

Organized by  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong  
and The Universidad Diego Portales

# **NATURALISM AND ITS LIMITS**

6-8 June 2023

# PROGRAMME RUNDOWN

## DAY 1 (6 June 2023, Tuesday)

10:15-10:30	<b>Introduction</b>	
	Hernán PRINGE	Institute of Philosophy, Universidad Diego Portales
	Gregory S. MOSS	Department of Philosophy, The Chinese University of Hong Kong
10:30-11:30	<b>Session 1</b>	
	Jacinto PÁEZ	Universidad Diego Portales
	Cassirer and the Naturalist Tradition	
11:35-12:35	<b>Session 2</b>	
	Hernán PRINGE	Universidad Diego Portales
	Nature and the Self-knowledge of Reason: Cassirer's Theory of the Concept	
12:35-14:30	Lunch	
14:30-15:30	<b>Session 3</b>	
	Gregory S. MOSS	The Chinese University of Hong Kong
	Ernst Cassirer and The Mythical Concept of Nature	
15:35-16:35	<b>Session 4</b>	
	Eduardo SABROVSKY	Universidad Diego Portales
	The Political Significance of the Modern "Disenchantment of Nature"	
16:40-17:40	<b>Session 5</b>	
	Pablo PULGAR	Universidad Diego Portales
	Interaction between Nature and History in Hegel's Philosophy	
18:00-20:00	Dinner	Hosted by Department of Philosophy, CUHK

## DAY 2 (7 June 2023, Wednesday)

10:00-11:00	<b>Session 6</b>	
	Yong HUANG	The Chinese University of Hong Kong
	Naturalistic Meta-ethics: An Agent Focused Moral Realism	
11:05-12:05	<b>Session 7</b>	
	Wolfgang TOTSCHNIG	Universidad Diego Portales
	Nature is Bad	
12:05-14:00	Lunch	
14:00-15:00	<b>Session 8</b>	
	Juan ORMEÑO	Universidad Diego Portales
	Hegel on the Relationship between Intentionality and Nature	
15:05-16:05	<b>Session 9</b>	
	Robin LEUNG	The Chinese University of Hong Kong
	“Human nature” Understood through the Hegelian and Aristotelian (Dis)enchanted Naturalism	
16:10-17:10	<b>Session 10</b>	
	Diego FERNÁNDEZ	Universidad Diego Portales
	On Improvisation as Natural Law	

### DAY 3 (8 June 2023, Thursday)

10:00-11:00	<b>Session 11</b>	
	Yujian ZHENG	Shenzhen University
	How to Reconcile the Reductive and Non-Reductive Demands Equally Ascribable to Naturalism?	
11:05-12:05	<b>Session 12</b>	
	Hayden KEE	The Chinese University of Hong Kong
	Phenomenological Naturalism and its Application in Evolutionary Anthropology	
12:05-14:00	Lunch	
14:00-15:00	<b>Session 13</b>	
	Ovidiu STANCIU	Universidad Diego Portales
	Nature Within and Beyond the Natural World. On Jan Patočka's Phenomenology of Nature	
15:05-16:05	<b>Session 14</b>	
	Edward KWOK	The Chinese University of Hong Kong
	The Problem of the Concept in Naturalism: Towards a Schellingian Philosophy of Nature	

*\*1 Hour for Each Speaker. (40-45 Minutes for the Presentation/15-20 Minutes for Discussion.)*

# ABSTRACTS

## SESSION 1 | JACINTO PÁEZ, UDP

### **Cassirer and the Naturalist Tradition**

Although at first glance the characterization of Cassirer as an advocate of naturalism seems counter-intuitive, the early American reception of Cassirer's philosophy has highlighted the possible proximity between Cassirer's philosophy and American pragmatism. Recently, Sebastian Luft has defended this line of interpretation in his article "Kulturphilosophie als 'naturalistische' Transzendentalphilosophie und die Frage nach dem Ort der Kultur Cassirer, Sellars und McDowell im Vergleich" (Luft, 2018). Central to the defense of this rapprochement between naturalism and Cassirer's philosophy is a supposed shift produced during the 1930s onward. Examples of this turn would be such works as *The Logic of the Humanities* or *Essay on Man*. In relation to the theme of the conference, our presentation aims to delimit the characterization of Ernst Cassirer's philosophy as a variant of naturalism. The subject of our study will be, on the one hand, the interpretations that emphasize a presumed naturalism in Cassirer's work and, on the other hand, the problem of a turn towards philosophical anthropology in his late work. Our aim will be to determine the validity and limits of this characterization in order to clarify the relationship between critical philosophy and naturalism.

