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Philosophical Aspects of Form

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EDITOR'S NOTE

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Wild Mood Swings, 2009-2010 © Tim Noble & Sue Webster. Images courtesy of the artists.

- ¹ On 17 and 18 January, Professor Claudine Tiercelin, Chair of Metaphysics and Philosophy of Knowledge, organized a seminar on philosophical aspects of the

concept of form, a concept which has given rise to many questions since at least as early as the opposition between Plato's *eidos* and Aristotle's *morphe*.

- 2 Whether form is understood as separate from worldly beings or as immanent to substance, it is traditionally distinguished from matter by philosophers. And just as the sciences do not easily lend themselves to the singular, so too is matter ill-suited to discourse and theory. Hence, most of the time, form bears the bulk of the theoretical load: it must account for the ideality of essences, the reality of properties, the unity of substance, individuation, and the unification of the diversity of perception, without forgetting the rigour of demonstrations and the beauty of appearances. The seminar was devoted to clarifying these problems, in their metaphysical and scientific dimensions – questioning the relevance of the concept of form in biology, the role of dispositions in contemporary physics, the power of mathematical and logical formalism or the scope of Aristotelian hylomorphism – and to tracing the phenomenality of form from its roots in *Gestaltpsychologie* to cognitive science and aesthetic perception. Do self-organization and complexity render the idea of form obsolete? Are forms in the world structures, dispositions? What constitutes the strength of a line of reasoning which seems evident to us solely by virtue of its formalism? What does it mean to (re)cognize a form, to appreciate it, to find it beautiful? Does form have precedence over content? Does it play a role in structuring our experience?
- 3 After Claudine Tiercelin opened the seminar, Jean-Marie Chevalier (Collège de France) considered the extent to which logic affords an intellection of the world by virtue of a homology of logical and metaphysical forms. Amirouche Moktefi (IRIST) then explained how and why many formal languages elaborated throughout the nineteenth century were subsequently gradually abandoned. Benoit Gaultier (Collège de France) presented and discussed Peirce and Wittgenstein's theory that any mathematical demonstration necessarily has an iconic dimension. Sandrine Darsel (AHP Nancy) ended the first afternoon of the seminar by discussing the need to grasp such a thing as a musical form in order to understand adequately a piece of music. The next morning was devoted to the metaphysics and philosophy of science, with presentations by Michael Esfeld (Université de Lausanne), who rigorously defended the idea that the laws of nature are its form, and Anouk Barberousse (Université de Lille 1), who considered the richness of the concept of organic form in biology, particularly through d'Arcy Thompson's and Stuart Kauffman's perspectives. The seminar resumed for a second afternoon with Alain de Libera's paper (EPHE), devoted to the important distinction between assistant and inherent forms in the work of medieval philosophers and theologians. Guillaume Fréchette (Université de Salzbourg) then defended the existence of an Austrian phenomenological tradition, exemplified by Ehrenfels and Meinong in particular, which holds the nature of the qualities of form as one of its key concerns. Jérôme Dokic (EHESS) closed this second day by identifying the properties thanks to which, in perception, a form is meaningful from a cognitive point of view and can therefore be called a "good form".
- 4 The seminar *Philosophical Aspects of Form* should thus have enabled the Collège de France's audience to become familiar with current research on these particularly stimulating issues. This is especially true for students preparing their *agrégation* in philosophy, since form was precisely one of the topics of the 2013 examination.

Videos of papers delivered at the seminar are available on www.college-de-france.fr, on the professor's page.

AUTHORS

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Metaphysics and Philosophy of Knowledge