

# Motivated Reasoning & Belief Polarization

PHIL 231

Winter 2018

## Instructor

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108 Cowell Annex  
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](mailto: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

Lord, Charles, G., Lee Ross and Mark R. Lepper, “Biased Assimilation and Attitude Polarization: The Effects of Prior Theories on Subsequently Considered Evidence,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37:11 (1979): 2098-2109.

### January 16 Confirmation Bias and Belief Polarization

*Target Article:*

Kelly, Thomas, “Disagreement, Dogmatism, and Belief Polarization,” *Journal of Philosophy* 105 (10): 611-633 (2008).

*Required:*

Kunda, Ziva, “Motivated Reasoning” *Psychological Bulletin* 108(3) (1990).

*Suggested:*

Nickerson, Raymond, “Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises,” *Review of General Psychology* (1998)

Taber, Charles and M. Lodge. “Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs,” *American Journal of Political Science* (2006).

### January 23 Motivated Reasoning and Introspection

Kahan, Dan. “Neutral Principles, Motivated Cognition, and Some Problems for Constitutional Law,” 125 *Harr. L. Rev.* 1 (2011).

Kahan, Dan. “Ideology, Motivated Reasoning, and Cognitive Reflection” *Judgment and Decision Making* (2013).

- Vargas, Manuel. "The Runeberg Problem: Theism, Libertarianism, and Motivated Reasoning." In *Libertarianism and Free Will: the Interplay of Religious Belief and Free Will*, eds. K. Timpe & D. Speak (Oxford University Press, 2016/17).
- Westen, Drew, et al., "Neural Bases of Motivated Reasoning: An fMRI Study of Emotional Constraints on Partisan Political Judgment in the 2004 U.S. Presidential Election" *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* (2006).

#### *Introspection*

- Ehrlinger, Joyce, Thomas Gilovich, and Lee Ross (2005). Peering into the bias blind spot: People's assessments of bias in themselves and others. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 31: 680-692.
- Pronin, Emily. "The Introspection Illusion" in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 41 (Academic Press, 2009).
- Pronin, Emily, Thomas Gilovich, and Lee Ross (2004). Objectivity in the eye of the beholder: Divergent perceptions of bias in self versus others. *Psychological Review* 111: 781-799.
- Pronin, Emily, D. Lin, and L. Ross. "The Bias Blind Spot: Perceptions of Bias in Self Versus Others" *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2002).
- Scopelleti, Irene, Carey K. Morewedge, Erin McCormick, H. Lauren Min, Sophie Lebrecht, and Karim S. Kassam (2015). Bias blind spot: Structure, measurement, and consequences. *Management Science* 61: 2468-2486.

**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:**

- Bortolotti, Lisa, "Stranger than Fiction: Costs and Benefits of Everyday Confabulation" *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*: 1-23.
- Carruthers, Peter. Excerpt from *The Opacity of Mind: An Integrative Theory of Self-Knowledge* (Oxford, 2011).

#### **Rationalization:**

- Jones, Ernest (1908). Rationalization in every-day life. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 3: 161-169.
- Schwitzgebel, Eric, & Jonathan Ellis, "Rationalization in Moral and Philosophical Thought"

#### **Implicit Bias:**

- Brownstein, Michael (2015). Implicit bias. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2015 edition). URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/implicit-bias>

#### **Cognitive Dissonance:**

- Mills, Judson, "Changes in Moral Attitudes Following Temptation" (1958)

#### **Self-Deception:**

- Mele, Alfred (2001), from *Self-deception unmasked*. Princeton: Princeton.
- Rorty, Amelie. "User-Friendly Self-Deception," *Philosophy* (1994).

#### **Bullshit:**

- Frankfurt, Harry. *On Bullshit* (Princeton University Press, 2005).

### **Wishful Thinking:**

Siegel, Susanna, from “The Rationality of Perception” (Harvard University Press, 2016).

### **MySide Bias:**

Baron, Jonathan (1995). Myside bias in thinking about abortion. *Thinking and Reasoning* 1: 221–235.

