

Report ‘1st Dutch-Flemish Graduate Conference on Philosophy of Science and/or Technology’

(by Laszlo Kosolovsky)

In cooperation with Ghent University, the NFWT organised its first graduate conference for advanced master students, Phd-students, and recent Phd’s, working on philosophy of science and/or technology.

A total of six sessions and two plenary lectures were held on November 25th and 26th.

The first day began with two sessions on ‘trust and expertise’. Laszlo Kosolovsky formulated a satisfactory account of consensus in scientific practice, referring to the National Institute of Health Consensus Development Conferences. Carlo Martini used the discussion of the role of experts and expert judgment in economics to claim that (at least) a more thorough approach to its epistemological problems is needed. Tom Simpson analysed a case study of technology building, at Microsoft Research Cambridge, to defend the thesis that trust is not a performative; but that it invariably has significant perlocutionary effects. Sven Diekman argued that, in order to hold a model valid for a certain use, a modeller has to form optimistic attitudes based on the relevance of each represented property, on professional, moral, and scientific feasibility, and on representational adequacy of the model. These personal attitudes of the modeller determine the epistemic features of the model. In the first plenary lecture, Jon Williamson argued that the Recursive Bayesian Net formalism can be applied to modelling the hierarchical structure of mechanisms. The last session of the day dealt with ‘levels of explanation’. Wouter D’Hooghe investigated the claim whether dual inheritance theory might provide a framework that unifies the social sciences as regards to cultural change. François Claveau drew on a case of triangulation for causal inference to address the question: ‘What are the conditions to be fulfilled such that using multiple means of determination leads to warranted inference?’ The first day ended with a talk on career opportunities in the United Kingdom, Belgium and the Netherlands.

The second day commenced with a plenary lecture by Gertrudis Van De Vijver who talked about the epistemological relevance of a transcendental viewpoint in critically analyzing the reflexive space within which most discussions on teleology and function in philosophy of biology take place. The fourth session dealt with ‘nature and the natural’. Delene Engelbrecht answered the question what exactly is meant by the concept of naturalness in patent law by examining two recent patent disputes. Yoni Van Den Eede undertook a preliminary attempt at a philosophical reflection on technological mediation as such, by using the concepts of ‘transparency’ and ‘opacity’ as heuristic instruments. Session 5 concerned ‘criteria for model-selection’. Raoul Gervais argued – by referring to the case study of face recognition - against proponents of mechanistic explanations who defend that explanatory strength is merely a function of the model’s accuracy. Stefan Mendritzki’s talk aimed at developing an appropriate concept of mechanism validity based on consistency with knowledge of the target system processes and thus clarifying the validation of agent-based models in evolutionary economics. In the final session on ‘understanding and explanation’, Sara Voute defended that by using the tools earth scientists use to develop explanations and achieve understanding, also laymen could achieve understanding without rigorous theoretical training. Merel Lefevere presented an array of arguments that made the difference between unification and integration explicit. On a personal note, I would like to express my gratitude to the organisers, i.e. Maarten Van Dyck and Jan Willem Wieland, for making all of this possible.