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Aesthetic Reference

Description
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Disciplines
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Comments
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Aesthetic Reference

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Abstract:
There are interpretive, pragmatic, and axiological aspects that are inherent and ineliminable in artistic representation and reference. Recognizing this, and acknowledging that these aspects apply to linguistic reference, as well, might be fruitful for philosophers of language to pursue in their analysis of linguistic reference.

I would like to begin with a few disclaimers. First, this paper is primarily exploratory, rather than explanatory. That is, my goal is to suggest what I hope and believe are some fruitful connections between concerns in the philosophy of art and in the philosophy of language with respect to the issue of reference. As a result, in this paper I will less be arguing for a particular thesis and will more be pondering the nature and worth of certain questions and approaches to understanding reference. My second disclaimer is that, given my somewhat peripatetic goal, I will not be drawing upon, or even really commenting on, the latest thoughts of those who are considered to be today’s “big guns” on the issue of reference: David Kaplan, Scott Soames, Jeff King, etc. Instead, I will audaciously offer some remarks on reference and referring from the perspective of an outsider. I hope this exercise in audacity will prove to be splendid and not ridiculous.

The sorts of questions I will be asking are: Can work in the philosophy of art help to elucidate issues about reference (and, if so, how)? Does or can asking the question, “How does a picture refer?” or “How does a musical phrase refer?” shed any light on “How does a word or name refer?” That is, how, if at all, can non-linguistic reference shed any light on linguistic reference? In addition, how does or can one refer with a work of art (or some aspect of an artwork); how can or does one refer in a work of art? Can a work of art (or some aspect of an artwork) mis-refer (and, if so, how)? Likewise, can an artist mis-refer?
1. ART

I will begin with a particular example of a work of art. The example involves a statue – actually, a proposed statue – that was commissioned to honor the New York City firefighters following the events of 9/11. During the events of that day, a photojournalist, Tom Franklin, took a photograph (Figure 1 below) of three firefighters raising a flag at Ground Zero.

![Figure 1.](Image)


The three firefighters were Dan McWilliams, George Johnson, and Billy Eisengrein; all three were white males. After seeing this photograph, Bruce Ratner, president of a New York City real estate management company, wanted to memorialize the heroism and meaning of that day by commissioning an honorific bronze statue. Ratner consulted with various fire department officials and with Ivan Schwartz (president of StudioEIS, in Brooklyn). Collectively they decided to pay homage to the firefighters and rescue workers of the day and decided to “employ artistic license” and create a commemorative statue that depicted three generic firefighters, one with what were believed to be characteristically white facial features, one with black facial features, and one with Hispanic facial features. A clay model of the statue (Figure 2 next page) was unveiled in December 2001 and was met with immediate criticism.
Some people claimed that this was an act of political correctness. The photograph, they said, was of a real event and the proposed statue was a betrayal of and insult to the three individuals who were originally photographed. Those who defended the proposed statue claimed that the statue was not meant to be a three-dimensional photograph; it was meant to be a symbolic statement honoring not only the three specific firefighters, but also all those who engaged in the acts of heroism that day. Yet others claimed that it wasn’t even only about acts of heroism that day, but rather about honoring heroism generally or sacrifice or the American spirit. (Because of the uproar, the full statue – as opposed to the clay model that was unveiled – was never made.)

What does this case have to do with reference? Beginning with the initial photograph, it seems obvious that many people took that photograph to be about three particular individuals. It seems quite reasonable to say that these people took the photograph to pictorially refer to those three particular individuals. If this is so, two questions immediately arise: first, how did this photograph refer, and, second, in virtue of what did it refer? By asking “how did this photograph refer” I mean what is it about the photograph that referred to those individuals? By asking “in virtue of what did the
photograph refer” I mean what is it in the photograph that referred to those individuals?

So: how did the photograph refer to those individuals? One way of answering this question is to say that the photograph represents those individuals. It represents them via depicting them. Of course, not all representations are depictions. (Indeed, many philosophers of art have noted this connection between representation and depiction and have written volumes on the nature of their interconnections.) For example, as Catherine Elgin has pointed out, a Monday-morning quarterback can use a coffee mug or a salt shaker to represent the players of a team while recounting some noteworthy play from yesterday’s big game. However, a coffee mug does not depict a football player. So, we might want to claim that the photograph refers to those three individuals because it depicts them.

