



Center for New Narratives in Philosophy

In partnership with the Center for Science and Society and the Department of Philosophy at Columbia University

Finding the Way to Truth: Conference on the Sources, History, and Impact of the Meditative Tradition

Sponsored by the Center for New Narratives in Philosophy, the Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy, the Departments of Philosophy, English and Comparative Literature, French, and Maison Française at Columbia University

ABSTRACTS

Session 1: “Know Thyself?” Ancient Contemplations

“Spiritual Exercises? ‘Care for the Soul’ and ‘Contemplation’”

Wolfgang Mann, Professor of Philosophy, Columbia University

Professor Mann works primarily on ancient Greek philosophy; he also has research interests in medieval philosophy and in German idealism. He is the author of *The Discovery of Things: Aristotle’s Categories and their Context* (Princeton, 2000). More recently, he has published several articles on the reception of Stoicism by various Roman authors.

“Who Knows You When You Know Yourself? Plotinus on the Delphic Command ‘Know Thyself’”

Sara Magrin, Associate Professor of Classics, University of California - Berkeley

Professor Magrin is interested in ancient epistemology and psychology, and her current research focuses on Plotinus. She is working on a book-length manuscript tentatively titled *With the Whole Soul: Plotinus on Animal and Human Forms of Cognition and Desire*.

By the time Plotinus wrote the *Enneads*, the Delphic command “Know Thyself” had become a philosophical common place. Most of his predecessors had interpreted it as an exhortation to discover our “self”, and they had unanimously identified our “self” with our soul. Plotinus suggested a new and more complex analysis of this command. If what we aim to know when we try to know ourselves is our soul, he wondered, who is the subject who seeks and tries to know? Plotinus remarked that the Delphic command pointed at a duality in our nature between an object known and a knowing subject, and, in light of this observation, he interpreted it as an exhortation to know ourselves primarily as subjects, rather than as objects, of knowledge. I will examine how Plotinus articulated this conception of our “self” as subject of knowledge, and the relation he envisaged between this “self” and our soul.

“Augustine’s *Confessions*: Post-Classical Manifesto”

Peter King, Professor of Philosophy and of Mediaeval Studies, University of Toronto

Professor King’s areas of research are focused on history of philosophy, particularly ancient and medieval philosophy, as well as political philosophy. His publications include “Mediaeval Intentionality”, “Scotus Against Anselm: The Two-Wills Theory”, and “Emotions in Medieval Thought.”

Augustine initiated a modern way of thought into the Middle Ages when he discovered that his life was a proper object of meditative reflection. In so doing, he turned the classical ideal of speculative thought on fundamental principles (*theoria*) into an open-ended project of insight and enlightenment through inner discovery, one brilliantly charted in his *Confessions*.



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Session 2: Contemplation and Perplexity in Medieval Thought

“Confession, Conversion, and Contemplation: John of Fécamp and the Monastic Meditative Tradition through the Eleventh Century”

Lauren Mancía, Assistant Professor of History, Brooklyn College, CUNY

Professor Mancía focuses on the devotional culture of medieval monasteries in the 11th and 12th centuries. Her book, *Emotional Monasticism: Affective Piety at the Eleventh-Century Monastery of John of Fécamp* is forthcoming from Manchester University Press in July 2019. She is also a lecturer at The Met Cloisters, the branch of the Metropolitan Museum of Art dedicated to the study of medieval art.

How did medieval monks before the twelfth century pursue their contemplation of the divine? In their minds, what were the limits and pitfalls of that pursuit, and did they think they could overcome those limits? How did they draw on authoritative precedents (Church Fathers, Benedict, etc.) in their meditative processes while still maintaining the capacity to innovate and develop meditative prescriptions over time? And was there a distinctly Benedictine approach to the contemplation of God by the eleventh century? In this paper, I will trace the development of emotional meditative practice in the medieval monastery through the eleventh century, focusing mainly on the work of John of Fécamp (ca. 990-1078) as the pinnacle of that development, showing how John was a product of a meditative monastic tradition stemming from Augustine’s *Confessions*, and arguing that his work was the watershed moment leading to Anselm’s *Prosologion* and later medieval meditative thought.

