

Meeting report: fourth ISHPSSB off-year workshop

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Received: 12 November 2010 / Accepted: 16 November 2010 / Published online: 22 December 2010
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In a lecture at Berkeley, John Dewey (1899, 129) declared that

Philosophy may not be sacrificed to the partial and superficial clamor of that which sometimes officiously and pretentiously exhibits itself as Science. But there is a sense in which philosophy must go to school to the sciences; must have no data save such as it receives at their hands; and be hospitable to no method of inquiry or reflection not akin to those in daily use among the sciences.

Philosophers who specialize in the ways and workings of science have frequently heeded Dewey's advice, engaging in myriad ways with the natural, social, and historical sciences. However, too often the products of history and science become 'mere data' for philosophers, producing a loveless "marriage of convenience" (Kuhn 1977; Burian 1977).

For the fourth biennial ISHPSSB off-year workshop, "Integrating Complexity: Environment and History" (ICEH), we tried to recapture the spirit of Dewey's time, when historians, philosophers, anthropologists, biologists, and psychologists together discussed the problems of life, mind, morality, development, and evolution. We chose as our main workshop theme "integrating complexity"—just as organisms are complex integrations of diverse parts, the workshop was to be a coming together of researchers from many different fields to address challenging conceptual and methodological questions. Thus, the 2010 workshop continued the ISHPSSB off-year tradition of "future directions in biology studies" by placing a bet: whatever their precise direction, such studies will tend to be more and more interdisciplinary.

The workshop was sponsored by the Rotman Institute of Philosophy, the Department of Philosophy, and the Department of History at the University of

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Western Ontario (UWO), as well as by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. It was organized, under the guidance of Gillian Barker, by a committee of faculty members, postdoctoral fellows, and graduate students working in the Rotman Institute at UWO. Our fundraising enabled us to invite a wonderful lineup of plenary speakers from many disciplines: History, Anthropology, Philosophy, Psychology, Economics, and Engineering. Moreover, all participants attended interdisciplinary panels, one each day, on (1) human immunology, (2) the causes of evolution, (3) evolutionary developmental biology, and (4) historical sciences. About a third of these panelists were working biologists.

The conference kicked off with two lectures about Charles Darwin, a man who is hard to avoid at such events. Robert Richards argued that Darwin thought of natural selection as a process suffused with intention and purpose, while Frank Egerton reviewed some of the important ecological discoveries of Darwin's famous voyage on the *Beagle*. Highlights of subsequent days included Emily Schultz's historical survey of ecological and environmental anthropology; Harry Heft's discussion of Edwin Holt, Roger Barker, and studies of organism-environment interaction in psychology; and George Smith's demonstration that there are deep analogies between (a) the process of failure analysis in engineering and (b) the reconstruction of the past in the historical sciences. The final speaker was Elliott Sober, who argued that although it is often possible to infer whether common ancestry is more likely than separate ancestry given present traits, our information about the past is always decreasing.

As with past ISHPSSB off-year workshops, one of our primary goals was to include graduate students and other younger scholars. This was achieved by daily parallel breakout sessions, inspired by those at the 2006 off-year workshop at Indiana University, Bloomington. Speakers presented on topics ranging from Lamarck and Buffon to niche construction and model organisms, with 15-min talks followed by 20 min of discussion. For example, Peter Gildenhuis presented a variety of extended population genetics models that are able to capture different aspects of organism-environment interaction; and Jessica Bolker drew a helpful distinction between 'exemplary' and 'surrogate' model organisms, i.e., those that exemplify a group and those that stand in for another organism.

Last but not least, we held the traditional 'happy office hours' each evening before dinner—this is a time in which graduate students have a chance to have a drink and converse with junior and senior faculty from a variety of institutions and disciplines. These animated discussions usually continued into dinner and beyond, facilitated by the fact that almost all workshop participants stayed on site at the Spencer Ivey Leadership Centre.

Thus the fourth biennial ISHPSSB off-year workshop was a resounding success, providing the ideal environment for a discussion of complex biological issues from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. We should try to foster more such interdisciplinary events; for as Dewey (1898, 339) saw so clearly, we must not only adapt to current conditions, but also seek out and create new conditions and possibilities: change almost always stems from the "discovery and constitution of new environments."