However, as opposed to the coffee mugs or salt shakers, we want to say that the photograph depicts them because there is a resemblance between the images on the photograph and the individuals depicted; it looks like them! This leads to another way of stating an answer and that is to say that the photograph involved an indexical signification. That is, following the terminology of Charles Peirce, an index is a sign that represents via a causal connection between the signifier and the object signified. For instance, a scar is a sign of a wound not because a scar looks like a wound, but rather because there is a direct causal relation between them. Likewise, smoke is a sign of fire and a weather vane is a sign of wind direction. Because a photograph results from a physical, causal process, this photograph refers to those particular individuals via a causal connection. The images on the photograph look like those individuals – and, hence, refer to them – because of a causal connection to them. Back to our question, then: how did this photograph refer to those individuals (assuming that it did refer)? Well, it depicted them and did so via a causal chain. Of course, at the phenomenological level, it was the aspect of looking like them that mattered to those who saw special value and merit in the photograph as opposed to the clay model statue.

Regardless of what it was about the photograph that referred (that is, whether is was via images looking like their subjects or being causally connected to them), there is the related question of what was it in the photograph that referred? Was it a collection and configuration of pixels that constituted the reference (or, for that matter, that
constituted the depiction)? We are tempted to ask – at least, I am tempted to ask – what else could it have been? Had this been a dance rather than a photograph, the reference (or, at least representation) would have been via a collection and configuration of movements rather than pixels; had it been a musical composition, the reference (or, at least representation) would have been via a collection and configuration of sounds. We will come back to this issue later.

First, some more remarks on depiction and reference. In spite of the numerous cases of people claiming to see the Virgin Mary in pizza slices, grilled cheese sandwiches, oil slicks, and even on potatoes, depiction cannot, in itself, be sufficient for reference. As Hilary Putnam noted, if an ant crawling across the sand traced out a particular pattern that we was a recognizable caricature of Winston Churchill (or, perhaps, a pattern of lines that appeared as the graphemes for the name “Winston Churchill”), we would not take such a depiction as referring to Churchill. Nor, for Putnam, is the missing element that of intention. As he remarked, to have the intention that anything should represent Churchill, a subject must be able to think about Churchill. Lines in the sand, noises, etc. cannot in themselves represent or refer. So, just as depiction is not sufficient for reference to occur, so, too, depiction is not necessary for reference to occur. Nonetheless, as is seen by the sensitivity concerning the firefighter photograph, there is pictorial reference and depiction is how this is accomplished. We will return to this point later.

Now, with respect to the clay model, to what, if anything, did it refer? For its critics, it did not refer to the three individuals. (Minimally, it did not refer only to those three particular individuals.) For its supporters, what it referred to varied. That is, for some supporters it referred to those three individuals along with other individuals (i.e., to all of the 9/11 rescue workers), while to other supporters it referred to something more abstract, such as heroes or acts of heroism or the American spirit or… Assuming something was referred to, what was it about and within the clay model that referred? Well, like the photograph, the clay model was a representation. What, exactly, it represented is not a simple, single thing. It represented many and various things to different people. In addition, it depicted, though unlike the photograph, it did so three-dimensionally and did so via a collection and configuration of globs of clay rather than of
pixels. (One might ask: did the clay model refer to anything or did it “merely” depict or represent something? I will speak to this more directly later.)

One thing that is true is that there was a causal connection between the clay model and the particular individuals who were photographed. The artist likened the clay model to the images in the photograph, although not in a complete one-to-one correspondence. The relevant difference was that the faces in the clay model were relevantly unlike the faces in the photograph. For critics of the clay model, the fact that the clay faces did not “look like” the faces in the photograph mattered, even though there was a causal connection between them.