“Reaching God through perplexity: Al Ghazali's Meditation”

Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Professor of French and of Philosophy, Director of the Institute of African Studies, Columbia University

Professor Diagne’s books in English include *African Art as Philosophy: Senghor, Bergson, and the Idea of Negritude* (2011) and *The Ink of the Scholars: Reflections on Philosophy in Africa* (2016). His areas of specialization include History of Logic; Boolean algebra of logic; French philosophy; Islamic philosophy and Sufism; and African philosophy.

Al Ghazali's *Deliverance from Error* has been sometimes translated under the title *Confessions*. To underline in that way the analogy with Augustine's major work does make sense: it indicates the meaning of meditation as the journey of the self towards God through perplexity. The presentation will examine the significance of perplexity in meditation.

“Meditations in Islamic Thought: Philosophy and Sufism”

Taneli Kukkonen, Professor of Philosophy, NYU Abu Dhabi

Professor Kukkonen specializes in classical Arabic philosophy, Aristotle, the Aristotelian and Platonic traditions from antiquity to the Renaissance, religious studies, Islamic culture in the classical period, and the early history of science. He is the author of *Ibn Tufayl* (Oxford, 2014) and over thirty research articles on Arabic philosophy and the Aristotelian tradition.

Two traditions of introspection develop in tandem during the formative period of Islamic thought. The first runs from the Arabic translation of Plotinus through Avicenna and on to Suhrawardi and the Illuminist tradition; it emphasizes the link between the phenomenal and the noumenal, the way that a metaphysical map can be drawn through keen observation of the layers of our psyche. The second, traceable largely through the Sufi tradition, takes self-examination to involve first and foremost a self-critique – a willingness to scrutinize how our encounter with reality gets warped by the powers of passion and self-deception. Where do the two traditions meet; where do they diverge; and what are the consequences for writing a history of the meditations?



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Session 3: Meditations in Late Medieval Thought: Now, Do it With Feeling

“From Meditation to Contemplation: Broadening the Borders”

Christina Van Dyke, Professor of Philosophy, Calvin College, and Senior Fellow and Interim Director of the Center for the Philosophy of Religion at Rutgers University

Professor van Dyke is a professor of philosophy at Calvin College, specializing in medieval philosophy and the philosophy of gender. Currently she is completing a book focusing on hat contemplatives such as Marguerite Porete, Hadewijch, Catherine of Siena, Angela of Foligno, and Mechtild of Magdeburg.

An important devotional genre in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, *Meditations* invited their readers to place themselves at the scene of various moments in Christ's life and encouraged them to have particular emotional responses - joy, sorrow, compassion, etc. - to those imaginative experiences. In its emphasis on feeling, meditation was seen as an activity particularly suited for women and their closer ties with the body. Meditation was also seen as an activity distinct from contemplation, which was portrayed as a 'higher', more intellectual pursuit. Yet meditation was intended to increase love to Christ, and love was widely considered to increase knowledge - knowledge of the same sort that contemplation also claimed to yield. Over time, then the widespread popularity of this spiritual exercise opens up space for women's claims to knowledge to be heard *because of* (rather than *despite*) their association with the body.

“Through a Glass Clearly: Self-Reflection in Nicholas Love’s *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*”

Katie Bugyis, Joy Foundation Fellow, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies

Professor Bugyis is a historian of medieval religious women, especially interested in recovering the liturgical practices they cultivated and the levels of literacy they attained as readers, copyists, and composers of different genres of texts, from prayers to plays. Her book *The Care of Nuns: Benedictine Women's Ministries in England during the Central Middle Ages* is forthcoming with Oxford University Press in 2019.

Sometime before 1410, Nicholas Love (d. 1423/4), the first prior of the Carthusian Charterhouse of Mount Grace in Yorkshire, began composing a full-scale English prose translation of the pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes vitae Christi*. The fruits of his labors, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, became one of the best known and most widely copied vernacular translations of the *Meditationes*. This paper seeks to comprehend Love’s conception of the soul and the process of self-examination and -transformation that he scripted for readers of and meditators on his *Mirror*, highlighting the virtues in Christ’s life that he deemed constitutive of “good living” and, therefore, worthy of imitation. Of particular interest are the excisions and additions Love made to his Latin source-text and what these editorial interventions potentially reveal about his intended readership and their presumed capacities for meditation.

