

Western E-vent in Early Modern Philosophy: A Description of its Blended Format (Prepared for Philosophers for Sustainability)

Dr. Benjamin Hill

Background

This outlines the format to be used for an early modern philosophy e-conference being organized by Benjamin Hill (Western) in response to the numerous conference and workshop cancellations in Spring 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The ideas and principles behind it apply to e-conferences generally and can be considered when organizing e-conferences as a response to climate change. This e-conference is being run in part as a test event for [Philosophers for Sustainability](#). Another white paper, post-event, prepared again for Philosophers for Sustainability will discuss the planning and execution as well as lessons learned in more detail.

The E-vent Format Overview

Because this e-conference draws papers from a variety of conferences, which had different formats and session lengths, it was decided to use a blended, asynchronous—synchronous format that focused on pre-reading, Q&A for the synchronous component, and archiving content.

- Pre-event (Bepress Digital Commons)
 - Papers + 5 min highlights video (see appendix) are publicly available.
 - Comments + 2 min highlights video (see appendix) are publicly available.
 - Public can submit questions and comments on the session webpage.
- The Event (Zoom, recorded)
 - 7-minuet highlights videos are played
 - Author offers a 5 min response to the prepared commentary
 - 40 minuets of Q&A
 - Pre-submitted questions
 - Questions submitted via Zoom chat function
 - Questions offered by audience members “raising their hand”
 - Informal Discussions between Sessions (Coffee Break sessions)
 - Breakout rooms with a moderator to facilitate informal discussion centered around a topic or question of common interest
- Post-event (Bepress Digital Commons)
 - Authors permitted to respond to all questions and comments in writing or video
 - Text-searchable PDF (with key terms) of all materials archived
 - Video of each session archived
 - Transcripts of each session archived
 - Open access to all conference materials provided

Rationale

A blended, asynchronous—synchronous format was chosen because of its flexibility, but not only because of its flexibility. I believe that it is a poor use of people’s time to passively

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watch someone reading a prepared paper and that the synchronous session should be devoted as much as possible to moderated, community interaction. Hence the idea of making papers available for pre-reading and allowing for the pre-event submission of questions from the public.

The highlights videos are a solution to the anticipated problem of audience members not pre-reading papers. The aim of the videos is to provide a condensed overview and outline of the paper and the commentator's critiques. Authors can simply talk through their papers or can make use of resources to present their materials in video format. See the appendix for additional details about the highlights videos and some examples. The videos will be played at the beginning of each session. Audience members who did not pre-read the papers can have enough of an overview to follow the Q&A and audience members who did pre-read the papers can enjoy a brief reminder of each just before the Q&A. The videos also allow some people to take a bit longer of a break between sessions, if they wish.

The informal discussion sessions allow for spontaneous interactions between participants and for the possibility of an extended break for participants wishing to skip them. The offered topic or question is there to provide some focus and structure to the breakout session. Topics which I am considering include:

- Why is it important that philosophers study the history of philosophy (is it?) and why should we continue to teach it? Why should programs continue to have history of philosophy courses as degree requirements?
- Do students struggle with or resist Spinoza's geometric style of exposition, and if so how do you get them past it?
- What skills and capacities do you think the next generation of early modern historians of philosophy most need to advance the field?
- Do you talk about race and colonialism when teaching 18th century philosophy, and if so how do you approach it?
- How can a graduate specialization in the history of early modern philosophy be effectively presented when applying for non-academic employment?

I am avoiding conversations about interpretations and steering the discussion to teaching and mentoring or professional issues.

The asynchronous format allows us to continue presenting content even after the event occurs. (People who "follow" the sessions can receive notifications when contents are added or updated.) I consider the possibility for more extensive and reflective engagement with the questions and comments an added value to the e-conference format. By offering authors the opportunity to respond to questions and comments in writing after the event, authors can be more fulsome and even include references and links and

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audience members can benefit from more considered answers as well as answers to questions that there was not sufficient time to address in the synchronous Q&A.

