NEWSLETTER ON PHILOSOPHY AND COMPUTERS

FROM THE CHAIR, MARVIN CROY

ARTICLE

SUSAN A. J. STUART
“E-CAP06 Conference Report for IACAP”
FROM THE CHAIR

Since my previous Newsletter message, two Divisional meetings of the APA have occurred. At the most recent Pacific Division meeting, Committee member Branden Fitelson (University of California–Berkeley) conducted a session he’d organized on blogging for professional and research purposes. In addition, the Committee awarded the 2005 Barwise Prize to Hubert Dreyfus. Following an introduction by Chris Grau (Florida International University), Professor Dreyfus provided a stimulating presentation concerning his work on phenomenology and its relevance for artificial intelligence research. (Photo shows Saul Traiger, Marvin Croy, Hubert Dreyfus, Chris Grau, and Harriet Baber.) At the Central Division meeting in Chicago, no Committee sessions took place, but some Committee members attended a session on open source software organized by Tom Wren (Loyola University) and sponsored by the International Association for Computing and Philosophy (IACAP).

At the Pacific Division meeting, I attended a lunch sponsored by the Board. All committee chairs were invited, and some attended or sent a representative. Particularly for “special” committees, none of whose chairs have a seat on the Board, these lunches provide an additional opportunity to communicate directly with Board members. There was some discussion of various committee projects and of an effort to increase the funding for committees.

In my previous Newsletter message, I reported on a change in IT personnel at the APA. A new IT support person had just been hired and I spoke with her at the Eastern meeting concerning the Committee’s main project of collecting and disseminating information concerning computer use within the profession. Unfortunately, the personnel for this position is once again undergoing change. Nevertheless, efforts to implement this design will be continued, and hopefully a fruitful discussion of the Committee’s goals can occur with the APA’s new executive director, David Schrader.

The 2006 Eastern Division meeting in Washington, D.C., is shaping up to be an important one for the PAC committee. Recently, the Committee voted to award the 2006 Barwise Prize to Jim Moor of Dartmouth College, and that award ceremony, including a presentation by Professor Moor and a reception, will occur at the Eastern Division meeting. In addition, Chris Grau has put together a session on Robot Ethics, which promises to be stimulating and informative. Also, IACAP is sponsoring a follow-up session on the many ethical issues associated with the development of open source software.

Changes in the Committee’s composition are underway. As I write this, today is the first day of service for three new Committee members: Harriet Baber (University of San Diego), Jerry Kapus (University of Wisconsin–Stout), and Amy White (Ohio University). Their contributions to existing projects or to establishing new projects are most welcome. Three Committee members are simultaneously ending their committee service: Mark Manion (Drexel University), David Stern (University of Iowa), and Bruce Umbaugh (Webster University). The Committee appreciates their efforts on a number of activities over the past three years.

Finally, my term as chair of this committee ends June 30, 2007. The APA Committee on Committees has named Michael Byron of Kent State University to be the next PAC committee chair. Michael will initially serve as “associate chair” for one year starting July 1, 2006. Michael is an excellent choice, and I look forward to working with him to facilitate this transition and to maintain momentum on Committee projects.

That’s all for now. Let me know if you have questions, concerns, or suggestions related to PAC committee activities.

Marvin Croy

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E-CAP06 Conference Report for IACAP

Susan A. J. Stuart
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The Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU–Trondheim was the location for our fourth European Computing and Philosophy conference (E-CAP06). The hosts, from the Department of Philosophy, were Charles Ess and May Thorseth,
who acted as the conference co-chairs; Johnny Soraker, the Local Organizer; and Sissel Svenning, an administrative assistant at NTNU, who took care of registration and financial questions. In addition, there was an international program committee that assisted in the consideration of conference submissions and the final selection of the many excellent papers with which we engaged over the three days.

The conference opened with words of welcome from May and Charles, and then a more formal welcome was given by the NTNU Rector, Torbjørn Digernes. Torbjørn admitted that he had felt some initial difficulty conceiving of a relationship between philosophy and computing but had been reassured by the richly interdisciplinary nature of the final program, and then had been delighted by the truly international gathering which had come from twenty different nations; at least two of these, Australia and China, cannot really be thought to be in Europe, though they may well be thought to be European.

The setting was remarkable, on hills to the south-east of the city, with marvelous views of the surrounding wonderfully verdant countryside and out into one of the myriad deep fjords that characterize Norway’s dramatic coast and coastal inlet system. The city itself is a very successful amalgam of medieval and contemporary, and—redolent of the relationship between philosophy and computing and the computational turn which the former has undergone and through which it is finding regeneration—the medieval has undergone a contemporary turn with a reciprocal relation of complement and enhancement.

