

UNLV

PHILOSOPHY COLLOQUIUM SERIES

SPRING 2024

1. Thursday, February 8, 2024, 4:00pm, Barrick Museum Auditorium [Note the day, time, and place]

“Perverse Actions.” [University Forum Lecture]

Paul Bloom, Depts. of Psychology and Cognitive Science, University of Toronto and Yale University

We occasionally act in ways that are wrong—morally or otherwise—at least partially because of the wrongness, as when we break a rule just for the sake of breaking it. I explore theories of such perverse actions, including failures of thought suppression, signaling, strategic behaviour, expressions of autonomy, and “hopeful monsters”. Some of these fail to adequately explain perversity, but others are more successful. I suggest that studying perverse actions can tell us interesting things about human nature.

2. Friday, February 9, 2024, 3:00pm in CHB [formerly CBC] C210

“Pleasures of Suffering.”

Paul Bloom, Depts. of Psychology and Cognitive Science, University of Toronto and Yale University

People are hedonists, seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. This view is central to much of psychology and it fits many people’s own sense of why they do what they do. But what about our appetites for spicy foods, hot baths, horror movies, sad songs, BDSM, and hate reading?

It turns out that people often seek out pain and suffering—in pursuits such as art, ritual, sex, and sports, and in longer-term projects, such as training for a marathon or signing up to go to war. Drawing on research from developmental psychology, anthropology, and behavioural economics, I argue that these seemingly paradoxical choices show that we are driven by non-hedonistic goals; we revel in difficult practice, we aspire towards moral goodness, and we seek out meaningful lives.

3. Friday, February 23, 2024, 3:00pm in CHB C210

“What Eliminative Materialism Isn’t.”

Bill Ramsey, Dept. of Philosophy, University of Nevada Las Vegas

In this talk my aim is to get clearer on what eliminative materialism actually does and does not entail. I look closely at one cluster of views that is often described as a form of eliminativism in contemporary philosophy and cognitive science and try to show that this characterization is a mistake. More specifically, I look at conceptions of eliminativism recently endorsed by writers such as Edouard Machery (2009), Paul Griffiths (1997), Valerie Hardcastle (1999) and others, and argue that although these views do endorse the elimination of something, they offer only what I will call a sort of category dissolution, and should be treated as something altogether different from traditional eliminativism. Spelling out the main contrast(s) between eliminative materialism proper and this alternative view, and defending the need to keep them distinct, is my primary objective. As I show, a central irony is that proponents of the problematic outlook often insist that divergent things should not be classified together under a single label. By characterizing their own views as a form of eliminativism, they commit a fundamental error that they themselves argue should not be made. While my focus here is on eliminative materialism, the error I intend to highlight appears across various discussions about alleged eliminativism of all sorts of things.

4. Friday, March 1, 2024, 3:00pm in CHB C210

“What is at Stake in the Early Modern Debate over Jewish Ceremonial Law? Agency, Reform, and a Defense of Toleration.”

Michael Rosenthal, Dept. of Philosophy, University of Toronto

In this paper I shall discuss a debate that developed among early modern Jewish philosophers (Spinoza, Moses Mendelssohn, and Lazarus Bendavid) over whether Jews should abandon ceremonial (or ritual) law as a condition of their political emancipation and cultural “improvement.” I shall take this debate as paradigmatic of certain philosophical tensions within the discourse of religious toleration and the contemporary critique of this discourse as such. In particular, the demand to reform Jewish beliefs and practice as a condition of emancipation highlights the tension between minority agency and majority domination in the discourse and practice of toleration. I shall argue that despite its apparent problems, if we understand it properly, this episode illustrates the value of religious reform and a possible pragmatic justification of toleration that does not ignore but rather depends upon the recognition of asymmetrical power relations.

5. Tuesday, March 5, 2024, 3:00pm in CHB C138 [Note the day and place]

“Reasoning, Inference and the Ontology of Reasons.”

Marc Moffett, Dept. of Philosophy, University of Texas, El Paso

The question of what kind of things reasons are – the ontology of reasons – is not independent of the question how one thinks actions and beliefs are justified. This is particularly true if one accepts (as I do) Dancy’s Unity of Reasons thesis: There is one kind of reason for acting/believing that can function as both a motivating reason and a normative reason.

Motivating reasons are reasons that *rationaly* explain why someone X-ed, while normative reasons account for why someone should or should not X (things that “count in favor of” X-ing). As Dancy notes, it would be possible to act for good reasons (and surely it is possible) only if motivating and normative reasons were of the same kind. While there may be room to resist Dancy’s reasoning, I propose to accept it. But accepting the Unity of Reasons seems inherently problematic: (1) On the one hand, it is immensely *prima facie* plausible that motivating reasons are psychological states; indeed, non-factive psychological states. (2) On the other hand, it is also immensely plausible that normative reasons are not psychological states, but rather the sorts of things that can be invoked in logical and practical reasoning in support of X-ing. And it is standardly thought that what is invoked in reasoning are propositions or, perhaps, states-of-affairs. Consequently, any philosopher who takes her cue from the naïve ontology of motivating reasons, will find pressure to explain how psychological states can serve as normative reasons. Similarly, any

philosopher who takes her cue from the naïve ontology of normative reasons, will find pressure to explain how propositions (or states-of-affairs) can serve as motivating reasons. (The *schadenfreude* of disunity theorists is palpable.)