Day 2: Saturday Feb 2

Session 4: Post-Reformation Reflections: Demons, Experience, and Knowledge

“Self-Reflection and Virtue: Teresa of Ávila, Montaigne, and Leibniz”

Christia Mercer, Gustave M. Berne Professor of Philosophy, and Director, Center for New Narratives in Philosophy, Columbia University



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Gustave M. Berne Professor Mercer's major research projects are: (1) *The Philosophy of Anne Conway*, a book on the philosophy of the seventeenth-century English philosopher, Anne Conway, whose metaphysical system has not been thoroughly studied, and (2) *Feeling the Way to Truth: Women, Reason and the Development of Modern Philosophy*, which argues that historians of philosophy need to rethink core assumptions about seventeenth-century philosophy and that the writings of women play a much more significant part in that history than has been recognized.

Post-reformation Europe was awash with demonic possessions, new Biblical interpretations, radically conflicting accounts of the world, plagues, and religious wars. The reflective methodologies at the center of medieval meditative practices began to be reimagined and applied more broadly in the 16th century. This paper quickly surveys the intellectual, political, and religious chaos of post-reformation Europe before discussing three of the most significant reimaginings in early modern philosophy of meditative practices. Teresa of Ávila's use of radical skepticism as a means to knowledge of self and God became a global phenomenon and set the stage for Descartes' *Meditations*. Teresa's contemporary, Michel de Montaigne, vividly describes his struggles toward self-knowledge in a new form of meditation, which he calls "essays." The great German polymath, G.W. Leibniz, takes up Montaigne's essay genre as a means of meditating on the virtue, nature, and God.

"Francis Bacon's Meditations"

Alan Stewart, Professor of English and Comparative Literature, Columbia University

Professor Stewart's specializes in Early modern English literature, history, and culture; manuscript studies; and lesbian and gay studies. With Richard Serjeantson, he is co-Director of the Oxford Francis Bacon, a new 16 volume edition of Bacon's writings for Oxford University Press. He edited volume I, Early Writings 1584-1596, with Harriet Knight (2012), and is now working on volume 2, Late Elizabethan Writings 1596-1602.

This paper makes the case for the meditation as a central, but misunderstood, element in Bacon's method as developed in the *Novum Organum*. Recent scholarship has returned to Bacon's *Meditationes sacrae* (1597), and begun to consider what it means that he describes his *Essays* as "dispersed meditations" (letter to Prince Henry, 1612). But the frequent allusions to *meditationes* in his foundational *Novum Organum* have been not only ignored, but routinely obscured by translations that flatten out the term as "mental effort" or "intense thought." Many of the invocations of *meditationes* in the *Novum Organum* appear to be negative – "All our choice meditations, speculations and controversies are mere madness"; "men ... have wasted countless hours on fanciful meditations and the fictions of wit." But taken in context and read together, the sense of these passages is not that meditation is itself to be belittled; rather, that meditation alone is not enough, but requires experience, and specifically *literate* experience. In this paper, I explore the contested status of meditation in Bacon's scientific method, and suggest that *meditationes sacrae* have a central role to play in the development of his thought on the subject.

"Self-Knowledge and Rational Rhetoric in Descartes's *Meditations*"

Elliot Paul, Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Queen's University

Professor Paul works mainly in early modern philosophy and epistemology. He also has interests in philosophy of mind and cognitive science, with a particular focus on philosophical issues surrounding creativity. He has published articles on Descartes and on creativity, and he has completed a new monograph titled *Clarity First: Rethinking Descartes's Epistemology* (forthcoming with Oxford University Press).

Historically, at least two great traditions were concerned with clarity: the epistemological tradition of the Stoics and the rhetorical tradition of Quintilian. The Stoics regarded clarity as the criterion of truth and knowledge, not as something to be induced through rhetoric. Quintilian treated clarity as a persuasive quality of mental images to be induced through rhetoric, not as a criterion of truth or knowledge. I argue that Descartes draws on both



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traditions, and, moreover, he reconciles them. In his view, knowledge in metaphysics begins with self-knowledge, which is achieved only through clear self-perception. Such clarity is achieved only through radical doubt about all bodies. And such doubt is difficult because we are, in fact, embodied. So Descartes tries to coax readers into radical doubt—partly by co-opting rhetorical strategies from spiritual meditations. In sum, he uses meditational rhetoric to facilitate radical doubt, which yields the clear self-perception required for self-knowledge. He uses rhetoric in service of reason.