It is important to me that the event be properly archived and made openly accessible. To my mind, one of the most significant disadvantages of traditional conference formats are their spatial and temporal limitations, which constrain the reach, utility, and significance of the knowledge transfer. As a historian and scholar, I am especially sensitive to the importance of maintaining a record documenting these important contributions to scholarship and the ongoing philosophical discussions that collectively constitute philosophy. (Who wouldn't want a record and transcript of Locke's famous meeting with five or six friends in his chambers "discoursing on a Subj'ct very remote from" the *Essay* that started Locke on his epistemological project?) I would not want to expend the kinds of efforts needed to organize an e-conference unless the materials were to be properly archived for posterity. Making them openly available is also personally and professionally important to me. In part, this is an issue of fairness or justice: knowledge should not be housed behind paywalls or restricted to subscriber and account holders. I believe that all people regardless of personal or professional employment, institutional location or affiliation, or personal circumstances should have access to the materials. This is also an issue of convenience: some people have obligations that do not permit them to participate in the synchronous sessions and yet wish to benefit from, or even be involved in the event. Even if a person were not able to attend the synchronous session, she could submit a question ahead of time, review the video or transcript to see how it was addressed in the synchronous session, and even review the author's post-event answers for more a more detailed response. Expanding participation thus is an important desideratum for me. I also believe that making transcriptions available, editing the video to include close captioning and bookmarking, and adding key terms to the sessions will also increase the visibility and utility of the material for authors and users alike. Making these materials openly accessible is how I can best facilitate all that.

Technology

The conference website and archiving is being hosted by [Western Libraries](#) in their Bepress Digital Commons repository entitled [Scholarship@Western](#). This is a service provided by Western Libraries, whom I am very thankful to work with on this.

I intend to use Zoom meetings for the synchronous sessions because of its ease and ubiquity. I do not believe the event needs to be presented as a webinar and I do not expect to exceed the number of attendees Western's Zoom license permits, so I do not anticipate added costs for using Zoom. I am sensitive to the security issues that have recently been brought forward regarding Zoom and appropriate security protocols will be put into place for the sessions. Balancing the desire for an open, accessible event with the security necessary to avoid zoombombers, trolls, and academic bullies is my primary goal. I intend to require pre-registration and a password to access the sessions, but not restrict the

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session to authenticated profiles. A staff member (graduate student) whose role is dedicated to monitoring and moderating professional behavior during the sessions will be assigned. He will control participants' mute buttons and remove disruptive participants. No issues are expected, and it is hoped that none occur, but we will be prepared in case any do so.

At this time, no decision has been made regarding video/audio editing and transcription software. The [OpenShot Video Editor](#) (open-source) has been used to edit the sample highlights video and is our current leading candidate to edit the videos for the conference. I have not yet compared [Zoom automatic transcriptions](#) with [Otter.ai](#) integrated with Zoom, but that will be our first exploration. I'm not sure about being able to offer live close captioning during the Zoom sessions, but it will be investigated. A staff member (high school student volunteer) is my tech support person, who will be doing the video/audio editing, managing the transcriptions, and compiling the pdfs of the text material. These matters will be discussed more fully in the white paper (in preparation) associated with this e-conference that will be released after the event.

Budget and In-Kind Support

Budget: I have no budget for this event. None has been requested, given the short timeframe for bringing it together. At this point, the only anticipated expenses are for [Otter.ai premium](#) (USD\$9.99 monthly or USD\$8.33/month paid annually, not include the 50% educational discount) and small thank-you gifts for the two staff members (CAD\$200). I will pay these expenses out of my own pocket.

Personnel:

Host and Session Moderator: Graduate student provided by [Western Philosophy](#) as part of its Summer Graduate Research Assistant program. 40 hours of labor as in-kind support. Duties will include introducing synchronous sessions, moderating the chat and asking questions submitted via chat and prior to the event, controlling audience microphones and screensharing, removing unruly participants, etc. The GRA will also be charged with running the pre-vent "test session" for participants. The GRA will also be charged with compiling the questions/comments submitted by the public pre-event for each session.

