



# Notre Dame Happiness, Virtue & the Meaning of Life Conference

## PROGRAM

Institute for Ethics & Society  
 University of Notre Dame Australia, Sydney  
 Friday 25 August 2017

10.00	Welcome: Prof Sandra Lynch (Director, Institute for Ethics & Society)
10.15	Melissa Merritt (UNSW) <b>Does Kant Countenance Clear-eyed Weakness of Will?</b>
<b>11.15 Tea</b>	
11.30	Catriona Mackenzie (Macquarie) <b>TBC</b>
<b>12.30 Lunch</b>	
1.30	Rick Benitez (Sydney) <b>Aristotle's Fine-Grained Virtues</b>
<b>2.30 Tea</b>	
2.45	Moira Gatens (Sydney) <b>Spinoza, Shelley and the Exemplar</b>
3.45	<i>Keynote &amp; Response</i> Candace Vogler (Chicago) <b>Aquinas on Virtue</b>
5.00	Closing Remarks & thanks: Prof Sandra Lynch
6.00	Dinner – Speakers, Notre Dame IES staff, and invited guests



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## ABSTRACTS

### Melissa Merritt, **Does Kant Countenance Clear-eyed Weakness of Will?**

Senior Lecturer in philosophy, UNSW

It is widely assumed that weakness of will (*akrasia*) features prominently in any Kantian account of moral life, by describing what ordinary human badness amounts to. Kantians themselves widely assume that it is easy to know what morality requires of us, but difficult to act from this knowledge. I argue that these assumptions rest on a faulty understanding of Kant's conception of practical reason, and that Kant does not countenance clear-eyed weakness of will. Ordinary human badness stems from a kind of cognitive weakness in judgment and perception in his view.

### Catriona Mackenzie, **TBC**

Professor of philosophy, Director of the Centre for Agency, Values & Ethics (CAVE) Macquarie University

### Rick Benitez, **Aristotle's Fine-Grained Virtues**

Professor of philosophy, University of Sydney

This talk begins by sketching a view of moral excellence as comprised of fine-grained virtues. On this view, while general moral goodness lies in a range between extremes, true excellence is highly refined and specific. It is situation-responsive, flexible, and characterisable not just by the kind of action performed, but the manner of performance. It will be argued that Aristotle's theory of moral excellence is expressed initially in a general way so as to help people hit the right target. Beyond that, however, there are indications that Aristotle considers moral development as directed towards the acquisition of fine-grained virtues. At the limit of this development, talk of a mean between extremes is less satisfactory than the formula of action "to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right aim, and in the right way." The talk will close with some observations about the role of fine-grained virtue in a theory of law, with reference to Aquinas' distinction between Natural Law and Human Law.

### Moira Gatens, **Spinoza, Shelley and the Exemplar**

Challis Professor of Philosophy, University of Sydney

Although many have denied that Spinoza's philosophy can accommodate aesthetics, I argue that his approach to Art must be understood in the broadest sense as the art of living (*ars vivendi*). Part of the art of living, as Spinoza says in the *Ethics*, is to nourish oneself with good food, theatre, and music. In addition, we should cultivate the virtues of tenacity and nobility. He offers various exemplary figures that we may emulate or eschew (the free man, the fool, Jesus Christ) in our quest for freedom and an honourable life. P. B and Mary Shelley were influenced by Spinoza's philosophy and were translating his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* around the same time as writing on the theme of Prometheus. I shall argue that Shelley's novel *Frankenstein, Or, The Modern Prometheus*, may be read as engaging Spinozistic themes of the bondage of the passions, the contagion of affect, and the problematic gap between human normative life and the rest of nature. Moreover, like Spinoza's exemplars, Shelley's portrayal of Prometheus is meant to provide a salutary lesson.

### Candace Vogler, **Aquinas on Virtue**

David B. and Clara E. Stern Professor of Philosophy and Professor in the College, University of Chicago, and Principal Investigator on the John Templeton Project *Virtue, Happiness, and the Meaning of Life*.

The virtue theorist we have used to guide our work in the Templeton project *Virtue, Happiness, & the Meaning of Life* is Thomas Aquinas. I give a sketch of Aquinas's understanding of the nature of virtue and its role in human life, stressing some of the advantages Aquinas's account has over Aristotle's and touching on such matters as the distinction between acquired and infused virtues, the essentially corrective character of virtue on Aquinas's account, and some ways in which his undeniably *theological* account might nevertheless be useful for non-theistic moral philosophers.