raises doubts about not only the full realisability of the realist project but also points to the epistemic health of respecting ethical inexplicability and the associated need for an ethics of trauma listening (Felman and Laub 1991); and (2) by outlining an ethics of trauma writing developed by Roxane Gay (2021), I argue the political concern of the realist can be met by justifying explanations as choices between better or worse representational failures. Thus I defend ethical inexplicability on both epistemic and ethical grounds.

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**Salla Aldrin Salskov & Ryan Manhire (Åbo Akademi University)**

**‘Moral Possibilities and Impossibilities in Kendrick Lamar's “Auntie Diaries”’**

One of the most polarising public debates in the context of contemporary gender politics concerns trans rights and identity. One side argues for the legitimacy of trans identities and trans rights, while the other side works to delegitimise these endeavours. Important work is being done to combat trans discrimination, but problems and solutions related to trans issues tend to be couched in epistemic terms, or within a human rights framework. What is less attended to, we argue, is an understanding of the moral-existential nature of the questions debated. In addition, the debate itself generates a discourse around the kinds of possibilities and impossibilities that ‘can’ be discussed. We argue that without an adequate understanding of what these possibilities and impossibilities amount to, as well as the existential dimension of questions related to gender and identification, contemporary discourses around gender and in particular trans issues, risk becoming a ‘one sided diet’.

In this presentation we discuss the aforementioned questions by considering Kendrick Lamar’s 2022 song ‘Auntie Diaries’ as an example that attends to the moral-existential dimension of disagreements over trans issues. Reflecting on growing up with trans relatives, an uncle and a cousin, Lamar tells the story of how he came to no longer be able to use the ‘f word’. Lamar uses this story to attempt to change the attitudes of others on the permissibility of the use of the ‘f word’. We consider both Lamar’s change of attitude and his attempts to change the attitudes of others in connection to questions of moral unthinkability and moral persuasion. We conclude by arguing that what is framed as possible and impossible in intersectional feminist trans inclusive politics needs to be understood as a matter of moral vision, not only in terms of right-based politics or epistemology.

**Salla Aldrin-Salskov & Niklas Toivakainen (University of Helsinki/ Åbo Akademi)**

**‘The sense of “ab-sense”: on the impasse at the heart of ethics’**

Psychoanalysis provided powerful conceptual tools for feminist theory to analyse and expose the *logic* of the suppression and repression of sexual relations *qua* the feminine/woman, and the universalisation *qua* a-sexualisation of ‘phallic discourse’. Similarly, and as an extension of this, central stands of queer theory have derived, especially out of Lacanian thought, theoretical tools for identifying ‘queer’ as the ‘ab-sense’ internal to any and all signification. However, these theoretical insights seem to contain their own aporia: the very thing they strive to signify, namely the ethical substance of their very critique of patriarchal or phallic culture, is exactly what cannot be signified, or what is deemed impossible. Does this mean that such *theories* cannot in the end but reproduce the very power or discourse they set out to critique? As in the case of Wittgenstein’s *Tractaus*, one is then left with the questions of whether one is doomed to stay silent about feminist/queer ethical discourse, whether one can hope to *show* something of its ethical substance, and/or whether such feminist and queer ‘insights’ simply contradict themselves.

In our paper we discuss the logic of possibility and impossibility that characterises why and how some of the most elaborate feminist and queer theoretical attempts at dealing with the noted aporia essentially involve an embrace of the aporia itself; an embrace of the impossibility internal to speech or language. We argue, however, that there are resources to be drawn from both Wittgenstein’s later philosophy as well as from so-called dialogue philosophy that point to some decisive unexplored possibilities in feminist and queer theory. Our argument is not so much that the embrace of the aporia is a fallacy. Rather, our aim is to challenge the way we understand the *meaning* of this impasse at the heart of ethics; the *sense* of the ‘ab-sense’.