As an aside – though, I hope not an irrelevant aside – I offer a few hypothetical questions, “hypothetical” because I do not have a clear or strong sense of a good answer to them. The first question is: What would have been the response if the artist had made the faces in the clay model look like the faces in the photograph, but insisted that the clay model was not about those individuals, but was instead about all the day’s rescue workers or about acts of heroism, etc.; the fact that the faces in the clay model looked like those in the photograph was incidental, merely a matter of being lazy and not really caring what the faces looked like. In this case, would the response have still been outrage or – because the clay faces looked like the photographed faces – would the response have been that the clay model really referred to those particular individuals anyway? The second hypothetical question is: What would the response have been if, instead of creating a clay model, the artist had manipulated the photograph so that it was not simply a mirror-like duplication of the faces of those three individuals? That is, what if the artist had photo-shopped the photograph so that, say, the faces were out of focus or were dimmed in some way or other or were given moustaches? As with the first hypothetical question, I am not sure what the answer, or a good answer, would be. I speculate that depending upon the nature and extent of the photo manipulation, there would be more or less acceptance of alterations of the photograph. This is important, I think, because this speaks to the fact that for most people it is less the causal story here and more the resemblance or similarity between the depictions and the individuals (that is, between the signifiers and the signifieds) that matters. Indeed, this is important because, I think, it speaks to the issue of the criteria for relevant likeness as a major concern in this case. At least some critics of
the clay model based their criticisms of it on the fact that the clay faces did not look
enough like the photographed faces. However, some alterations might have been not only
acceptable, but also welcomed or even desirable (e.g., perhaps wisps of smoke or soot
that blocked part of their faces could have been deleted). Finally, what if the artist had
made a clay model that did have faces that looked exactly like the photographed faces but
insisted that the point was not to honor these individuals, but instead to criticize them for
spending time raising a flag rather than seeing if there was yet anyone else they could
have rescued from some building? So, rather than a work of art that was honoring
heroism, the work of art was a criticism of patriotic grandstanding and the artist wanted
to be sure to capture the faces accurately of those three individuals.

Although these are hypothetical questions, I believe they speak to – and, I hope,
help shed some light on – matters about the philosophy of art and also to matters about
reference. For now, what I glean from this case is that there is non-linguistic reference. In
addition, non-linguistic reference – in this case, pictorial – is a common aspect of works
of art. What is referred to in a work of art and how a work of art refers involve inherent
and ineliminable interpretive elements. Collections and configurations of pixels, paint
strokes, globs of clay, musical notes, bodily movements, etc. can and do depict and
represent and signify, but they do so not simply because they are such collections and
configurations. Signification is a relation, not merely a dyadic one between a signifier
and a signified, but a triadic one, requiring some recipient or interpretant. To put it
schematically: some sign S signifies some content (perhaps an object) C to some
interpretant I. A particular collection and configuration of pixels or clay globs signified
one thing to certain people and another thing to other people. In the context of art, we
take this phenomenon to be quite non-controversial, perhaps even expected. A given
photograph or statue or dance or song means something (perhaps multiple things) to one
person and something quite different to another. Likewise, just what various elements
within a photograph or statue or dance or song depict and/or refer to can and do vary
across audiences. A lilting piccolo can signify a small bird or even innocence; a set of
bass notes played in a particular tempo can signify danger, with those notes being
quarter-notes (as opposed to half- or full-notes) signifying increasing and more imminent
danger, but they do not necessarily signify this (and do so only relationally). On the other
hand, this is not to say that what is thus signified is merely a matter of (subjective) interpretation. Those same notes played in the same way, say, as part of a wedding procession would be perplexing or perhaps humorous, but they would not be celebratory. Likewise, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* might be open to multiple interpretations, but whatever it is about (or signifies or refers to), it is not about snowboarding. Nor is Ophelia representative of the present king of France or, for that matter, the present queen of England. Again, the point of these remarks will, I hope, be clear below.

2. HISTORY

In getting to the point of them, I will make a detour through another particular case. This time the case is not artistic, but historical. It involves the history of the naming of the planet Neptune. How did Neptune come to be named? In answering this question, it is instructive to first look at how the planet Uranus was named. In March 1781, William Herschel spotted what he noted as “a curious either nebulous star or perhaps a comet.” Within a few days he found that this “fuzzy object” had moved and, so, he identified it as a comet. Further observation revealed no tail or cloudlike coma, leading Nevil Maskelyne, from the Royal Greenwich Observatory, to suspect this might actually be a planet (a remarkable find, if true, as it would be the first “new” planet known since recorded human history). By November 1781 astronomers around the world had become convinced that Herschel’s find was indeed a planet and not a comet. (Herschel was not the first to take note of this “fuzzy object;” in 1690, John Flamsteed made mention of it and even assigned it a designation, “34 Tauri”, thinking it was a star.)