Session 5: Post-Reformation Mysteries: From the Self to the World and Back

“The ‘Mysteries’ of Bodily Knowledge in Early Modern Europe”

Pamela H. Smith, Seth Low Professor of History and Director, Center for Science and Society, Columbia University

Professor Smith specializes in early modern European history and the history of science. Her current research focuses on attitudes to nature in early modern Europe and the Scientific Revolution, with particular attention to craft knowledge and historical techniques. She is founding director of The Making and Knowing Project, founding director of The Center for Science and Society, and chair of Presidential Scholars in Society and Neuroscience.

“Secret” and “mystery” were often used to describe craft or practical knowledge and were frequently included in the titles of recipe collections in early modern Europe. This connected the experiential, practical knowledge of craft to an esoteric ideal of knowledge in which the mystery of union with God could not be expressed in rational form, but instead must be experienced through the body. Sensory apprehension—tasting, smelling, seeing, feeling and even hearing God—gave a kind of certainty to bodily, or experiential knowledge that words and propositional knowledge could not. The religious and intellectual reformer Paracelsus (1493-1541) regarded craft knowledge as a bodily union with divinely created nature through which useful knowledge especially of medicaments could be produced. During the so-called scientific revolution such bodily knowledge as a means of extracting knowledge from nature came to be articulated in terms ever more rational and philosophical that could detach that knowledge from the particular bodies of craftspeople and investigators.

“Jewish Prayer and the Ascent of the Soul: An Early Modern Meditation on Unity and its American Christian Transformation”

Brian Ogren, Professor of Religious Studies, Rice University

Professor Ogren specializes in Jewish thought and is particularly interested in philosophy and kabbalah during the early modern period. Currently, he is working on a project dealing with Jewish thought in early America. His work continually examines issues of center and periphery, as well as continuity and change, in regard to Jewish philosophical and mystical traditions.

In 1575, Rabbi Moses ben Maimon Elbaz of Taroudant, Morocco began writing a work entitled *Heikhal ha-Kodesh* (The Holy Temple), which explains Jewish prayers and their secret intentions. This work was edited and published by a famous rabbi in Amsterdam in 1653, at which point it quickly spread throughout the Jewish world. Within this work is an elucidation of the *Shema'*, perhaps *the* central Jewish prayer derived from the biblical book of Deuteronomy and recited by observant Jews three times a day. Using kabbalistic tools, Elbaz explains the *Shema'* in meditative terms as both a unifying reflection on the universe and a ladder of ascent for the soul of the practitioner reciting it. In 1722, Elbaz's explication of the *Shema'* was picked up on by an important American convert to Congregationalism and radically transformed to give it a Trinitarian reading. My talk will discuss these various meditative understandings of this central Jewish prayer and their implications for identity, on both the personal and collective levels.

Session 6: The Afterlife of Meditations: From Romanticism to Resistance and Critical Theory



Panel with Three Short Presentations:

“Between Divine and Human Self-awareness: the Significance of Jakob Boehme's Abyss in the Pre-Freudian Theories of the Unconscious”

Clemence C. Boulouque, Carl and Bernice Witten Assistant Professor in Jewish and Israel Studies, Columbia University

Professor Boulouque's interests include Jewish thought and mysticism, interreligious encounters, intellectual history and networks with a focus on the modern Mediterranean and Sefardi worlds, as well as the intersection between religion and the arts, and the study of the unconscious.

In his *Forty Questions*, the German mystic Jakob Boehme (1575-1624) asked: "Where, from the beginning of the world, does the soul originate?" He went on to locate it in the *Unground*, the abyss from which the divine will emerged into self-awareness. I will explore how nineteenth century's uses of Boehme's Kabbalistic concept – in which the divinity seeks to become conscious – became a template for the pre-Freudian theories of the unconscious: this new human imperative of knowing oneself emerged from divine self-awareness and shaped the Schellingian unconscious. later reappropriated by Jung.

