Challenges and Solutions to the Online Conference: A Case Study

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I. Introduction

In early June of 2020, The University of Western Ontario, in conjunction with The Society for the History of Modern Philosophy at The Ohio State University, organized a three-day E-conference on early modern philosophy. Its primary impetus was to provide a platform for professionals to share research in this field that, due to COVID-19, could not be responsibly done in person. Yet, this E-vent provided more than fruitful conversations to specialists. As a wholly online conference, the profession more generally can benefit from drawing lessons that arise from its virtual format. These lessons are of specific importance to people who, like the members of Philosophers for Sustainability, understand the imperatives brought about by climate change and are searching for methods to combat its damages while maintaining our role as researchers and educators.

Because we are in a pioneering stage of the development of virtual conferences, organizers are generally reliant on the formats that, while suitable for traditional, non-distal gatherings, are inconducive to productive discussions located in an entirely virtual environment. A successful adaptation to this new situation requires innovation, experimentation, and communication. The organizers of the Western E-vent in Early Modern Philosophy thereby believe it is essential to share the problems that arose with its conference, the extent to which its novel format addressed these problems, and what we identify as the most pressing challenges going forward. We hope that others will use our conference as a case study as we explore ways to make future online gatherings a success.

II. The Format of the Western E-vent in Early Modern Philosophy

The Western E-vent in Early Modern Philosophy followed a hybrid format that contains both synchronous and asynchronous elements. Before the synchronous meetings, we requested each speaker to create a short, five-minute video that highlights the main themes of their submitted paper. These videos typically included a concurrent presentation of a slideshow and a film of the speaker narrating the slideshow's contents. We offered each presenter a short, written guide on how to construct these highlight videos most effectively. Moreover, when available, we requested commentators to make quicker, two-minute videos detailing their questions or concerns. Unlike the speaker's videos, we did not expect the commentators to construct an accompanying slideshow. Along with these two videos, we requested the speakers and commentators to upload their papers and comments, which were available to download for the other participants to preread before the meeting. We supplied each speaker's session with a public webpage for these submissions. Finally, we invited conference attendees to submit their written questions for each speaker on their session's respective websites.

The synchronous part of this conference consisted of thirteen fifty-five-minute sessions, five twenty-five-minute informal discussions, and one eighty-five-minute keynote address. These sections took place over three days. The first two days spanned nine hours each and the last day eight, all of which included a one-hour lunch break and five-minute intervals between sections.

Each section was supported by the zoom online video conferencing program. This program allows each participant to share his, her, or their webcam video to others in the meeting. The resulting audio and visual streams are displayed on each participant's computer monitor in a grid layout, with the option to enlarge the current speaker's stream. Hosts of each virtual meeting are permitted to share other programs on their screen to everyone in the meeting. Moreover, participants are given the option to indicate his, her, or their desire to speak by unveiling a hand icon next to their name.

The speaker sessions each followed the ensuing schedule: First, an organizer or chair would give a short introduction to the speaker. The meeting host would then share his, her, or their screen to stream the speaker's prerecorded highlight video, followed by the commentator's video. The speaker would then have five minutes to respond to the commentator. Once this dialogue between the speaker and commentator would close, the session would open up for forty minutes for Q&A with the rest of the participants, giving priority to those questions that were already written and submitted to the session's webpage. To create a queue for the questions, the chair or organizer would follow the order in which the participant 'raised their hand' by unveiling the icon discussed above. Near the end of the allotted time for each session, the speaker would be given the opportunity to have the last word, and a slide displaying the title and name of the next speaker would be shared.

The informal sections were less strictly organized. They were, however, each structured by a dedicated question or family of questions. The organizers intended these questions to be relatively informal, yet still significant and of interest to as many attendees as possible. For example, the fourth friendly discussion section was centered around the question: "What skills and capacities do you think the next generation of early modern scholars most need to advance the field?" Like traditional Q&As, we allowed participants to enter a queue so that everyone who wished to could share their thoughts prompted by this question. We allowed more leeway in how others respond to these thoughts than in other sessions. The keynote address followed the same format as conventional, non-distal addresses.

Following the synchronous meeting, participants were encouraged to continue their interactions online. We provided the following avenues for this continued exchange: each session's webpage included a text box with which participants and speakers can write and respond to comments. Moreover, we recorded and archived each speaker's session, videos, papers, comments, and transcripts. We then hosted these materials on the conference website.