When it came to assigning a name to this newly discovered planet, a number of suggestions were made. The French astronomer, Joseph-Jérome Lalande suggested that it be named after Herschel himself. The German astronomer, Georg Lichtenberg, argued for the name “Astrea,” after the Greek goddess of justice. The Swedish astronomer, Erik Prosperin, recommended the name “Neptune” (!), honoring the brother of Jupiter and son of Saturn. Other suggestions were “Cybele” (wife of Saturn), “Hypercronius” (being above Saturn), “Minerva” (Roman goddess of wisdom), “Oceanus” (a mythical river said to surround the Earth), even “Neptune of George III” and “Neptune of Great Britain”. Herschel weighed in with the proposal “Georgium Sidus” (“the Georgian star”). Finally,
Johann Elert Bode, who published the Astronomical Yearbook, an annual publication of astronomical tables, proposed the name “Uranus” (father of Saturn and grandfather of Jupiter). Abbé Maximilian Hell, director of the Vienna Observatory, commended this choice and immediately included it in his published astronomical tables. While the newly discovered planet was for a short time referred to as “Georgian” in England and as “Herschel” in France, the name “Uranus” quickly became widespread and eventually was the only name used.

Within several decades of the identification of Uranus as a planet, peculiarities in its orbit led astronomers to postulate the existence of an even more distant planet. Nationalistic competition, especially between French and British astronomers, resulted in a race to observationally discover this presumed planet. On the French side were François Arago and Urbain Jean-Joseph Le Verrier, while on the British side were George Biddell Airy, John Couch Adams, and James Challis. Armed with Newtonian theory and detailed astronomical tables, astronomers made specific predictions of where this new planet should be observed. Based on measured calculations of where the planet should be, it was finally Johann Gottfried Galle, of the Berlin Observatory, who made the initial sighting that was affirmed by other astronomers, in September 1846.

As in the case of Uranus, multiple names were proffered for this newly discovered planet. Galle at first suggested “Janus”, saying that the double face would be appropriate for this planet’s position on the frontier of the solar system. In a letter only a week later, Le Verrier stated to Galle that the French Bureau of Longitudes had decided upon the name “Neptune” (and, indeed, rejected “Janus” because it implied that there were no further undiscovered planets in the solar system). Within a few days, however, Le Verrier retracted the suggestion of “Neptune” and declared that the planet should be named after himself. Arago, claiming that Le Verrier was the actual discoverer of this planet (with Galle’s sighting being but the confirmation of that discovery) and claiming that Le Verrier had delegated the task and choice of dubbing the planet, announced that he would indeed name it after Le Verrier. (Arago then went on to announce that he also refused to refer to Uranus by any other name than “Herschel”.) While among the French the appellation “Le Verrier’s Planet” became commonplace, in Britain “Neptune” had taken hold. As could be expected, other names were proposed. Challis suggested “Oceanus”
and this was endorsed, though somewhat mildly, by Airy. This was followed by a plethora of proposals: “Chronos”, “Hyperion”, “Atlas”, “Atreus”, “Gravia”, “Minerva”. (Rejecting the suggestion that this planet should be named after Le Verrier, British Admiral W. H. Smyth wrote to Airy: “Mythology is neutral ground. Herschel is a good enough name. Le Verrier somehow or other suggests a Fabriquant and is therefore not so good. But just think how awkward it would be if the next planet should be discovered by a German, by a Bugge, a Funk, or your hirsute friend Boguslawski?”) As with Uranus, very quickly, except for pockets of opposition in France, “Neptune” was accepted as the name.