### *On the Epistemic Values of Affective States*

Elgin, Catherine. “Emotion and Understanding” in *Epistemology and Emotions*, eds. Brun & Kuenzle (Ashgate 2008).

Hookway, Christopher. “Epistemic Immediacy, Doubt and Anxiety: On a Role for Affective States in Epistemic Evaluation” in *Epistemology and Emotions*, eds. Brun & Kuenzle (Ashgate 2008).

### *Permissivism & Relativism*

Goldman, Alvin, “Epistemic Relativism and Reasonable Disagreement,” in *Disagreement*, eds. R. Feldman and T. Warfield (Oxford University Press, 2010).

White, Roger, “Epistemic Permissiveness” *Philosophical Perspectives* (2005)

### *Evidential vs. Pragmatic Reasons*

Chignell, Andrew, “Belief in Kant,” *Philosophical Review* (2007).

### *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/>

Peirce, Charles Sanders. “The Fixation of Belief” (1877).  
[available here: <http://www.peirce.org/writings/p107.html>]

### *Benefits of Motivated Reasoning*

Bok, Sissela, from *Exploring Happiness: From Aristotle to Brain Science* (Yale University Press, 2011).

Mercier, Hugo, and D. Sperber. “Why Do Humans Reason? Arguments for an Argumentative Theory,” *BEHAVIORAL AND BRAIN SCIENCES* (2011).

Taylor, Shelley, and J. Brown, "Illusion and Well-Being: A Social Psychological Perspective on Mental Health," *Psychological Bulletin* (1988).

Taylor, Shelley, and J. Brown, "Positive Illusions and Well-Being Revisited: Separating Fact from Fiction," *Psychological Bulletin* (1994).

Tolstoy, Leo. Excerpt from “A Confession” (1884).

Trivers, Robert (2000). The elements of a scientific theory of self-deception. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 97: 114-131.

Trivers, Robert (2010). Deceit and self-deception. In P. M. Kappeler and J. B. Silk, eds., *Mind the Gap*. Berlin: Springer-Verlag.

**February 6                      Micro Motivated Reasoning**

Ellis, J. manuscript

Kornblith, Hilary. "Distrusting Reason," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* (1999)

Medina, José, from *The Epistemology of Resistance* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

Mogensen, Andreas, "Racial Profiling and Cumulative Injustice" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.

Stanovich, Keith E., Richard R. West, and Maggie E. Toplak (2013). Myside bias, rational thinking, and intelligence. *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 22: 259-264.

**February 13                      GROUP MEETINGS**

Cohen, G. A., from *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* (Harvard University Press, 2000)

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

*Peer Disagreement*

Christensen, David. "Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News," *Philosophical Review* (2007).

McGrath, Sarah. "Moral Disagreement and Moral Expertise" *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics* (2008).

Van Inwagen, Peter "We're Right. They're Wrong," in *Disagreement*, eds. R. Feldman and T. Warfield (Oxford University Press, 2010).

*Irrelevant Influences*

Sher, George. "But I Could Be Wrong," *Social Philosophy and Policy* (2001).

White, Roger. "You Just Believe That Because..." *Philosophical Perspectives* (2010).

*Higher-Order Evidence*

Egan, Andy, and A. Elga. "I Can't Believe I'm Stupid," *Philosophical Perspectives* (2005).

Elga, Adam "On Overrating Oneself... and Knowing It" *Philosophical Studies* (2005)

Roush, Sherrilyn. "Second Guessing: A Self-Help Manual," *Episteme* (2009).

Whitcomb, Dennis, et al. "Intellectual Humility: Owning Our Limitations" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* XCIV No. 3 May 2017.

**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.

*Philosophy*

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.

Schwitzgebel, Eric, and Fiery Cushman (2015). Philosophers' biased judgments persist despite  
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  
visual perception. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 91: 612–625.

Balcetis, Emily, and David Dunning (2007). Cognitive dissonance and the perception of natural  
environments. *Psychological Science* 18: 917–921.

Balcetis, Emily, and David Dunning (2010). Wishful seeing: More desired objects are seen as  
closer. *Psychological Science* 21: 147–152.

### **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](mailto:jellis@ucsc.edu)**