



INTERVIEW WITH THE “FORUM THEORETICAL PHILOSOPHY”

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INTRODUCTION. The *Forum Theoretical Philosophy*¹ is a research network for young academics. It has its origins in the Philosophy Department of the University of Bamberg, Germany where it was founded in 2010 by philosophy graduate students. In the last four years the group has organized various philosophical events, all focused on MA and PhD students. Among these, the two *Bamberg International Summer Schools in Theoretical Philosophy* organized in summers 2012 and 2014 are certainly the most important activities that characterize the *Forum* as one of the most interesting, enterprising and fruitful European student organizations.

Dear Forum, would you kindly introduce yourself? We are Sebastian Krebs, Vanessa Starke, Thimo Heisenberg and Simon Baumgartner. The four of us represent the board of the Forum, and all of us work in different areas in philosophy (and also in different places scattered around the globe). When we founded our research network, we wanted to reduce our interests to the least common denominator, and figured out that all of us mainly work in *Theoretical Philosophy* in its broadest definition. This includes such diverse fields as philosophy of psychology, philosophy of history, philosophy of language, logic, epistemology, and, of course, metaphysics! All of us share an interest both in the continental and the analytic tradition of thinking – and we think these two “cultures” are way more intertwined than many philosophers might think. The idea of the *Forum* is to strengthen exchange between graduate students in the field across institutional and national boundaries. In pursuit of this aim, we have organized numerous philosophical workshops.

What inspiration has led you to found a research network? Everything started when we were advanced undergrads, and (as probably all philosophy students do at a certain point in their life) puzzled our brains over Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. We spontaneously decided to start a reading group, and we invited friends and colleagues from different universities to join in. This way, our first workshop was born, taking place in Winter 2010. It was

¹<http://theoretical-philosophy.net/>.

really productive, and we decided to continue our workshop series. The idea to name ourselves *Forum Theoretical Philosophy* came later, when in early summer 2010, our academic teachers Professor Christian Illies and Professor Christian Schäfer asked us whether we are interested in organizing an international Summer School at the University of Bamberg. (Well, we actually asked them whether we could organize a smaller workshop in collaboration with the department, and their reply was something like ‘Why not making it really big and really international?’ – and we were crazy enough to join in!)

What were the first steps of the project? As you might imagine, it is a huge difference between organizing a small reading group, and organizing a two week Summer School for international students. We needed a topic, a concept, a structure, a list of possible lectures, and – most importantly – funding! The Bamberg philosophy department helped us where it could and provided the basic infrastructure. But they also gave us the freedom to design the Summer School according to our ideas of what students might like when taking place in an international event. It was a huge responsibility (we were just about becoming graduate students back then), but, of course, also a great opportunity! And we were lucky: the project has been awarded with generous funding by the German Academic Exchange Service, and some of the greatest philosophers alive accepted our invitation, among them Saul Kripke and Barry Stroud. However, the project took an enormous amount of time: we spent about two years for preparations – and barely met each other in person since there was always one or two of us doing an exchange year in Norway, Japan or the United States. We coordinated our projects via Skype and e-mail — and in the few weeks of the year when all of us were in the same country, we somehow managed to keep our regular workshops ongoing.

In Italy, many philosophical activities promoted or organized by students have to face huge problems in order to establish within the academic framework. The *Forum* is based in the University of Bamberg. Have you found a welcoming and supporting environment in the beginnings of your activities? Which were, if any, the main obstacles that you had to deal with? It is both true and false to say that we are based in the University of Bamberg. Most of us studied (or study) in Bamberg at a certain point in our life (or at least, took part in some classes here), and without the great support of Professor Illies, Professor Schäfer and Professor De Anna, our research network would not have been possible. However, we are a registered association – and leg ally, we function as an independent corporate body ourselves. That means that we have our own budget (even though it is very small), and our activities are not limited to the University of Bamberg. We do not get paid by the Bamberg Philosophy Department, which guarantees us the freedom and independence of organizing the projects according to our own ideas. We also do not feel any pressure to establish ourselves within the academic framework: we simply want to be a *Forum* – that means a meeting place – for young academics working within the fields of Theoretical Philosophy. Of course, there are many obstacles (most of them bureaucratic ones) we had to deal with in the past, but all of us gained uncountable valuable experiences over the last four years – and now, we are at a point where we also want to share our expertise with younger academics, and help them to make their own ideas become real projects.

Would you provide an account of your activities? The core of our activities have always been, and always will be the exchange of ideas in philosophical workshops. They usually

last for a weekend, and we try to find the most beautiful locations available to discuss philosophy: so far, we have met on a real castle, an old farmhouse at the picturesque Lake Constance, in the charming Franconian vineyards, or in the tranquility of the Bavarian Forest.

The idea is to discuss certain topics or texts we are working on at the moment, or to present early drafts of our own research projects. The feedback to these workshops is usually pretty good. There is no academic pressure, no grading, no deadlines and no term papers involved. It is not that academic pressure is bad in general, but sometimes it is good to leave it behind and to focus only on the essentials.

The Summer Schools which we organized in collaboration with the Bamberg Philosophy Department are, of course, a little bit different. They mainly provide a forum for young researchers to meet and discuss their own work, too – but they are, in a way, much more intense since we had international top researchers like Saul Kripke and Kit Fine as our external guests, and we were doing top-of-the-edge philosophy constantly for two weeks. (And as you might imagine: discussions never stopped after the official seminar time was over.)

Could you explain the fundamental idea that the *Forum* mainly aims to promote?