So, what is the point of this case with respect to the issue of reference? For me, the point is that this case gestures toward how reference is possible (or successful) and the sorts of non-semantic aspects that underlie reference. As the cases of Uranus and Neptune show, assignation (that is, the assigning of a name and the establishment of reference) can indeed be fairly complex. Neither Herschel, the “discoverer” of Uranus, nor Galle, the first to “observe” Neptune, had their respective dubbings accepted. Uranus is not named “Georgium Sidus” and Neptune is not named “Janus,” even though they were so dubbed by their respective “discoverers.” Furthermore, I think, this case shows that referring is not merely a matter of denoting or describing and that reference is not captured simply by analyzing the semantic aspects of sentences. Rather, I want to suggest, referring is also a matter of conferring and deferring and inferring. It is a matter of conferring in the sense that there is an inherent sociality to referring. It is not, and cannot be, a private act. (Cases in which it seems to be private, such as someone deciding to refer to something by a particular expression, say naming a newborn kitten, rest on and presuppose background publicity and social aspects of language, both in terms of semantics and pragmatics.) For much the same reasons, referring is a matter of deferring, that is, deferring to subsequent public usage. In many cases of referring (even with names) we very much explicitly defer to recognized authorities for the establishment of reference and names and for successful reference. Also, referring is inferring in the sense of requiring interpretation. Successful reference requires not only present, but also future reception, recognition, and understanding.
3. LESONS

These inherent aspects of reference – and especially to the activity of referring – are evident, I think, in the Neptune case, but even more so in the earlier case of pictorial reference. What it is to refer non-linguistically, I believe, clearly illustrates the conferring, deferring, and inferring aspects of reference. On the one hand, what exactly is referred to by a photograph (or other work of art) as well as in a photograph is not simply given. In large part, I want to say, it is negotiated. It is a matter of interpretation and understanding. What certain collections and configurations of pixels (or globs of clay or notes, etc.) refer to is in part dependent upon what is “out there” in the world, but also in part upon how we interpret and understand those collections and configurations. To once again appeal to Catherine Elgin, reference is not secured simply by having words uttered or written. Whether to say that a person refers depends on how his words are interpreted. If we can make no sense of a person’s utterances we put them down to incoherent ramblings. If their interpretation is straightforward, we take them to be meaningful and the terms in them to refer. But it is the availability of a reasonable interpretation that is crucial. What is true of words is even more evident of non-linguistic cases of reference. What a picture refers to, what a musical phrase refers to, what a dramatic scene refers to, are a function of, as noted above, interpretation and understanding. My claim is that this is true of linguistic reference, as well. However, at this point, I have not provided a thorough argument to this effect, but rather have made gestures toward such a conclusion.

As I stated at the start of my remarks, this paper is more exploratory than explanatory (a point which, no doubt, is painfully obvious!). The main gist of the exploration is to see if there is anything in the work of the philosophy of art that might shed some light on the issue of reference. I have begun the exploration by briefly considering a particular case of art (the 9/11 photograph and clay model statue) and related what I take to be some lessons from that case to lessons from the historical case of the naming of Neptune. At this point, having suggested what I hope are some fruitful connections between artistic reference and linguistic reference, I want to make a few more gestures toward how paying attention to philosophy of art might be helpful to philosophers of language. I will do this by briefly noting three areas of concern in the
philosophy of art that I think relate to concerns about reference. These areas are: (1) artist-centered concerns, (2) audience-centered concerns, and (3) critic-centered concerns.

Before turning to artist-centered concerns, I want to first note a basic issue that I think is relevant is the issue of seeing art as a process or a product. The relevance is whether, and in what ways, it is fruitful to see reference as a process or a product. That is, is the process and activity of referring a more fruitful approach than taking the “product” (i.e., reference) as the starting point. My own inclination is, following the work of John Dewey and others, to take referring as more basic than reference. However, for the present purposes, I am not going to pursue this.

First, then, artist-centered concerns. These concerns are ones with respect to art that are generated by, or are particularly relevant to, the creator of a work of art. They include, for example, the phenomena of expression, communication, and provocation, as well as representation. That is, what is an artist doing via creating a work of art? For instance, what was Picasso doing in and with his painting, Guernica or Brahms in and with his Fifth Symphony? Assuming that something or other is represented in these works, there are issues of what was represented, how it was represented, and why it was represented. Again, what was Picasso doing? He was representing a particular historical event, but was representing much more than merely that event. Indeed, in representing that particular event, he necessarily focused on certain aspects of it and not on others. Likewise, he expressed or communicated or attempted to evoke (or provoke) by means of certain colors, textures, shapes, etc. As with what he represented, how he represented was a matter of selectivity on his part. In addition, there are issues of why he represented what he represented and why he did it in the way(s) that he did (e.g., why he chose black and white and gray vs. a rainbow of colors). To truly understand what this phenomenon is (i.e., the object Guernica as well as the phenomenon that is the creation of the object Guernica), all of these issues involving representation – that is, what, how, and why – are pertinent. If these are all relevant to matters of artistic representation and can be extended to pictorial reference (or, say, in the case of Brahms, auditory reference), then these might also be relevant and fruitful avenues of concern in grasping linguistic reference.