## SESSION 2 | HERNÁN PRINGE, UDP

### **Nature and the Self-knowledge of Reason: Cassirer's Theory of the Concept**

In this talk I would like to consider Cassirer's functional theory of the concept as a doctrine which may provide an account of the comprehensibility of nature alternative to both Kantian and Hegelian idealism. Cassirer argues that critical philosophy, understood from his neo-Kantian viewpoint, is not reached by the Hegelian criticism of Kantian philosophy and at the same time avoids certain difficulties that can be found in Hegel's doctrine. On this basis, Cassirer's idealism provides its own account of the actuality and self-knowledge of an autonomous reason.

## **SESSION 3 | GREGORY S. MOSS, CUHK**

### **Ernst Cassirer and The Mythical Concept of Nature**

In this essay I reconstruct Cassirer's account of the mythical concept of nature, with a focus on the mythical concepts of time, space, and number. I defend Cassirer's account of mythical culture against a series of critiques raised against his philosophy of mythology. Cassirer has been charged with neglecting the profane dimension of mythical culture and with presenting an inconsistent account of sacred being. In order to make headway on these critiques, I first demonstrate that Cassirer does in fact acknowledge the profane and its place in mythical culture. Through close conceptual and textual analysis, I reconstruct Cassirer's account of the sacred and the profane in "Myth as Form of Intuition" in the second volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. After demonstrating the presence of this distinction in Cassirer's texts, I reconstruct Cassirer's account of the emotive origin of the sacred in mythical culture. Finally, I show how Cassirer's law of mythical culture is not inconsistent with the sacred but is a further articulation of the form of sacred being.

## **SESSION 4 | EDUARDO SABROVSKY, UDP**

### **The Political Significance of the Modern "Disenchantment of Nature"**

In this paper, I shall begin by tracing this political significance to the early modern thinker in whom, I contend, this significance is quite explicit, Thomas Hobbes. In Hobbes' mechanistic conception, nature is composed, not of objects endowed with secondary qualities, but exclusively of matter plus movement. The former qualities would then be nothing but fancies created by our sense-perception, mind and heart, to be explained also in mechanistic terms. The political significance of this conception is quite straightforward: it is aimed against reification, the objectification of what, for Hobbes and his heirs, is nothing but the product of human production. An objectification that would be present not only in common sense and superstition, but also, in Hobbes' case, in medieval scholastic philosophy and theology, as a main component of the medieval power-knowledge apparatus that early modern thinkers are striving to displace. In a second moment, I will show how this critique of reification is, itself, based on a form of reification—a subtler one, however. In a third one, I shall contend that this subtler form can still be discerned in Marx's early critique of alienation and of commodity fetishism in *Das Kapital*. And that, if this is the case, Marx critique would be confined within the boundaries of the modern world, thus failing to provide a ground for apprehending the modern age, and its present crisis.

## **SESSION 5 | PABLO PULGAR, UDP**

### **Interaction between Nature and History in Hegel's Philosophy**

Abstract to be provided.

## **SESSION 6 | YONG HUANG, CUHK**

### **Naturalistic Meta-ethics: An Agent Focused Moral Realism**

According to a common classification, there are naturalistic and non-naturalistic forms of moral realism. According to a less known classification, there are agent-focused and action-focused moral realism. Combining these two classifications, we have four different types of moral realism: (1) non-naturalistic action-focused moral realism, (2) non-naturalistic agent-focused moral realism; (3) naturalistic action-focused moral realism; and (4) naturalistic agent-focused moral realism. In this paper, I shall argue for and defend the last one as the most plausible or promising type of moral realism, especially in face of objections from moral anti-realists. In the process, I shall draw on materials of the greatest neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi.

