

# HUMBOLDT CONVERSATIONS IN PHILOSOPHY

16:00 - 18:00

ONLINE

JUNE 9 2021



Rose Ryan Flinn is currently completing her PhD at New York University. Her dissertation is on various forms of non-reductionism in the philosophy of language, aesthetics, and philosophical logic.

## Rose Ryan FLINN (NYU)

### "Off the Rails": Slurs and the Absence of Thought

A non-pejorative counterpart for a slur *S* is a word *C* that applies to the same things that users of *S* take *S* to apply to, but without the derogatory force that *S* conveys. For instance, 'black' is a non-pejorative counterpart for the N-word. In this talk I seek to challenge the assumption that, for a slur *S* with non-pejorative counterpart *C*, the meaning of *C* is part of the meaning of *S*. This assumption is widespread: it is held both by pragmatist accounts of slurs, according to which *S* is semantically equivalent to *C*, and semantic accounts of slurs, according to which *S* is expressive of derogatory content additional to the non-pejorative content of *C*. In the first half of the talk, I urge that this assumption is false. It is no part of the meaning of the N-word to classify subjects as black. To think otherwise is to construe slur-users as having more in common with 'us' (those for whom slurs are useless) than they in fact do. The error here, on the part of the orthodoxy, is two-fold: first, there is a failure to acknowledge the fundamentality of the slur-user's mistake; and second, the attitude taken towards the target group by speakers without a use for slur words is likewise misrepresented. In the final parts of the talk, I encourage an alternative conception of slurs on which they are failed attempts at classification. I argue that slur-users, in their use of slurs, betray a conceptual bankruptcy that is disruptive of their ability to think of their targets at all. Although this is apt to encourage parallels with empty terms such as 'phlogiston', I suggest that such parallels can only be taken so far.

For more information, additional reading and registration please contact:  
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