My name is Drew Pierce. I am a graduate student in philosophy here at Michigan State University, and I specialize in critical theory and social and political philosophy generally. I haven't had much experience in the field of development ethics, and so naturally I can't say anything interesting about the “capabilities” approach as a distinct approach in this field. I would like to take this opportunity then, as a sort of public reflection upon my experiences at the conference today and yesterday.

Let me start by acknowledging a reservation I had previously held about the field of development ethics. Before the conference, my naïve view of development ethics was something like this: In terms of subject matter, I took development ethicists to be concerned with issues of global poverty and oppression, global structures of governance, and global structures of interdependence and responsibility. This perception was accurate enough.

In terms of methodology, I took issue with what I perceived to be a problematic or at least incomplete theoretical framework. From what little I had read in this field, development ethics seemed to me to be something like a globally conscious liberal reformism. Let me explain. By globally conscious, if it is not apparent enough, I mean to note an awareness of not just global problems like world poverty, environmental degradation and the like, but also an awareness of the complex inter-relationality of such problems. By liberal reformism, I mean the idea that liberal paradigm, with its ethical individualism and conceptual centrality of the State, can be adapted to address problems of a global nature. I also understand liberal reformism in relation to the neo-liberal ideal of economic globalisation based upon free trade, and I take liberal reformism to claim, if not that this is an appropriate ideal, at least that we must speak this same language if we are to effectively critique it. Finally, I take liberal reformism to claim that, when faced with the extreme suffering of people in underdeveloped nations, we must reject or at least postpone developing “grand narratives” and unachievable structural alternatives, and work within existing systems to ameliorate such suffering. This last argument is perhaps the most compelling, as there does seem to be something suspicious and self-serving about western intellectuals dismissing the suffering of people in underdeveloped nations as an inevitable byproduct of certain global economic and administrative systems. Yet, despite the fact that this last claim can and surely has been used to justify an unwillingness to pursue local and individualized reforms to ameliorate the harmful effects of global capitalism while leaving it intact, it nonetheless appears to be true, and its truth should not be overlooked. What development ethics should pursue then, in my humble and amateur opinion, is a balance of local efforts to ameliorate undeserved and unjustifiable suffering, and global, structural alternatives to the systems that produce such suffering as byproducts.

I am happy to say that my experiences at this conference have convinced me that many of you share this vision, and that my premature reservations were unjustified. Nearly all of the presentations, in one way or another, demonstrated how philosophy can and must be engaged in practical issues in the world as it is, without sacrificing a critical, even radical vision of structural change. So, I am relieved and grateful to you all for allaying my concerns and introducing me anew to the exciting field of development ethics.

That said, I would like to mention one thing that I think has been missing so far, and to ask your thoughts about it. The issue was brought into focus for me by Luis
Camacho's critique of what I might call geographic determinism: the claim that geographical factors explain disparities in wealth among different regions of the world. What disturbed me about this claim, which Camacho expertly debunked, was that it was a familiar one. The same argument appears earlier (and indeed continues to appear despite much scientific evidence against it) as an “explanation” of the superiority of white Europeans over non-white, non-European peoples. The argument, if it could even be called that, goes something like this: In colder climates, such as those of northern Europe, people had to be much more industrious and innovative to survive, whereas in tropical climates, such as those of sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, it was much easier to procure food, and elaborate shelter from harsh winter climates was unnecessary. Thus, we are supposed to conclude, white Europeans have “naturally” evolved into beings of superior intellect and innovation, out of geographical necessity.

What is disturbing about the reappearence of these sorts of arguments in more covert forms, is their history in this racist discourse, that they may mark, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, a resurgence of neo-fascist ideology. Indeed, it is probably no coincidence that the people whose racial inferiority was “explained” years ago by geographical factors, are now the same people whose chronic impoverishment is being “explained” in a similar way. This led me to wonder whether race was playing a greater role in some of the global problems we’ve been discussing here than it would appear; whether, for example, the apparent lack of concern on the part of more developed countries for the suffering in less developed countries might be explained by a moral psychology that views some groups as inferior, inherently dependent, “savage,” and the like; or the extent to which the ideal of cosmopolitan citizenship is hindered by racism and xenophobia.

Having made a hasty judgment before about the shortcomings of development ethics, I am hesitant to say that the role of race remains undertheorized therein, since, again, I haven't read enough of the literature to make that claim. However, I have not heard much about the issue of race as it is relevant to the field of development ethics, and so I am interested to hear your thoughts on this issue, and perhaps even how it is relevant to the capabilities approach (since, after all, racist discourse often takes the form of ascribing differential and hierarchical sets of capabilities to different racial groups). So, I'll leave you all with that, and thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak and reflect upon my experiences and perceptions of the field of development ethics.