**Amber Elise Sheldon (Boston University)**

**‘The Moral Impossibility of Eating Lab-Grown Meat’**

Moral impossibility describes how our options are restricted by moral reflections, values, and frameworks. Certain actions are refused or unacknowledged as possibilities because such conduct violates one’s moral commitments. Silvia Panizza (2020) proposes that moral demands of ethical veganism (or vegetarianism) exclude certain actions, such as eating animals, from being conceived as possibilities. Rather than involving deliberate choices to refuse animal products as possible objects of consumption, ethical veganism is not a choice because the opposite is not conceived of as an option—there is no decision to confront. We can now produce meat by culturing tissues from stem cells. Unlike meat-substitutes made from plants, laboratory-cultivated (hereafter “lab-grown”) meat emulates regular meat at the cellular level. Lab-grown meat production does not rely on cruel intensive animal agriculture practices, so widespread adoption of lab-grown meat products would have practically the same outcome of reducing animal suffering and slaughter as converting everyone to vegetarianism. Therefore, it seems ethical vegetarians who avoid eating meat to reduce the suffering of factory-farmed animals would be proponents of lab-grown meat. I will propose that certain vegan/vegetarian commitments maintain the moral impossibility of consuming lab-grown meat. Cora Diamond underscores that we don’t eat our dead, and we don’t eat our amputated limbs. We don’t see humans as edible, and this seems fundamental to our conceptualization of, and relation to, other human beings. I will posit how the concept of “edible” has unique salience in our moral relationships—not being “food” is ethically significant. Although lab-grown cow meat did not suffer, nothing establishes that *a cow is not something to eat*. Referencing the works of Panizza, Diamond, Iris Murdoch, and Alice Crary, I will describe the concept of “edible” in moral life to argue that vegan experiences of moral impossibility regarding meat-eating holds, even when meat is lab-grown.

**Krzysztof Sołoducha (University of Warsaw)**

**‘Methods and conditions of creating hybrid ethics for AGI-machines’**

The classical problem of naturalistic fallacy in ethics in the AGI (Artificial General Intelligence) era takes the form of a question about the model for creating decision-making patterns for machines operating in autonomous modality of unsupervised learning. The need to build active trust, in Giddens meaning, in these machines is forcing an ART (Accountability, Responsability, Transparency) approach, which calls for data-driven methods. On the other hand, these types of methods reveal culturally conditioned, non-egalitarian patterns of behaviour that may be socially objectionable and rather point to the need to use top - down methods that correspond to universal, normative ethical expectations. My speech should examine the paradoxes associated with the use of both methods and outline the need to develop a hybrid approach that would perhaps allow a combination of both methods to create ethical benchmarks for the selection, from ethical point of view, of statistical reasoning performed by contemporary AGI systems. As a result of my presentation, I will try to identify the philosophical conditions for developing such a hybrid approach and some criteria of developing "Moral Turing Test" for hybrid ethics addressed to AGI machines.  
  
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**Etye Steinberg (University of Haifa)**

**‘Unthinkable Actions’**

Some actions are unthinkable for us, in the sense espoused in Martin Luther’s famous claim:

“Here I stand, I can do no other”. Our conscience will not allow us to perform these actions. But what does it mean for an action to be unthinkable this way?

The paper categorizes views about unthinkability based on two distinctions. The first is between descriptive and normative views of unthinkability. On a descriptive view of unthinkability, an action is unthinkable for an agent iff the agent will never (want to do, or judge that there is reason to) do it. On a normative understanding, the agent judges that she should never (want to, or judge that there is any reason to) perform this action.

The second distinction is between motivational and deliberational views. On motivational views, an action is unthinkable for an agent iff having a motivationally effective desire to perform this action does not (or, the agent judges, should not) fit into the structure of that agent’s subjective motivational set. According to deliberational views, an action is unthinkable for an agent iff the agent does not (or, as the agent judges, should not) treat any consideration as a reason to perform this action.