“Self-Reflection as Resistance:’ Hannah Arendt’s Reading of the Meditative Tradition”

Aminah Hasan-Birdwell, Alva and Beatrice Bradley Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Furman University

Professor Hasan-Birdwell is concerned with the nature of reality and understanding our lived experiences, individual and communal. However, her research tends to focus on these elements within the context of the history of Ontology and specifically addresses philosophical problems of identity, history, ethics, politics and time.

This paper attends to Hannah Arendt's direct expansion of the Socratic elements of the Meditative Tradition in her mature philosophical thought of the 1970s. Specifically, the analysis will focus on Arendt's account of the activity of thinking, which is derived from the *aporetic* dimension of the Socratic dialogues and is also reminiscent of medieval philosophy and thinkers such as Montaigne. The paper will highlight Arendt's reflections on the activity thinking as preventative and resists the type of evil or moral wrongdoing (which results in non-thinking) that could be found in the conformity to and complicity in the political atrocities of the twentieth century.

“Political Spirituality and Practices of the Self: Foucault’s Vindication of the Meditative Tradition”

Sabina Vaccarino Bremner, Graduate Student, Philosophy, Columbia University

Bremner works on Kant and post-Kantian philosophy and moral/political philosophy. She is developing an account of Kantian ethics that positions reflective judgment as central to Kant's views on autonomy and the generation of practical maxims of action.

From 1980 to 1983, Michel Foucault advances a counterargument to Descartes' cogito: Descartes' argument for the clarity and distinctness of the 'I think' fails, because the apparently self-evident 'I' is only the "correlate" of specific practices – including meditations and other spiritual exercises – developed throughout history. Thus, Foucault argues that it is a mistake to conceive of the self as the unchanging foundational subject of knowledge; instead, Foucault becomes increasingly interested in what he terms the "spiritual tradition", from which Descartes emerges, and which is instantiated in Christian mysticism, medieval counter-conducts, and Montaigne's "self-writing." In this paper, I present Foucault's reading of the historical inflection point, which he situates in the meditative tradition, between treating the self as a telos that can be created through specific spiritual exercises and treating the self as an obvious metaphysical given. Foucault suggests that aspects of the



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former conception of subjectivity, predating Descartes, are both recoverable and importantly linked to contemporary struggles of resistance.

Session 7: The Afterlife of Meditations: Contemporary Science

Panel with Two Short Presentations:

“How Science Meditates: Ignorance, Failure and Optimism.”

Stuart Firestein, Professor and Chair of the Department of Biological Sciences at Columbia University

Professor Firestein is the former Chair of Columbia University's Department of Biological Sciences where his laboratory studies the vertebrate olfactory system, possibly the best chemical detector on the face of the planet. His laboratory seeks to answer that fundamental human question: How do I smell? Dedicated to promoting the accessibility of science to a public audience, Firestein serves as an advisor for the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation's program for the Public Understanding of Science.

The word 'scientist' was coined in 1833 by William Whewell to mark the evolution from being Natural Philosophers. Scientists were not philosophers, they *did* things – they blew things up, magnetized or electrified things, etc. But this belies the meditative thoughtful part of science. John Keats also coined a phrase, negative capability, to describe the condition of being in mystery, doubt and confusion – and considered it the most creative state for the literary mind. It applies equally well to science. Advances in science come from embracing uncertainty and facing the unknown unknown through failures.

“Creating as Meditation”

David Edwards, Professor of the Practice of Idea Translation in the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences at Harvard University and founding faculty of the Wyss Institute of Biologically Inspired Engineering

Professor Edwards is founding faculty of the Wyss Institute of Biologically Inspired Engineering. Founder of Le Laboratoire, a cultural center in Paris and Cambridge, where artists and designers perform experiments at frontiers of science, David works with contemporary artists, designers, chefs, perfumers, and other creators to pioneer research around ambiguous questions in human health, society and the environment.

Imagining what is not seen, by observing what does, and creating an expression of the unseen that gives it compelling form, involves a kind of meditative process. Mindful repetitions of ideating, experimenting and exhibiting excite the brain's reward system, permitting creators to remain immersed in the creative experience that produces lasting aesthetic value.