

PHIL 619: Seminar in Epistemology (tentative syllabus)

Fall 2015, Thursdays, 10:30—12:30, LEA 927

Instructor: Robert Stephens

Email: robert.stephens@mail.mcgill.ca

Office: TBA

Office hrs: Thursday 9:00-10:30

Theme: Belief revision

Managing one's beliefs is a pretty heavy responsibility, as one's claim to rationality generally hinges on doing it right. According to standard norms of rationality, our belief revision practices *ought* to respect the principles coherence and consistency—we ought to weed out inconsistent beliefs, we ought to update beliefs on the basis of new evidence, we ought to believe that which is logically implicated by our beliefs, we ought to intend and behave in a fashion consistent with our beliefs, etc. In many ways, the relationship between belief and rationality is intertwined, insofar as each tends to be the yardstick via which the other is measured. We will begin our inquiry with Quine & Ullian's *Web of Belief*, which makes this argument quite explicitly.

However, the connection between rationality and belief, on any dimension, is arguably more complicated and ambiguous than this initial discussion presumes it to be. On one hand, we are faced with evidence from myriad empirical studies suggesting our belief revision practices fall hopelessly short of this goal. On the other hand, a number of influential accounts in cognitive science note that there are hard computational limits involved in any sort of holistic, global belief revision which render coherence and consistency as impossible, unrealizable ideals. We are faced with what cognitive scientists have dubbed the *frame problem*, alluding to the difficult question of where to stop considering evidence before committing to (or rejecting) any given belief, yet at the same time, trapped in what Cherniak (1986) refers to as the *finitary predicament* of having limited time and computational resources to engage in that process. In short, rationality seems to demand belief revision practices that are "Quinean", while cognitive architecture makes that impossible.

In this course, we will look at a number of accounts of belief and belief revision that attempt to resolve or sidestep this issue, as well as a handful of influential social psychology studies that highlight the depth and breadth of the problem regarding how poorly belief revision practices meet normative rational requirements for most of us, not just those sidelined as "irrational". We will look specifically at cases of "perseverant false belief", in which putatively "rational" individuals fail to fully *unbelieve* propositions that they themselves have concluded to be definitively false, debunked and/or disproved by evidence—their false beliefs appear to remain insofar as they guide action or crop up in implicit attitudes, reasoning biases, and self-deception. We will further explore the relation between belief revision practices and rationality as they relate to pathological belief states and delusion, to see what lessons may be drawn for philosophical accounts of belief.

Evaluation:

Participation - 20%

Presentation(s) - 30%

Final paper (12-15 pages) - 50%

Each week we will discuss one or two articles or book excerpts. Given that this is a small seminar course, there is a pretty heavy participation grade, which will be based on regular attendance and active discussion of the material. The presentation mark is separate: we will divide up the material early in the term and assign a few of the papers to be presented by students (you should expect to have this happen twice in the term). On a week where you are presenting, you will be expected to give a brief overview of the main argument(s) of the paper in question, provide the group with a 1-2 page (max) handout, and be able to lead off the discussion. Depending on the number of students in the course, these presentations may end up being done in pairs - we'll see when the course begins.

Readings (tentative): all readings will be posted on MyCourses

- Quine, W.V.O., Ullian, J.S. (1978) *The Web of Belief*. New York: McGraw-Hill. (Excerpts)
- Fodor, J.A. (1987). Modules, frames, fridgeons, sleeping dogs, and the music of the spheres.

- Harman, G. (1986) *Change in View*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. (Excerpts)
- Cherniak, C. (1990) *Minimal Rationality*. Cambridge, MA: Bradford. (Excerpts)

- Dennett, D. (1987) "Cognitive Wheels: The Frame problem of AI" from *The Robot's Dilemma* (ed. Pylyshyn). Norwood, NJ: Ablex, pp. 41-64
- Cohen, J.L. (1992). *An Essay on Belief and Acceptance*. Cambridge: Clarendon Press. (Excerpts)
- Frankish, K. (2004). *Mind and supermind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Excerpts)
- Anderson, C., Lepper, M., & Ross, L. (1980). Perseverance of social theories: the role of explanation in the persistence of discredited information. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 39(6), 1037-49.
- Gendler, T. S. (2008a). Alief in action (and reaction). *Mind and Language*, 23(5), 552-85.
- ——— (2008b). Alief and belief. *Journal of Philosophy*, 105(10), 634-63.
- Bortolotti, L. (2009). Delusion. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2013 Edition)
- ——— (2010). *Delusions and other irrational beliefs*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Excerpts)
- Dretske, F. (1986). Misrepresentation. *Belief: form, content, and function* (pp. 17-36). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Davies, A.M., Davies, M. (2009). Explaining pathologies of belief. *Psychiatry as cognitive neuroscience: philosophical perspectives* (pp. 285-323). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McKay, R., Dennett, D. (2009). The Evolution of Misbelief. *Behavioural and Brain Sciences*, 32, 493-561.
- McKay, R., Langdon, R., Coltheart, M. (2007). Models of misbelief: Integrating motivational and deficit theories of delusion. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 16, 932-41.
- Loftus, E. F. (1974). Reconstructing memory: The incredible eyewitness. *Jurimetrics J.*, 15, 188.
- ——— (2005). Planting misinformation in the human mind: a 30 year investigation of the

malleability of memory. *Learning and Memory*, 12, 361-66.

- Braun-Latour, K.A., Latour, M.S., Pickrell, J.E., & Loftus, E. (2004). How and when advertising can influence memory for consumer experience. *Journal of Advertising*, 33(4), 7-25.
- Gilbert, D. T. (1991). How mental systems believe. *American Psychologist*, 46(2), 107-119.
- Gilbert, D.T., Krull, D.S., Malone, P. S. (1990). Unbelieving the unbelievable: some problems in the rejection of false information. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 59(4), 601-613.
- Reisner, A. (2009). Unifying the requirements of rationality. *Philosophical Explorations*, 12(3), 243-260.

In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

McGill University values academic integrity. All students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the code of student conduct and disciplinary procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/integrity for more information).

A finalized version of this syllabus will be available on MyCourses at the beginning of the Fall 2015 term.