I argue for a normative-deliberational view: an action is unthinkable for an agent iff the agent judges that she should never treat any consideration as a reason in favor of performing this action. Only this view meets two important tests: the “failure” test (a theory of unthinkable action must allow for the conceptual possibility of doing the unthinkable and explain what is special about the failure implicated in doing the unthinkable); and the “incapacity” test (a theory of unthinkability should enable distinguishing between not doing something because it is unthinkable and not doing something because of extreme aversion).

**Jenny Zhang (University of Edinburgh)**

**‘The Possibilities of Moral Life and the Impossibility of Moral Psychology’**

Mark Alfano (2016) defines the field of moral psychology as “a systematic inquiry into how

morality works, when it does work, and breaks down when it doesn’t work” (p. 1). I argue that

many moral psychological studies do not, and arguably cannot, fulfil these empirical goals. This is because there is an irreconcilable tension between the essential features of morality, which is the target of inquiry for moral psychology, and the methodology employed to investigate the target.

Drawing on Cora Diamond (1995, 2003), I elucidate that some essential features of moral life

comprise facts about improvisation, responsiveness, creativity, possibility and adventure, which highlight the fundamentally relational, provisional and unpredictable nature of morality. Borrowing insights from Sophie Grace Chappell (2014), I further specify that one essential feature of real world moral behaviour is a moral subject’s ability and freedom to exercise moral imagination and engage with possibilities.

However, many moral psychological studies underestimate the relationality, provisionality and unpredictability of moral phenomena, as shown by the willing adoption of abstracting

methodology, which isolates one feature from an entangled web of morally relevant features.

Furthermore, to conduct feasible studies and draw valid inferences from experimental results, variables have to be controlled in laboratories, but that problematically constrains research participants’ ability and freedom to exercise moral imagination and explore possibilities. These will be illustrated through examining Goodwin and Landy’s (2014) and Koleva et al.’s (2012) studies.

The upshot is that while moral psychology purports to shed light on how morality works in the real world, it is situated within a scientific paradigm, equipped with certain methodology, which makes it unlikely to achieve this ambition. To make progress, moral psychologists need to at least be aware of the limitations of their current approach, if not adopt new methodology, or/and revise the central goals of moral psychology.

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**Pedro Rapallo Zubillaga (California State University)**

**‘Impossibly Immoral Fictions and How to Understand Them’**

The moral dimension of the problem of imaginative resistance can be posed in the following manner: Why do we resist imagining certain morally charged fictions when the most implausible fictional scenarios give us no problem? There are two sides to this issue. One concerns *resistance* to imagine and the other concerns *inability* to do so. In trying to answer to the problem, the literature has often compounded the two sides, ignored one of them, or tried to reduce one to the other. I aim to show that both sides of the problem present legitimate philosophical problems in the philosophy of fiction that require separate attention. I do this by distinguishing weak and strong failures of the imagination. The former is characterized by our unwillingness to imagine certain fictions, and the latter are characterized by our inability to imagine certain fictions. I accept the solution that has been presented by the literature to the former problem and so, I focus my efforts to show how the latter may be resolved. I contend that our imagination is limited by the bounds of intelligibility. That is, we cannot imagine what we cannot understand. Applied to moral scenarios, I contend that moral facts are grounded by nonmoral facts, and these metaphysical relations hold as ways to intelligibly deal with morality. Thus, for a fiction to be sensical, the moral facts of the fiction need to be grounded by the nonmoral facts. This carries the consequence that in order to manipulate the moral facts, the author needs to manipulate the nonmoral ones first. Otherwise, the fiction is rendered unintelligible, and we lose the ability to track what is true in it; we no longer have the ability to know what is happening in the fiction. This prompts strong imaginative failure.

1. The non-optionality claim is widely remarked on by philosophers and psychologists working on moral exemplars. See, *inter alia*, Archer (2015), Flescher (2003), Lapsley & Narvaez (2014), Lapsley & Hill (2009), and Jayawickreme & Di Stefano (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Inspired by Urmson (1958). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Hale (1991), and see also Carbonell (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Annas (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Developed principally in “Practical Necessity” (Williams, 1981, pp. 124-131) and “Moral Incapacity” (Williams, 1995, pp. 46-55). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)