10th Edinburgh Graduate Epistemology Conference

Abstracts

STEPH RENNICK (Keynote)  The Intention Problem (A Rational Constraint on Eating Stars)

MICHAEL HANNON (Keynote)  Are Smarter Voters Better Voters?

It is widely believed that democracies require knowledgeable citizens to function well. But the most politically knowledgeable individuals also tend to be the most partisan, and the strength of partisan identity tends to corrupt political thinking. This creates a conundrum. On the one hand, an informed citizenry is allegedly necessary for a democracy to flourish. On the other hand, the most knowledgeable and passionate voters are also the most likely to think in corrupted, biased ways. What to do? This paper examines this tension and draws out several lessons. First, it is not obvious that more knowledgeable voters will make better political decisions. Second, attempts to remedy voter ignorance are problematic because partisans tend to become more polarized when they acquire more information. Third, solutions to citizen incompetence must focus on the intellectual virtue of objectivity. Fourth, some forms of epistocracy are troubling, in part, because they would increase the political power of the most dogmatic and biased individuals. Fifth, a highly restrictive form of epistocracy may escape the problem of political dogmatism, but epistocrats may face a steeper tradeoff between inclusivity and epistemic virtue than many would like.

MATT HEWSON  Accurate Updating: Some Hard Truths

I show that the update functions which maximise expected accuracy require you to respond to evidence in prima facie irrational ways. On the face of it, this is bad news for the project of grounding all epistemic norms in accuracy.

MOYA MAPPS  Believing Women

In this paper I defend the feminist position that we should believe people when they claim to be survivors of sexual harassment and assault. I start with a pair of philosophical problems. First is the “wrong kind of reason” problem: does the principle “believe women” give moral and/or political reasons in a domain that should be governed by purely epistemic reasons? Second is the “ought implies can” problem: can one control what one believes? If not, how could an imperative like “believe women” be meaningful?

The key to solving both problems, I argue, is distinguishing two different kinds of “belief.” In one familiar sense, “believing” is something mental, something in the same broad category as “thinking” and “feeling.” This kind of “believing” is something inside the head; it is essentially private. I call this “believing” in the epistemic sense, or believing^E for short.

But I argue that “believing” also has another meaning: “believing” in the practical sense, or believing^P for short. Believing^P a person is a way of treating her. Whereas believing^E
concerns what one thinks, believing^P concerns how one behaves; whereas believing^E is essentially private, believing^P is essentially public.

I propose two distinct but mutually complementary interpretations of “believe women,” one for each sense of “believe.” Each interpretation solves the “wrong kind of reason” problem and the “ought implies can” problem in its own way; together, they offer a rich account of how we should believe and why.

**ELISE WOODARD**

The Ignorance Norm and Paradoxical Assertions

Can agents rationally inquire into things that they know? On my view, the answer is yes. Call this view the Compatibility Thesis. One challenge to this thesis is to explain why assertions like “I know that p, but I’m wondering whether p” sound odd, if not Moore-Paradoxical. In response to this challenge, I argue that we can reject one or both premises that give rise to it. First, we can deny that inquiry requires interrogative attitudes. Second, we can deny the ignorance norm, on which agents are not permitted to both know and have interrogative attitudes, such as wondering. I argue that there are compelling reasons to deny the former and reasons to question the latter. Both options pave the way to further work on further inquiry.

**ROSS PATRIZIO**

The Generality Problem and the C-Typing Solution

The generality problem for reliabilism demands a principled specification of precisely which type of belief-forming processes are relevant in determining doxastic justification. Lisa Miracchi (2017) has recently presented a novel solution to the problem, labelled the C-Typing thesis. In this paper, I present a troublesome dilemma for Miracchi. Through discussion of implicit biases and their effect on our credence-formation, I demonstrate that Miracchi’s thesis must be amended so as to either exclude or include such bias from the process type specification. Opting for the former risks rendering the thesis ad-hoc, whereas opting for the latter risks rendering the thesis non-reliabilist.

**MICHAEL BRUCKNER**

Friendship, Forensics, and Favoritism

Sarah Stroud and Simon Keller have observed, independently of each other, that friendship sometimes seems to require ignoring, discrediting, reinterpreting, or in some other way disrespecting unflattering evidence about one’s friends. (I call this observation ‘Disrespect’.) One inference Stroud and Keller seek to draw from Disrespect is that the norms of friendship require thinking better of one’s friends than an impartial observer would. (I call this thesis ‘Favoritism’.) Another inference Stroud and Keller seek to draw from Disrespect is that the norms of friendship are in conflict with the norms of mainstream epistemology, which allegedly always prohibit disrespecting unflattering evidence about one’s friends. (I call this thesis ‘Conflict’.)

While I accept Stroud’s and Keller’s initial observation that friendship sometimes seems to require disrespecting unflattering evidence about one’s friends, I contest both inferences they seek to draw from it. I object to the inference of Favoritism on the grounds that it is shown to be invalid by a hitherto neglected type of case, where the norms of friendship require thinking worse of one’s friends than an impartial observer would (lest one unduly idolize them). I then
indicate how the notion of epistemic acquaintance, which has seen an upsurge of interest recently, opens up a novel avenue for blocking the inference of Conflict as well. Note that this argument is modest: if epistemic acquaintance can obtain between an epistemic agent and their friend’s character, then there will be grounds to resist the inference. I will not undertake defending the antecedent here.

ALICE HUANG Normative Sensitivism

Credence-one + doxastic sensitivism is the view that S outright believes a proposition p iff S has credence 1 for p, where credence is distributed only across a limited set of possibilities that are active for S. In the literature, which possibilities are active for an agent is generally considered as descriptive psychological facts. I motivate a normative version of doxastic sensitivism that better explains intuitively irrational cases. I argue that which possibilities are active should be determined by an expected utility function.