Abstract:
In company with another literary scholar and two professional psychologists, I put together an online survey of characters in Victorian novels. We listed about 2,000 characters from 200 novels and contacted hundreds of scholars and readers of the novels. We got nearly 600 respondents. With multiple responses from individual respondents, we received more than more than 1,500 “codings” on several hundred characters. For each character selected, the respondents were asked to give numerical ratings on motives and personality features, to give ratings on their own emotional responses to the characters, and to assign characters to roles as protagonists, antagonists, or minor characters. We used standard statistical procedures to analyze the results and produced a book manuscript on the nature and significance of “agonistic” structure in the novels. We also gave detailed results for several novels in which major characters received multiple codings. We anticipate two chief kinds of criticism: (1) that it isn’t possible or legitimate to reduce human nature to a few basic or universal categories; and (2) that the elements of human nature are so well known and understood that using them in the way we do can only reproduce the self-evident. Besides simply pointing to the fact that these two criticisms cancel one another out, I shall explain how and why it is possible and legitimate to reduce human nature to a few basic, universal categories, and also how those categories can be used to reach new and important insights into the novels.

– Informal seminar (15 min.) followed by discussion –
– All Welcome –

Darwin Lecture Series info: homepages.ucalgary.ca/~jefox/Darwin.htm