## **SESSION 7 | WOLFGANG TOTSCHNIG, UDP**

### **Nature is Bad**

Taking as a basis the distinction between nature and culture, between what is given and what is human-made, I argue that nature is morally bad. This evaluation follows directly from the conjunction of two uncontroversial premises, namely, first, the fact that nature is governed by the process of evolution through natural selection and, second, the principle that the welfare of sentient beings is of moral value. The argument that I present is not new; it has been put forward by several authors. However, it is often neglected or overlooked and, therefore, needs to be recalled. After laying out the argument, I develop its implications for several contemporary debates, in particular the issue of animal rights.

## SESSION 8 | JUAN ORMEÑO, UDP

### Hegel on the Relationship between Intentionality and Nature

In this presentation I will try to offer an accurate but manageable version of what Hegel called “Spirit” (*Geist*) and its relation to nature. In plain German the word “Spirit” means “mind”. And spiritual entities are animals with sensations, feelings (and in our own case, thoughts). According to Hegel, the mere nature of such animals is not enough to explain what it means to be so “minded” as we are. Hegel considers that, in order to make a philosophically meaningful account of spirit (sc. of the activities and practices that presupposes theoretical as well practical intentionality), we must use an expressive vocabulary (sc. self-manifestation, self-revelation), that is ill-suited to describe nature, even the nature of agents capable of intentional activity. Hegel is aware that notions like “manifestation” or “revelation” could not be applied to the entire dominion of philosophical knowledge: it has no point to use an expressive vocabulary in order to make sense of the trajectory of a particle in space, nor to refer to the chemical bonds between the atoms that form a molecule. It has a point, however, if we want to account for the way in which living organisms react to their environment based on their own inner states. And it seems much more appropriate if we consider the behavior of a rational agent: then to understand her actions as conclusions of practical reasoning or as exemplifications of practical rules is to interpret them as expression of the subjectivity –the inner self- of the agent. The rest of my presentation will try to explain the significance that Hegel seems to attribute to this expressive dimension.

## SESSION 9 | ROBIN LEUNG, CUHK

### “Human nature” Understood through the Hegelian and Aristotelian (Dis)enchanted Naturalism

The connection between Aristotelian naturalism and Hegel is an issue that has been explored intensively in academia. Notably, Aristotle’s naturalism is connected closely to his doctrine of teleology, in which nature as a whole represents the highest good and the actualization of particulars is in accordance with the whole they affiliate. However, in light of the rapid development and the dominance of empirical science nowadays, it is questionable whether the assertion of the metaphysical whole is still necessary, since the aggregation of scientific findings seems to already exhaust the meaning of the whole. Moreover, it is unclear in what sense is nature justified to be a normative authority for both human and general organic lives. Due to these comments, Aristotelian naturalism is described as “enchanted”. On the other hand, despite Hegel being receptive to the Aristotelian model, his view on nature consists of no presupposed metaphysical whole whereas it has been substituted by the actualization of concepts. Instead of outlining the teleological highest good, the task of philosophy becomes interpreting the structure of actualization. Upon discerning their contrasting difference, Pinkard describes Hegel’s approach as “disenchanted”<sup>1</sup>. Intriguingly, in both the Aristotelian and the Hegelian framework, the notion of nature does not only apply to “mother nature” but to “human nature” as well. Through reviewing and comparing their theoretical differences, this presentation shall attempt to outline the provided two options to understand human nature and discusses the implications that come along. Hence reconsidering whether or not “human nature” as an essence is a complete idea.



## **SESSION 10 | DIEGO FERNÁNDEZ, UDP**

### **On Improvisation as Natural Law**

Abstract to be provided.

## **SESSION 11 | YUJIAN ZHENG, SHENZHEN UNIVERSITY**

### **How to Reconcile the Reductive and Non-Reductive Demands Equally Ascribable to Naturalism?**

In this presentation, I'd like to briefly report and review some of the most intriguing features of a mainstream version of naturalism which I believe is largely plausible and very productive in contemporary analytic philosophy. This is a version I'd prefer to draw on certain central themes from David Lewis, Donald Davidson and Daniel Dennett (& Ruth Millikan) for its characterization. I aim to show what's the tension underlying these themes and why it has much to do with the equally important demands from the reductive vs anti-reductive thoughts. Some hopeful light of reconciliation (or reasons why it's achievable) might emerge from this brief review.