The reciprocal influence of the long-established, that is, philosophy, with the modern, computing science, was carried over into the first keynote address, which was given by Ray Turner from the University of Essex. His talk was entitled The Philosophy of Theoretical Computing Science and in it he attempted to identify the significant questions that might be inspired by theoretical computing science as a discipline, and also to examine how computing scientists handle computational artefacts using models. One of Turner’s main points was that the interesting philosophical questions arise from the construction and application of such models, so it is important to understand what models we have developed and why, but even more important to have a thorough understanding of the ontological status of the model and what it is we are modeling. It was a splendid start to the conference, and not least because of the lively realist/anti-realist debates that ensued about the semantics of programs and programming languages.

Over the years, with the innovative intellectual work of Luciano Floridi, the International Association of Computing and Philosophy (IACAP) has brought the Philosophy of Information in the central forum of the academy; with Ray’s address and the track that led on from it, with papers from some of the foremost scholars in this field, we have also been able to formally introduce the Philosophy of Computing Science to the academy. A great deal of credit must be given to Amnon H. Eden (University of Essex) for his efforts and foresight in establishing a very strong track in this now flourishing new field. His hard work brought people together to discuss, first and foremost, what the philosophy of computing science might be (Timothy Colburn, Gordana Dodig-Crnkovic, Tom Maibaum), whether computing science is a science (Shai Ophir, Richard Bornat), the problems of software ontology (Lars-Erik Janlert, Amnon Eden, Ray Turner, Tom Maibaum, Alton Sanders, Konstantine Arkoudas, and Selmer Bringsjord), and related questions of representation and teleology (Curtis Brown). The parallel nature of many sessions, alongside chairing commitments, meant that it was possible to attend only some of these sessions, but, by all reports, the discussion that was generated was energetic and very exacting. Our great thanks must be extended to Amnon; it is certainly our intention to continue this track in ECAP07.

The ontology theme was carried on in another of the first day parallel sessions, though this time specifically in relation to information, artefacts, and science. There were five papers in this track, but I’ll mention only two that address fundamental or classic issues. Sándor Soós concentrated on a fundamental difficulty, the Species Problem—the failure to construct a sufficient theoretical definition of species—and the application to it of the toolkit of formal ontology; and Luciano Floridi addressed the classic question of whether the ultimate nature of reality is digital or analog by presenting a challenging thought experiment to argue that either the original dichotomy is misapplied, or that if it persists, it presents counterintuitive consequences. Thus, the conclusion for Floridi has to be that the most coherent conclusion is to go with Information Structuralism.

The third track running alongside these sessions, Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Problem of Consciousness and Cognition, was opened with an invigorating talk by Mark Bickhard for the claim that representation in complex systems is emergent and going on to present a manner in which the hard problem of qualia can be released from its ontological circle. Splendid stuff, but far too exciting for one short session. Cem Bozshahin followed with, as he said, “yet another paper against Searle’s Chinese Room,” but this time concentrating on the claim that generative grammars are mediators from phonological and logical form to meaning and that Searle’s argument is linguistically inadequate. Computationalism, as a theme, was at the heart of the next three papers with Anna-Mari Rusanen and Otto Lappi, who spoke of the inadequacy of the causal model (explanans) to explain neural phenomena (explanandum) because, even though it may account for implementation, it fails to account for competence and performance; Jonathan Knowles, who examined the problems with Fodor’s computational theory of mind; and Marcello Guarini’s paper, again on Fodor but this time in relation to moral case classifiers—which, because of his absence, was presented at a furious pace by Selmer Bringsjord.

Such an exceptional first day was rounded off by dinner at the Dickens restaurant, followed by a Trondheim walkabout led by Charles Ess to some of the places he and Johnny most enjoy.

Day two began with the second keynote speaker, Lucas Introna from the University of Lancaster (shown in photo below), who spoke on the question of the morality of technology in a paper entitled Maintaining the Reversibility of Foldings: Making the Ethics (politics) of Information Technology Visible. Echoing the phrase coined by Jim Moor, he stated that technology creates “policy vacuums” and emphasized that the
It is characteristic of CAP conferences that they provide a forum for the liminal, the innovative and exciting work being done on the borders of disciplines, which often, though not always, wish to remain constrained by their disciplinary boundaries. It is also characteristic of CAP that it provides an atmosphere of generosity and inclusiveness. If these things are true, then ECAP 2006 in Trondheim has been the epitome of a CAP conference. There can be no doubt that when we were promised magnificence of setting, presentations, and collaboration, they were not false promises.

ECAP07 will take place at the University of Twente, The Netherlands, with Philip Brey as the conference chair. The final dates have yet to be settled.