In this talk, I am going to give a partial defense of psychologism about reasons – the thesis that reasons are (non-factive) mental states – by arguing that the view of reasoning invoked in support of anti-psychologism is overly simplistic. A realistic and fully developed theory of reasoning instead supports psychologism. Specifically, I will argue that reasoning (or more specifically, inference) involves us in normative (justificatory) questions only insofar as we think of reasoning (inferring) as a cognitive act. Furthermore, the act of reasoning invokes ineliminable psychological states as motivating reasons for accepting (or rejecting) the results of our reasoning. That is, these psychological states are motivating reasons for our practically or logically inferring something. Removing them, moreover, would leave us without a good reason for so inferring. Thus, non-factive psychological states serve as both motivating and normative reasons for inferential acts. Finally, the normative status of any resulting states-of-affairs is at least partially inherited from the normative status of these underlying actions. On this basis, I conclude that reasoning and inference, properly considered, support psychologism about reasons.

6. Friday, March 22, 2024, 3:00pm in CHB C210

**“Poisoning the Well: Hermeneutical Injustice through Conceptual Engineering.”
Cat Saint-Croix, Dept. of Philosophy, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities**

To "poison the well" is to pollute a source of life and community—spoiling a safe, essential resource. This talk identifies two ways conceptual engineering can be used to poison the well, each bringing about epistemic injustice. Both results—corruption and creep—can spoil conceptual resources. Hermeneutical corruption is the adulteration of a concept by some element that renders it harmful to populations for whom it was previously beneficial. The right-wing re-engineering of “queer” to incorporate “groomer” throughout 2022 and 2023 is a clear example of this tactic. The more familiar category of concept creep, by contrast, is the expansion of a concept in a way that dilutes the original meaning. This tactic was employed in the re-engineering of “critical race theory” that took place in 2019-2022. Often, these tactics go hand-in-hand. This talk explores the interrelation of these concepts, their connection with conceptual engineering, and the epistemic injustice they can inflict. In particular, I argue, far from being difficult or impossible to implement—as proponents of the "implementation problem" argue—conceptual engineering is common, subtle, and potentially dangerous.

7. Friday, March 29, 2024, 3:00pm in CHB C210

“Children, Borders, and ‘Adultification’.”

Amy Reed-Sandoval, Dept. of Philosophy, University of Nevada Las Vegas

Many of the world’s borders systematically harm children and adolescents in terrible ways. In particularly violent cases, they are sites where children experience death, injury, sexual violence, and a range of other physical harms. Borders are also frequently sites of family separation and trauma—leading some philosophers to argue that border coercion violates many children’s “right to an open future”. In this paper, I aim to expand upon a small, but important, normative literature on the relationship between borders and childhood by arguing that many borders also harm children by effectively *turning them into adults* in the eyes of society. That is, many borders are complicit in the phenomenon of “adultification,” as young people find their social identities “transferred” from the category of children to that of adults upon crossing them. This, in turn, leaves many children—particularly children of color—vulnerable to increased targeting by police and harsher penalties under the criminal justice system. Border-crossings may also serve to disadvantage children in education systems, subject them to a wide range of hostile, racist, anti-immigrant attitudes, and make children even more vulnerable to family separation. After diagnosing the moral wrong of “adultification” that occurs at many of the world’s borders, which I do through the lens of privacy ethics, I move on to argue that addressing this problem requires us to refashion “adultifying borders” as “child-friendly spaces”.

8. Friday, April 12, 2024, 3:00pm in CHB C210

“Happiness and Nothingness.”

Paul Schollmeier, Dept. of Philosophy, University of Nevada Las Vegas

Human happiness is a daydream. All our thoughts are daydreams because human knowledge has its limits. Our ideas and impressions cannot grasp reality. Our ideas arise from our impressions, internal or external, but our impressions are false! They seem to be effects that represent and resemble objects. But effects need not resemble their causes, and their causes need not be objects. We all experience dreams and mirages, do we not? What is worse, our ideas and impressions are fixed entities, but reality gives every appearance of being entities in flux.

We are deluded about our happiness, then. We are allotted only a false notion of human happiness. Human knowledge seems to be about something, but it is about not-something. It is about nothing, in a word. And yet we could not be happy if we were not deluded! We are indebted to nothing for all our activities, both our thoughts and our actions. Nothing is a privation, and it holds a potential for change. Unless it comes to be from nothing, no something can come to be. Nothing, paradoxically, permits us to think and to act! It is a privation with a potential for eudaimonic activity.

9. Friday, April 26, 2024, 3:00pm in CHB C210

“Number-Properties: Existence in a Homogeneous Reality.”

Melisa Vivanco, Dept. of Philosophy, University of Texas - Rio Grande Valley

Although number sentences are ostensibly simple, familiar, and applicable, the justification for our arithmetical beliefs has been considered mysterious by the philosophical tradition. In this paper, I argue that such a mystery is due to a preconception of two realities, one mathematical and one nonmathematical, which are alien to each other. My proposal shows that the theory of numbers as properties entails a homogeneous domain in which arithmetical and nonmathematical truth occur. As a result, the possibility of arithmetical knowledge is simply a consequence of the possibility of ordinary knowledge.

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**For more information contact the
Philosophy Department at: 702-895-3433**