Our fundamental idea is to fill a certain gap within academia: Many students have so many ideas – especially within philosophy. Not all ideas are equally good, but also many of the best ideas fail due to a lack of funding or organisational infrastructure, sometimes also due to a lack of self-confidence. Only a small percentage of good ideas become real. Our main motivation is to higher this number – at least, by a tiny little bit.

In your opinion, what are the most important results of which the *Forum* should be proud of?

Definitely the two Summer Schools in Bamberg. We still have not fully realized that Saul Kripke joined one of our projects! Imagine that we were just first year graduate students back then, and imagine how we felt when the (arguably) most important philosopher alive accepted our invitation. Not even to mention all the other smart and highly-motivated people we brought together for intellectual and academic exchange over the last years.

What are your plans for the future?

This is hard to tell! Right now, our professional lives are in a big change and we all are more or less at the step of leaving our student life behind, and starting a professional career. This mainly means that we want to open the *Forum* for ideas of other students, and want to share our expertise and experiences with even younger academics who might want to organize a workshop and do not know where to start. This does not mean that we won't organize events by ourselves: therefore, you better follow us on Facebook if you do not want to miss our next event.

In summer 2012 you organized the first Bamberg International Summer School in Theoretical Philosophy: “*Metaphysics or Modernity?*”, focused on the current status of metaphysics and its tradition. The invited lectures were Richard King (University of Glasgow), Jorge Gracia (SUNY Buffalo), Barry Stroud (UC Berkeley) and Saul Kripke (CUNY). Could you give us an account of this event? Over the course of the summer school, about twenty graduate and postgraduate students from all over the world had opportunity to work with internationally-renowned academics on the topic “*Metaphysics or Modernity?*”². Saul Kripke, Barry Stroud, Richard King and Jorge Gracia

²<http://theoretical-philosophy.net/invitation-to-apply-metaphysics-or-modernity/>.

delivered lectures to students for three days each. The focus was primarily on the detailed exploration of the subject matter through discussion, rather than on introducing the main problems and ideas. The educational objective of the Summer School was to create an arena for rigorous intellectual debate on the issue of metaphysics and to promote academic and cultural exchange between all participants.

What idea of metaphysics came out from this intensive experience? There were many diverse understandings of metaphysics among the participating students before they came to our Summer School. And we think it is fair to say that their idea of metaphysics became even more diverse after two weeks of intensive classes. And this does not mean anything bad. Just to the contrary: we all broadened our understanding of the topic – and how rich the diverse approaches to metaphysics are, you can see in our essay collection “*Metaphysics or Modernity?*” which appeared last year with Bamberg University Press (Baumgartner, Heisenberg, and Krebs, 2013).

According to this outcome, is metaphysical inquiry still a valid enterprise within contemporary philosophy? It certainly is! Metaphysics has always been and (hopefully) always will be one of the core disciplines of philosophy. And even if the only metaphysical insight one can gain is (as many contemporaries believe) that there are no metaphysical insights: it is still important to understand why this should be the case – and how one could argue against it. However, there is so much more to say about metaphysics, which is also the reason why we chose another metaphysical topic when organizing our second Summer School in Bamberg.

In summer 2014 you organized the second Bamberg International Summer School in Theoretical Philosophy: “Individuals and Indeterminacy. Perspectives in Contemporary Ontology”, focused on the fundamental metaphysical notions of individual and indeterminacy. The invited lectures were Kit Fine (NYU), Peter van Inwagen (Notre Dame University), Peter Simons (Trinity College Dublin) and Gabriele De Anna (University of Bamberg). Could you give us an account of this event? We basically took the concept and structure of our first Summer School, but tried to make it even more professional than “*Metaphysics or Modernity*” in 2012. Probably this reflects also our own personal and academic development. We became more interested in more specialised topics, than asking again the big question “Is metaphysics still possible in the 21st century?”. This way, our Summer School was more research-focussed, and the discussions were less general than in 2012³. Also, our preparation was much more professional than in 2012. Back then, everything was a little bit spontaneous and improvised – and we also think that the students profited a lot from this, which is what makes our work valuable.

Two very Big Questions. The first one: what is an individual? Take 20 graduate students and four international experts, and put them in one seminar room. Are they just one big individual, consisting of 24 parts, or are we still talking about 24 individuals here? If you ask all of them what an individual is, you can be sure to get 24 different answers. Probably even more. And it is probably the big strength of philosophy that philosophers never agree with each other. Otherwise, discussions would be quite boring.

³<http://theoretical-philosophy.net/160/>.

The second one: what is indeterminacy? The answer to this question is even more indeterminate than to the one before – Kit Fine, Peter van Inwagen, Peter Simons and Gabriele de Anna all presented us different accounts of indeterminacy. But most famously the problem of indeterminacy is illustrated with a man with a full head of hair. He is obviously not bald. Now the removal of a single hair will not turn a non-bald man into a bald one. And yet it is obvious that a continuation of that process must eventually result in baldness. This paradox is also called “Sorites paradox” and dates back to ancient times. It is impossible to give you an ultimate answer of how many hairs a man must have to be considered non-bald. But we can assure you that we all (including Kit Fine) lost our hair by discussing this delicate problem in contemporary metaphysics!

Dear Forum, thank you very much for your kind availability and willingness. We wish you all the best for the future!

References

Baumgartner, Simon, Thimo Heisenberg, and Sebastian Krebs, eds. (2013). *Metaphysics or Modernity, Contributions to the Bamberg Summer School 2012*. Bamberg: Bamberg University Press. ISBN: 978-3-86309-180-4.