

# Interview with Ben Ferguson

The LSE-Bayreuth Conference was the initiative of Dr. Ben Ferguson. Ben obtained his PhD in political philosophy from LSE in 2013. Since then, he has been working as a lecturer at Universität Bayreuth. The editing committee of *Rerum Causae* has asked Ben to answer some questions about the conference and his involvement in it.

## **1. Which are the affinities between LSE Logic and Scientific Method Department and the UBT Programme in Philosophy and Economics?**

Bayreuth and LSE have overlapping interests because both departments offer Philosophy and Economics Masters and Bachelors degrees. But the departments differ a bit because LSE also has a strong emphasis in decision theory and philosophy of science, while at Bayreuth we have people working on epistemology and also more traditional historically-informed German philosophy. Historically there has been quite an overlap between the programmes in terms of students too—many Bayreuth BA students go on to do MSc degrees at the LSE. And, of course, many faculty have, at one time or another, been associated with both departments.

## **2. When and how was the idea of a student conference first developed?**

Many years ago – I believe in 2005 – a LSE MSc student started *Rerum Causae*.

## *Interview with Ben Ferguson*

When I did my MSc in 2007 I worked as an editor on the journal and this was a position I repeated in the first year of my PhD in 2009. That year Luc Bovens suggested that if we were going to the trouble to collect, read and edit student papers we might as well attach a conference to the process as well and so the student conference was born. We repeated the conference for a few years at LSE before I began a position in Bayreuth. When I moved to Germany I decided, along with Matthew Braham in Bayreuth and Luc to turn the conference into a joint conference. Last year the first joint conference was held at LSE and of course this year we had the second joint conference in Bayreuth.

### **3. To which extent philosophy students and philosophers in general benefit from ideas exchange?**

Well, of course, the idea of a public forum for philosophical discourse is as old as the subject itself—though, the modern conference and paper presentation structure is somewhat newer. But pretty clearly, communicating ideas in a dynamic and discursive environment is a central part of the discipline.

In my own experience there are a number of benefits from presenting papers at conference. Preparing to communicate an idea forces you to carefully order your thoughts and, for me, this activity alone often improves my papers. And then, obviously, there are the comments and questions from the audience during the presentation that also lead to improvements. But perhaps even more helpful are the comments that one sometimes receives afterwards. I remember a week after giving a paper on Kant during the first year of my Phd I received an email from Luc with additional (and very detailed) comments.

From the audience side you have the advantage of having complicated subjects distilled and carefully explained to you and this can be much easier than reading papers. You also are exposed to new research in your area or, in some cases, get to hear about research in other interesting areas that you may not

have been aware of. From my prospective, this is one of the main benefits of the LSE-Bayreuth conference. For example, this year Rudolf Schüßler, from Bayreuth, gave a keynote talk titled, ‘Derigourising Kant?’ which was an excellent historically and philosophically informed talk on Kant that differed from what students at the LSE were likely to have experienced before.

**4. Would you describe the LSE-UBT Graduate conference a successful experience? What could be improved in your opinion? Do you see the collaboration between LSE and UBT grow in the next few years?**

Well when I look at the change from the small journal that began ten years ago to the joint journal-conference affair that we have now, it certainly seems that *Rerum Causae* and the conference have been very successful. Each year the number of submissions has increased and each year things seem to run even more smoothly. LSE and Bayreuth are likely to continue collaborating both with the student conference and in terms of research and teaching exchanges in the coming years simply because of the overlapping interests of the departments. But beyond this, I think there is room to expand the conference too. In recent years there has been some discussion of involving other universities that work in similar areas to the student conference, or holding the conference at a venue other than London or Bayreuth. I think that next year the plan is to continue as we did this year, keeping the conference between Bayreuth and LSE, but I think it would be exciting to see other universities involved in the future.