Technology Support Volunteer: High school student volunteer interested in learning more about technologies and website building. Duties include uploading materials and information to the Bepress Digital Commons website, video/audio editing, managing the transcription services, and creating pdfs and posting them to the website.

Bepress Digital Commons Website: Access to Bepress and their Digital Commons is provided by [Western Libraries](#) as part of their scholarly mission and all costs are covered by their subscription. This includes the website design, the archiving of materials, and the server space.

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Zoom: The use of Zoom will be covered by [Western University's](#) institutional license.

E-Poster Presentations Add-on

At this point, I have not yet decided whether to offer this option simply because I am not sure I want to take on the additional work of soliciting and organizing such presentations. These would be solicited via a call for submissions and vetted only by me. The poster-style format seems to me to be ideally suited to graduate students and new PhDs showcasing their thesis research or for researchers to provide updates on research, editing, or translation projects. It is a lower-stakes form of participation that can nonetheless yield some visibility for scholars entering the field.

- 5-slide (7 min max) Recorded PowerPoint Slideshow (presented asynchronously)

These would be made available pre-event and the public would be encouraged to view and leave questions and comments. Whether there is a synchronous session, and how it is handled, would depend on the number of submissions. If there are a substantial number of submissions, there would be no synchronous session during the conference. Options for synchronous sessions might include:

1. Simply screen the PowerPoints as videos during a breakout session (4 posters = 30 min) with no possibility to engage authors
2. Open several contemporaneous breakout rooms where audience members can engage with 2-4 authors for unmoderated questions and discussions
3. Allow authors a set number of minutes during a session to address questions and comments submitted by the public prior to the event with no opportunity for additional Q&A

I am uncomfortable with the idea of having a session where the audience is allowed to have a Q&A with a group of e-poster authors because worry about unequal amounts of time and attention being distributed among the e-posters, even when the group is limited as in option 2 above; I do not wish to have someone committing to participating and feeling that they or their work were slighted or overshadowed in a session by another's. Worse would be to have single-author breakout rooms and no one showing up to discuss someone's e-poster presentation. Since this is a new format and I am unaware of past experience to guide judgments about how to expect the dynamics of these e-poster sessions to go, I am cautious about how to set up a synchronous session for e-poster presentations.

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Appendix 1

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Highlights Video Guide

The text below was distributed to participants to provide some guidance regarding the highlights videos and simple ways of creating them. Examples are hyperlinked in the text.

Because not every audience member will pre-read all the papers, each session will begin with a video presenting the highlights for the paper and its commentary. Authors will have 5 minutes to convey the main ideas and an overview of the paper; commentators will have 2 minutes to recap their main lines of questioning and critical engagement with the papers. I know it's not much time and there is no way it can take the place of reading the papers, but it will hopefully be enough to orient people to the discussion and Q&A. Advice and good practices from the Three Minute Thesis competitions ([available here](#)) might be helpful to you.

Below are some suggestions for how to present and record your highlights in a video format. Please see the video [linked here \(8:13\)](#) for additional discussion and a sample of what a highlights video can look like.

You can record your highlights presentation using any program you are most comfortable with. Below are two options.

Zoom is pretty easy. Simply begin a meeting in your personal Zoom room and start recording. You can share your screen to display a PowerPoint slideshow or a Word document or PDF that contains your highlights. You can use the annotation tools within Zoom's dashboard or within any of the programs, if you want. Zoom will automatically convert the recording to a MP4 file when you end the meeting. [Here is a simple example \(5:24\)](#) from Benjamin Formanek (Western), which is without any screen sharing, editing, or branding.

PowerPoint is also easy. Simply use the "Record Slideshow" feature to add video commentary and then save the completed slideshow as a MP4 file. You can use the annotation tools in PowerPoint as you record your video commentary, if you wish. [Here is an example \(6:04\)](#) I did of paper on race and colonialism in Locke. It was not edited.

There is no need to edit your videos, unless you want to. Because the videos should be too big to email, simply put them into a folder on your favorite cloud-based storage program and invite me to share the folder. I would be happy to share a cloud-based folder with you so that you can upload them into it if you prefer that. I will then put the videos on the conference website and make them available to the public.