Motivated Reasoning & Belief Polarization

PHIL 231

Winter 2018

Instructor

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Office Hours: Thursdays 1:45 – 3:00, & by appointment
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Course Description

In the last decade there has been an unprecedented surge in research—in philosophy, political science, and social psychology—on what many philosophers now call motivated reasoning (and the closely related phenomena of confirmation bias, implicit bias, rationalization, wishful thinking, MySide bias, and more). In this seminar, we will review that research and investigate some of the significant philosophical (especially, epistemological and ethical) questions it raises.

We will focus especially on the role of these phenomena in the reasoning of particularly reflective, scrupulous, and highly educated thinkers, including perhaps philosophers, scientists, and academics more generally. What impact does motivated reasoning have on their beliefs and convictions? Or on ours? And what are the normative implications of that impact?

Two sets of normative questions will be particularly relevant. The first is directly epistemological and concerns the form and degree of epistemic modesty recommended (if not mandated) by our understanding of the consequences of these cognitive phenomena. The other is ethical and concerns the bearing of these consequences on some of our most fundamental social practices: those whereby we interpret the thoughts and reasoning of other people (friends, colleagues, politicians) and, in turn, based on our assessment of their reasoning, form judgments about their ethical character and epistemic capacities.

Readings will be drawn primarily from contemporary epistemology and cognitive science. Also relevant will be recent work in social philosophy on epistemic, hermeneutical, and testimonial injustice.

Course Assignments

Students will be assessed on the following:

- **Final Paper** 50%
  Due Friday, March 23, 1:00pm

- **Groupwork** 30%
  Weekly discussions
  Group Presentations (March 19, 12:00-3:00pm)

- **In-class participation** 20%
Accommodations

UC Santa Cruz is committed to creating an academic environment that supports its diverse student body. If you are a student with a disability who requires accommodations to achieve equal access in this course, please submit your “Accommodation Authorization Letter” from the Disability Resource Center (DRC) to me privately during my office hours as soon as possible in the academic quarter, preferably within 1 week. I also am open to and want to encourage you to discuss with me ways I/we can ensure your full participation in this course. If you have not already done so, I encourage you to learn more about the many services offered by the DRC. You can visit their website (http://drc.ucsc.edu/index.html), make an appointment, and meet in-person with a DRC staff member. The phone number is 831-459-2089 or email drc@ucsc.edu.

CALENDAR OF READINGS

The schedule of readings below is tentative. I will announce changes in class or via email.

January 9  
Introduction


January 16  
Confirmation Bias and Belief Polarization

*Target Article:*


*Required:*


*Suggested:*


January 23  
Motivated Reasoning and Introspection


Introspection


January 30 Epistemic Normativity and the Ethics of Belief

Note: Don’t fret! There’s a lot to look through here, but I’ll give guidance on what’s critical and what you may skim depending on interest. The key here is merely to call your attention to a variety of related issues to keep in mind in the following weeks.

The Relation of Motivated Reasoning to:

Confabulation:


Rationalization:

Schwitzgebel, Eric, & Jonathan Ellis, “Rationalization in Moral and Philosophical Thought”

Implicit Bias:

Cognitive Dissonance:
Mills, Judson, “Changes in Moral Attitudes Following Temptation” (1958)

Self-Deception:


Bullshit:
Wishful Thinking:

MySide Bias:

On the Epistemic Values of Affective States

Permissivism & Relativism

Evidential vs. Pragmatic Reasons

Pragmatism
James, William. “The Will to Believe” (1896) and paragraph #59 of “Is Life Worth Living?” (1896) in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. Available at http://www.gutenberg.org/
[available here: http://www.peirce.org/writings/p107.html]

Benefits of Motivated Reasoning
Tolstoy, Leo. Excerpt from “A Confession” (1884).
February 6  Micro Motivated Reasoning

Ellis, J. manuscript
Medina, José, from The Epistemology of Resistance (Oxford University Press, 2012).

February 13  GROUP MEETINGS


February 20  The Epistemic Significance of Higher-Order Evidence: Disagreement and Beyond

Peer Disagreement
Van Inwagen, Peter “We’re Right. They’re Wrong,” in Disagreement, eds. R. Feldman and T. Warfield (Oxford University Press, 2010).

Irrelevant Influences

Higher-Order Evidence
Elga, Adam “On Overrating Oneself... and Knowing It” Philosophical Studies (2005)

February 27  The Reach of Motivated Reasoning

Ellis, J. manuscript

Measures of Intelligence
Stanovich, Keith. Rationality & the Reflective Mind (Oxford University Press, 2011), available online through cruzcat.ucsc. Read at least chapters 1, 2, and especially 7, but there is a lot of relevant material in this book in case you’re interested in reading further.
Nietzsche, Friedrich. “On the Prejudices of Philosophers” from Beyond Good and Evil (1886)
Schwitzgebel, Eric, & Ellis Jonathan, “Rationalization in Moral and Philosophical Thought”
Schwitzgebel, Eric, and Fiery Cushman (2012). Expertise in moral reasoning? Order effects on
moral judgment in professional philosophers and non-philosophers. Mind & Language 27: 
135-153.
training, expertise, and reflection. Cognition 141: 127-137.

Impact on Perception
Balcetis, Emily, and David Dunning (2006). See what you want to see: Motivational influences on 
Balcetis, Emily, and David Dunning (2007). Cognitive dissonance and the perception of natural 
Balcetis, Emily, and David Dunning (2010). Wishful seeing: More desired objects are seen as 

March 6 Social Implications

Interpersonal Judgment
Ellis, J. manuscript

Social Injustice
Fricker, Miranda, from Epistemic Injustice (Oxford University Press, 2007).
Medina, José, from The Epistemology of Resistance (Oxford University Press, 2012).
Mogensen, Andreas, “Racial Profiling and Cumulative Injustice” Philosophy and Phenomenological 
Research.

March 13 Circling Back

Reading TBD.

March 19 (Monday) Group Project
12:00 – 3:00pm

March 23 (Friday) Final Papers Due
Due at 1:00pm; send via email to jellis@ucsc.edu