III. Problems the Format Addressed

We anticipated the three most pressing problems an online environment would bring to be a relative lack of undistracted, fruitful dialogue, fatigue resulting from prolonged exposure to the zoom display, and a deficiency in low-stakes, personal communication between participants. The consensus, we believe, of people who are not inclined to attend entirely online conferences have to do with these issues. Because this conference was likely to be the first for many participants, failing to take these issues into account could have only vindicated possible suspicion that virtual environments are intrinsically incapable of providing a proper atmosphere for worthwhile discussion. The chosen format was thereby explicitly designed to address these worries. The extent to which the format succeeded was gauged by a questionnaire sent to each attendee. The results of this survey offer us useful material to draw further lessons on how to conduct future online events.

The first problem we attempted to address was what we believed would be a relative lack in engaged dialogue among the participants. Because 'dead air' during a zoom session is particularly painful relative to an in-person environment, we made solving this problem a priority. To abate this worry, we requested speakers to write and upload their paper, which would ideally be read ahead by each participant, before the beginning of the zoom meeting. The accompanying highlight videos were intended to further prime discussion, both for those who did preread the paper as well as for those who wished to follow the Q&A but did not prepare beforehand. In case there was a dearth of questions, we encouraged participants as well as organizers and chairs to write down questions and comments on each speaker's session webpage well beforehand.

The effectiveness of these proposed solutions was uneven. We believe the highlight videos, the read-ahead request, the inclusion of a commentator, and the utilization of the 'raise hand' function were jointly more than sufficient to enable fruitful discussion. From personal communications, it appears that many people were surprised to find the dialogue as useful as it was. This evaluation is corroborated by the results of the post-conference poll, which indicates that twenty-five of the thirty-one responders strongly agree that the time spent during the conference was valuable (the remaining six somewhat agree). As more people became accustomed to the non-traditional aspects of the conference's online format and organization, the discussions felt more natural and streamlined. We thereby encourage others to consider these strategies.

The outcome of our encouragement of other participants to submit prewritten questions and comments to each speaker did not meet our expectations. As our survey reveals, only approximately one-third of the participants elected to engage in this avenue. Because some of these responses likely come from commentators who we explicitly instructed to use this option, we expect these survey results are artificially inflated. This is unfortunate since the majority of those who responded to the poll express approval of this mode of participation. However, this data, too, might be inflated since some might have interpreted it to include the commenter's obligations. We believe the reason why so few submitted their prewritten comments is due to our lack of communicating that this option was offered, and indeed encouraged. Roughly half of

those who did not prewrite comments indicated that the reason they did not was that they either did not know they were able or did not know how they could do so. Because many found this to be a benefit distinctive to an online format, we urge others to advertise this option better, should others agree that it shows promise.

The second main problem our format was meant to address is the unique mental and physical strain one often feels when one participates in this type of online gathering, a phenomenon popularly described as 'zoom fatigue.' To a certain degree, we acknowledge this effect is unavoidable. However, there are some measures one ought to take to moderate it, which we attempted to do so in the following ways: First, we requested speakers and commentators to give prerecorded video presentations in part to provide participants with another medium separate from that of the rest of our zoom meetings. By intermittingly switching media between recorded videos and live webcam streams, we hoped to break the monotony that comes with exposure to prolonged, live webcam streaming sessions. Second, we believed it was necessary to schedule frequent breaks between each session, allowing participants to step away from their computer and return rejuvenated. Finally, we sent out a guide explaining the best practices for interacting on zoom. Of particular effectiveness was out encouragement to broadcast one's video only when one is talking. This suggestion was useful in two ways: First, it eliminated the requirement for one to unremittingly present oneself in an artificial way, effectively removing one from the spotlight, as it were. Second, it lessened the relatively intense and unnatural feeling from regularly seeing thirty-or-more different faces. Such a stimulatory overload has been described to be one of the primary causes of 'zoom fatigue.'

As with our response to the first problem, these three strategies were not uniformly effective. The request for the speakers to create prerecorded videos appeared to be a success. However, perhaps due to a lack of insistence on behalf of the organizers, not every speaker created a video. Moreover, these videos were of an uneven quality. Perhaps one way to rectify this is by requiring prospective speakers to submit a video when applying for admittance to the conference, ensuring that they put a greater deal of effort into them. Regarding our scheduling of five-minute breaks between each session, there is much room for improvement. It was very frequently the case that our Q&A sections would bleed over into the five-minute recesses, rendering them ineffective. This problem is not easily solved by requiring each chair to be stricter in keeping time since we did not guarantee that each chair followed the same clock to the minute. We propose, then, that in the future, one ought to extend the time for each break, perhaps up to ten or fifteen minutes, and make sure that each chair synchronizes his, her, or their clock to the same minute. Finally, we believe encouraging people to turn off their video stream when not speaking was immensely helpful. However, presumably, because few people read our guide, which suggested this technique, not enough people implemented it. We encourage others to promote this practice more aggressively.