A second focus is the audience-centered concerns. These concerns are not so much about the creation of a work of art, but rather about the nature of aesthetic
experience. What is it to encounter a work of art? What makes an experience an aesthetic one? These concerns, although different than those that are artist-centered, still involve representation. In “receiving” art, we still take art to be about something or other (even if, as is rarely the case, it is only about someone expressing herself). The issues here also revolve around questions of what, how, and why, but in this context they are more related to what is experienced in an aesthetic experience, how it is experienced, and why it is experienced. For instance, are there special features of art that, when encountered, constitute an aesthetic experience? Such features might be harmony or balance, say, or unity or intensity in what is encountered and/or represented. Or, is it not special features of what is encountered, but rather a special focus by the receiver of the art. For example, one might encounter an object (say, a flower or a soup can or a sunset or a series of movements) and focus on the harmony, balance, etc. Closely related to this notion of special focus, the nature of the aesthetic experience might be on special attitudes or ways of approaching and receiving some object or phenomenon. This is sometimes noted by speaking of the difference between naked and nude. Here the emphasis is on selective attention (e.g., focusing on movement in a photograph or statue while ignoring the colors or physical materials) and maintaining an aesthetic “psychic distance.” (For example, the aesthetic experience of watching a play would be lessened and perhaps even unattainable for someone who too closely identified with the particular actors on stage rather than the characters being portrayed or by the producer of the play who only encountered the play in terms of its financial payback). In any case, the aspects of representation, and the relevant questions of what is being represented, how it is being represented, and why it is being represented, are all pertinent with respect to the audience of art, but in somewhat different ways than to the creator of art. It strikes me that understanding representation or reference in the context of art (that is, artistic or aesthetic reference) requires a comprehension and analysis of these three aspects (the what, how, and why). If so, then again, there might be good reason to inquire into all three with respect to linguistic reference.

Finally, by critic-centered concerns, I mean issues that are especially related to artistic interpretation and criticism. These are, in one sense, also audience- or receiver-centered issues, since they focus on the reception of art, not its creation. However, these
are somewhat different than the emphasis on the nature of aesthetic experience. Nonetheless, the three broad foci remain: what is interpreted (or critiqued), how it is interpreted (or critiqued), and why. These issues relate back to questions of artist intent as well as questions of form vs. context. For example, what, if anything, about the personal biography of an artist is relevant in interpreting and critiquing a work by that artist? Would an interpretation of a work of art be mistaken if the artist said that he intended the work to say X and it was interpreted by others to say Y or Z, or even to deny X? What would constitute a good interpretation and, even more, a correct interpretation? Some aestheticians have argued that the point of interpretation and criticism is to convince people (perhaps even the artist) of some facts about the art (that is, to get people to believe something). Others claim the point of interpretation and criticism is not to get people to believe something, but to get them to perceive something (in the art). Interpretation and criticism is a form of pointing (as in: Just look at the movement in this work, or: See how this phrase is juxtaposed with that phrase and how they are resolved later in the work). The point for me here is – as before – that there are, even in the context of interpretation and criticism, the questions of what, how, and why.

Bottom line? There are interpretive, pragmatic, and axiological aspects that are, I believe, inherent and ineliminable in artistic representation and reference. Recognizing this, and acknowledging that these aspects apply to linguistic reference, as well, might be fruitful for philosophers of language to pursue in their analysis of linguistic reference. I have only touched in a glancing way some of the issues about representation and reference that energize and agitate philosophers of art. Nonetheless, I suggest that taking these issues and aspects seriously might be useful for philosophers of language. Picture that!

(This paper was originally presented at the Inland Northwest Philosophy Conference, in Pullman, WA, on May 1, 2010.)