## **SESSION 12 | HAYDEN KEE, CUHK**

### **Phenomenological Naturalism and its Application in Evolutionary Anthropology**

Phenomenology has traditionally been viewed as staunchly opposed to naturalism. In recent decades, however, following the mutual enlightenment between phenomenology and the cognitive sciences, many researchers have proposed that phenomenology might itself be naturalized. I propose *phenomenological naturalism* as an alternative to both antinaturalist and naturalized phenomenology. Phenomenological naturalism is inspired by Merleau-Ponty's dialectical (loosely speaking) approach to integrating phenomenological and natural scientific inquiry into mind and behavior. Merleau-Ponty sees the objectivist tendency of naturalism and the subjectivistic tendency of classical phenomenology as equally essential moments of a composite view that integrates both moments while respecting their difference. I draw on texts from across Merleau-Ponty's oeuvre to illustrate how this dialectical approach plays out across a range of life and human sciences. I then apply phenomenological naturalism to a field Merleau-Ponty himself never thoroughly explored, and one that has advanced considerably since his time: evolutionary anthropology. The field has traditionally been characterized by a strictly objectivist tendency, the "stones and bones" approach to human prehistory. In recent years, however, a subjectivist tendency has emerged, one that attempts to reconstruct the inner life (emotional, social, and cognitive) of prehistoric hominins. In line with phenomenological naturalism, I argue that it is only by recognizing the pervasively bodily character of human and animal psychology that we can reconstruct the lived world of prehistoric humans. We must put the flesh back on the bones and minds of our ancestors if we are to reconcile the objectivist and subjectivist tendencies of evolutionary anthropology and form a more comprehensive picture of prehistoric human experience.

## **SESSION 13 | OVIDIU STANCIU, UDP**

### **Nature Within and Beyond the Natural World. On Jan Patocka's Phenomenology of Nature**

My talk aims to elucidate the place and function of the concept of nature within Patocka's phenomenological perspective. More precisely, I will attempt to bring to salience the specific phenomenality Patocka ascribes to nature and to explore the relation he establishes between nature and the natural world (or the lifeworld). On his account, nature is captured in each natural world as that which withdraws from it, it appears as the internalization of an external and overflowing dimension. In other words, even though any exploration of nature can only be carried out on the ground of the natural world, the phenomenality of nature would be stripped of one of its dimensions as long as we do not recognize the unworldly moment that it necessarily entails.

## SESSION 14 | EDWARD KWOK, CUHK

### The Problem of the Concept in Naturalism: Towards a Schellingian Philosophy of Nature

Naturalism is the view that the world is *exhaustively* populated by *natural* entities, and there is no room for any *non-natural* entities. In other words, naturalism holds that *all things in the world are natural things*. But if naturalism is to be a position that genuinely teaches us something about the world, it needs to answer the following question: *what is nature?* Consequently, naturalism must be accompanied by a *philosophy of nature*. In this paper, I will argue that, under the popular conception of nature, i.e., *physicalism*, which conceives of nature as populated by spatio-temporal physical entities that are the objects of empirical science, naturalism is *self-undermining*. Specifically, if naturalism is right and nature is merely physical, a naturalistic conception of the *concept* will be unable to account for the conceptual knowledge that sustains naturalism. As a result, if naturalism is true, naturalism is incapable to account for the *truth* of naturalism, and we are not supposed to know that naturalism is true. Therefore, if the truth and knowledge of naturalism is possible, it must imply that only some, not all, things are natural, and so naturalism appears to be false. At best, naturalism is only a description of a particular domain of being. Furthermore, in the face of this difficulty, the naturalist can either reconceive the concept of concept for it to accord with the physical nature, or reconceive nature itself to accommodate the universal structure of the concept. I argue that the former option fails and does not actually solve the problem, therefore, we are better off taking the latter option, which involves a re-conception of the concept of nature. As an alternative, I will also introduce a Schellingian conception of nature, which is, in principle, capable of avoiding the problematic tension between the physical nature and concepts, and therefore, securing a concept of nature upon which the position of naturalism can be erected. Schelling's philosophy of nature is particularly promising, because it offers a conception of nature that can accommodate the existence of universal concepts.