The third and final problem we anticipated would come from hosting an entirely online conference is its perceived lack of personal communication between attendees. For many

people, one of the chief draws for these conferences is the networking and social benefits that result. Because it is presumed that the virtual environment cannot provide this avenue of dialogue, many people might be hesitant to attend conferences located in these spaces. With this in mind, we decided to include between sessions the option for participants to join informal discussions on low stakes, yet exciting topics. We hoped that these sessions were structured in such a way that adequately balances the minimization of prolonged, awkward silence with the horizontal, free play feel of natural dialogue.

It appears that these informal sessions were a lukewarm success. Out of the twenty-nine of those surveyed, sixteen strongly agreed that they were enjoyable and rewarding, while eight somewhat agreed, and five neither agreed nor disagreed. Around five less enthusiastic participants believed it would have been more valuable to schedule a different sort of session instead. We conclude that, while it is essential to give participants the space to have a more informal discussion, there is still much room for improvement on how to moderate it.

IV. Challenges for the Future

The trial format we decided on succeeded in solving, or at least abating, many of the problems we deemed most pressing. Still, as indicated above, there were a few aspects of our format that led to less than entirely satisfactory outcomes. Moreover, it did not stave off every unanticipated issue. We close by broaching these unforeseen problems and briefly review which previously identified problems still pose challenges for future organizers.

The primary challenge we believe organizers of similar e-vents face is 'zoom fatigue.' When participants were invited to share which changes they would like to see in future e-conferences, both of the responses recommended they be shorter: "Three days was exhausting" "A Shorter (sic.) conference. It was very stimulating but too long." We believe this suggests our proposals to lessen the toll an online event has on its users were not sufficient. Perhaps it is true that there are insurmountable obstacles to the effectiveness of a conference such that it could not last as long as a traditional, non-distal one. It might be best for future organizers to take this maximum length as given and plan for shorter events with fewer speakers. One might space out the sessions over a broader period, perhaps five or six days, and limit the number of hours for each day to four or five. Because the online environment does not require its attendees to leave their home cities, purchase plane tickets, and book hotel rooms, organizers in this domain have more freedom to decide how long their events will last. Alternatively, one may attempt to find other methods to limit 'zoom fatigue,' either by adopting the practices and amendments presented above or by new ones. Developing and testing these proposed novel methods are, we believe, ought to be recognized as the most critical item in the agenda of anyone who wishes to create a successful, ambitious online conference.

Another lesson one may draw from the Western E-vent in Early Modern Philosophy is that it is communally recognized that a low stakes, informal discussion of some type is beneficial to conference participants. While our attempt at simulating similar conversations was, by and large,

positively appraised by many attendees, we believe there is much room for further growth. We recommend future organizers to include on their schedules similar, if not identically structured, sessions. It is essential, we believe, that new ideas for how one may implement these informal sessions be shared, tested, and evaluated.

Before we close, there are a couple of stray issues and recommendations we would like to relate. First, there must be many people from different locations organizing and hosting any synchronous meeting. One organizer's electrical power failed shortly before he, she, or they were obliged to host and chair a speaker session. If there were no replacements, the consequences would be more disastrous than in a traditional environment, since the host is required to be present for the online environment to be shared with each participant. It is also crucial for there to be an open, real-time means of communication between the organizers. We primarily communicated over email, with three or four zoom sessions for more in-depth conversation and to practice using the zoom interface before the synchronous meetings. However, there were some moments where it would be useful for each organizer to be updated simultaneously. For unexpected issues, such an avenue of communication might prove essential to the well-functioning of the organizer's event. We suggest text chat services such as signal or slack for this purpose.

V. Conclusion

Despite the challenges specific to the online conference, as well as the uneven effectiveness of how we addressed them, we have good reason to expect further progress and participation in this environment. Of the thirty-one people who were asked whether they would like to see a similar e-conferences organized in the 2020-2021 academic year, twenty-two strongly agreed, six somewhat agreed. The other three neither agreed nor disagreed. Strikingly, this distribution is independent of whether the dangers of COVID-19 subside. Twenty-three of those thirty-one surveyed indicated they strongly agree that they would attend another, similar e-vent in the future, *even if travel and in-person conferences return to the pre-pandemic normal*, with seven indicating that they somewhat agree and the last remaining person neither agreeing nor disagreeing. While this data might not be representative of those in our profession more generally, as it contains responses from only those who were already inclined to attend an e-conference, it does bode well for future promise in this area.

We have some reason to believe, then, that many people are willing to adapt to an online format and do so because they find the results beneficial, despite the current drawbacks. We expect much of these drawbacks are not primarily due to the online setting itself, but rather to the pioneering stage we find ourselves in concerning how we can best utilize this setting. The lesson we believe most crucial to draw from our e-conference is that, should we make a concerted effort to develop, test, and share methods to make virtual conferences a success, there is nothing in the way for us to achieve this goal.