Report 'Three Rivers Philosophy Conference: Science, Knowledge and Democracy' (April 1-3, 2011)
(By Laszlo Kosolosky)

The University of South Carolina (Columbia, South Carolina) served as an inspiring location for the very first Three Rivers Philosophy Conference (April 1-3, 2011). 'Science, Knowledge and Democracy' were the key themes both invited and contributory lectures dealt with. The conference counted 4 plenary speakers, over 35 contributed papers, and a 5 paper strong poster session.

In the opening lecture of the first day, Elizabeth Anderson developed criteria for lay assessment of scientific testimony and demonstrated that applying these criteria is feasible for laypersons. The democratic legitimacy of technical public policies is not up for discussion, given that citizens can make reliable second-order assessments of the consensus of trustworthy scientific experts.

In the afternoon plenary session, Miranda Fricker posed the question: 'Is the virtue of testimonial justice a virtue for scientists?' By referring to the historical case of Semmelweis, she answered the question affirmatively. Furthermore, different models for how communities of scientists might collectively possess the virtue of testimonial justice were sketched out.

At the start of the second day, Henry S. Richardson took us on a philosophical journey by investigating reliance on expertise as we reason together. Richardson investigated the underlying conceptual tension between reasoning and relying. Possible threats emerging could be averted by further institutional measures: by guaranteeing the possibility of public scrutiny of expert reasoning, by ordering the reasoning so that the threat to its unity is limited, and by providing adequate mechanisms for appeal, challenge, and reconsideration.

The final plenary session was given by Miriam Solomon, who talked about the evolution of consensus conferences. Starting from Arthur Kantrowitz's 1967 idea of 'science court' she traced the history behind consensus conferences, with special attention to the NIH consensus development program and the Danish consensus conference model. Through this historical examination she argued for consensus conferences as being 'social epistemic rituals', which claim to 'make knowledge' through satisfying ideals of fairness and objectivity.

Most of the contributed speakers were intrigued with similar issues as the ones addressed by the keynote speakers. In particular, interesting talks were given related to topics such as expertise (Heather Phillips, Pavel Hardos, David L. Rice), consensus (Boaz Miller, Jeroen Van Bouwel, Laszlo Kosolosky, Brent Ranalli), evidence (Heather Douglas, Robyn Bluhm), objectivity (Jeff Kochan, Amanda Roth, Eric Winsberg, Carole J. Lee), public participation (Daniel Steel, David Taylor, Frans A.J. Birrer, Cara O'Connor), political science/philosophy (Mark Brown, Karin Jonch-Clausen, Klemens Kappel, Justin Weinberg, Matthew Brown, Nicholas Zavediuk), geoengineering (Benjamin Hale), selective ignorance (Kevin Elliott), and many more.

Special thanks to Justin Weinberg and Kevin Elliott, who succeeded very well in organizing what turned out to be a splendid conference. Hopefully this event will be remembered as the starting point of a fruitful biennial tradition.