Loyola University Chicago

History of Philosophy Roundtable, Fall 2025

"The Master's Problem: Revisiting Hegel's Immanent Critique of Social Domination"

Stephen Cunniff (University of Chicago)

Hegel’s famous ‘Master-Slave Dialectic’ contains an argument that, in addition to the obvious wrong done to the enslaved, the arrangement in fact undermines the master’s own purposes. The standard readings of this argument claim either that the unequal relationship undermines the master’s interest in *recognition* from the other, or that the master undermines his claim to independence by being utterly dependent upon the slave. I argue that these views are unfounded in the text and unsatisfying in themselves. Instead, I argue that Hegel’s account concerns the way in which the means-end structure contained in the master-slave relation is ultimately self-conflicting. His interest lies in the concept of mastery itself as an ultimate end – specifically, as the paradigmatic form of a purely self-centered conception of a self-sufficient life, in which everything else is regarded only as an instrument for one’s own gratification. This is because, for Hegel (following Aristotle), the slave as such is the absolute tool – the ‘tool of tools.’ But for Hegel, the master’s problem is, in this way, the paradigmatic form of the kind of problem involved, for instance, in absolute avarice. Its egocentric form of existing for oneself results in ultimately conferring a kind of absolute value to the possession and permanent disposal of something one at the same time regards as a mere means. The master is, in this way, like the miser, but more miserable. The miser foolishly cherishes his means, while the one who values he life of mastery holds his most prized possession in absolute contempt.

"Counting Civilization: Husserl's History of Humanity through Numbers"

Thomas Byrne (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign)

This lecture presents Husserl’s genealogy of numbers as a hidden history of civilization itself. Numbers, far more than instruments of calculation, were the signs through which human life first gained order, continuity, and shared meaning. They arose from the practical demands of survival and grew into the symbolic structures that made science and culture possible. In tracing this development, I show how Husserl’s earliest investigations into arithmetic and his late reflections on the sciences share the same method, pursue the same themes, and reach the same conclusions — revealing a continuity at the very heart of his philosophy.

"To Foster or Debunk?: Black Feminism, Frankfurt School Critical Theory, and the New Materialist Turn"

Naomi Simmons-Thorne (Loyola University Chicago)

Black feminist studies has undergone a paradigm shift in recent years, marked by a transition from critical theories like intersectionality and identity politics to new materialist themes like social death and the body. Linked to the broader 'new materialist turn' of the 1990s, this intellectual movement stresses the limits of ideology critique and negative theorizing, calling for positive theories capturing complex assemblages between bodies, objects, and other forms of matter. During this time, black feminist scholars called for parallel theories, arguing that earlier black feminist critical theories failed to sufficiently capture the materiality of the black female body. These developments, I contend, primed the field for the rise of the new material black feminisms and culminated in the gradual decline of black feminist critical theory. A monumental sea change, surprisingly little has been written explicitly about this topic though, leaving the field with unanswered questions about the nature of these schools of thought and their interconnections. This paper proposes to address this gap. My analysis reveals that these school clash, most constitutively, through their preoccupations and concepts of affectivity. I meticulously reconstruct these themes and constructs, determining each school's essential character while embedding them in their respective currents—New Materialism and Frankfurt School Critical Theory.

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