

## **Naturalistic Approaches to Action, Mind, and Value**

York University Graduate Conference in Philosophy  
24-25 April 2014  
Renaissance Room (Vanier College)



## Schedule

### 24 April (Thursday)

9.30am - 10.00am

Coffee and registration

10.00am - 10.50am

**Fermin Fulda** (University of Toronto, IHPST)

**Beyond Mechanism and Intellectualism: The Case of Bacteria Cognition**

In this paper I introduce an ecological theory of purposive agency and contrast it with the traditional Cartesian conception using recent research in microbiology on bacteria cognition and cell-decision-making as a test case. First, I argue that the Cartesian conception, the view that agency presupposes cognition, imposes a dichotomy between ‘mechanism’, the view that unicellular organisms are mere automata, and ‘intellectualism’, the view that their actions exhibit full blown rationality. Then I argue that this scheme is not sufficiently nuanced to capture what these empirical discoveries mean for our understanding of the nature of agency: While mechanism radically underestimates the capacities of unicellular organisms, intellectualism clearly overestimates them. In contrast, I argue that the ecological conception, the view that agency consist in the capacity to respond to conditions as affordances, offers a via media between mechanism and intellectualism by allowing for degrees of agency along a continuum, from mere adaptive biological agents at one extreme to cognitive psychological agents on the other. Single cell organisms, I conclude, are minimal biological agents, hence not mere automata, but not cognitive (rational) agents.

Commentary: **Èric Arnau Soler** (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona & York University)

10.50am - 11.10am

Break

11.10am - 12.00pm

**Emanuel John** (University of Potsdam & University of Pittsburgh)

**The Natural Goodness of Rational Agents**

Aristotelian naturalism rests on the argument that the standards of goodness, applying to an activity or living being, are to be conceived relative to their species concept. For this notion of naturalism the knowledge of what makes X good and that of what X is are hence interchangeable. My paper discusses to what extent it is applicable to persons as subjects that have the power to act from the representation of an end. This requires scrutiny in two aspects. The first lies in determining an end as according with what is substantive of rational life. This line of thought is, for example, followed by Phillipa Foot in her book *Natural Goodness*, where she makes sense of the Aristotelian notion of naturalism by showing that

the understanding of what is generically good springs from the human life-form. The second lies in the power to represent an end as one's own, and therefore to self-consciously endorse standards of one's conduct. The latter aspect may undermine the former when the end a person represents as her good does not accord with the good that springs from generic rational life. That the self-consciously represented good can be thought as one with the generic good is essential when arguing that the Aristotelian argument applies to persons that have the power to act from the representation of an end. In laying out the origin of the conflict between the two aspects I expose the presuppositions we have to accept when thinking them together.

Commentary: **Imola Ilyes** (York University)

12.00pm - 1.00pm  
Lunch

1.00pm - 1.50pm

**Thomas Quinn** (Birkbeck College, University of London)  
**Naturalising Actions**

There are two broad approaches to questions about the nature of human agency. The standard view of agency is reductive, and is motivated by a worldview on which the only things that exist are those posited by our best scientific theories. The reductionist aims to show that agency can be 'naturalised' – that actions can be reduced to non-personal events such as neural firings and muscle movements and so shown to be part of the world as science conceives it. In contrast there is the antireductive approach. The antireductionist argues that actions are intrinsically active and agent-involving, and so any attempt to reduce them to the non-personal will fail. Arguments for the irreducibility of action are often quickly dismissed by the reductionist. My aim is to examine why this is, and to assess whether the widespread rejection of the antireductive approach is warranted. I will show that the reductionist's case for dismissing anti-reductive arguments is based on a strategy that is often implicitly employed. The reductionist's strategy is to separate conceptual and metaphysical reduction. This allows them to claim that the antireductionist at best only shows that our concept of action is irreducible, which still leaves it open for actions to be metaphysically reducible to non-personal events. I will argue that, when properly considered, this strategy is problematic and so the antireductionist's arguments are deserving of more careful consideration.

Commentary: **David Rocheleau-Houle** (York University)

1.50pm - 2.10pm  
Break

2.10pm - 3.00pm

**Sofia Bonicalzi** (University of Pavia)  
**Free Will, Agency and Naturalism**

Pretending to be a good companion for scientific naturalism, contemporary compatibilism pursues strategies that appeal to a highly refined set of first-persons properties and concepts, such as “self-consciousness”, “dispositional abilities”, “responsiveness to reasons” or “rational capacities”, taking for granted that explaining human actions with reference to the reflexive activity of the subject is compatible with a third-person ontology. In spite of the grey areas of these proposals, such a practical standpoint is a promising path for a better understanding of the mechanism of deliberation and choice in moral psychology. However, a compatibilism that advances substantive claims about how we are free and responsible (and not only why we hold people free and responsible), appealing to the efficacy of mental contents qua mental, is hard to enclose within the boundaries of reductive physicalism or eliminative materialism. The case of moral responsibility is particularly illuminating for speaking up for the ineliminability of the first-person approach since, in several of the most promising views, the basic prerequisites for free will and/or moral responsibility partially overlap the requirements for “being a person” or “being an autonomous agent”. If we want to share compatibilist intuitions – without embracing Dennett’s Intentional Systems Theory, which is deeply eliminativist, or the Strawsonian “deflationist” proposal – we might be ready to reconsider not only our methodological tools but also the domain of our ontology. This does not necessarily imply the recourse to supernatural factors, but may require the adoption of a broadly construed naturalism, which can take different paths. While libertarian views often make a point of focusing on the agential perspective, I want to claim that reasonable determinism-friendly accounts also cannot avoid taking into account first-person properties and have to say something about how to make them coherent with the naturalistic vision of the world.

Commentary: **Michelle Ciorria** (York University)

3.00pm - 3.30pm

Break

3.30pm - 5.30pm

**Jennifer Hornsby** (Birkbeck College, University of London & Centre for the Study of Mind in Nature, University of Oslo)

### **Reason Explanation in Action and Perception**

In the old debate about reasons for action and causes of action, it was often assumed that the fact that reason-explanations are causal explanations ensures that actions belong in the natural, causal world. I shall introduce a parallel debate that there might be about perception (thus raising questions in metaphysics, rather than the more often discussed epistemological questions). I shall suggest that our understanding of causality should impinge on what we take a naturalistic approach to be. I think that those who equate naturalism with physicalism are in the grip of a faulty conception of causality.

## 25 April (Friday)

9.30am - 10.00am

Coffee and registration

10.00am - 10.50am

**Jean-Charles Pelland** (Université du Québec à Montréal)

### **Millikan vs. Kusch: On Evolution and Normativity**

As powerfully illustrated by Kripke (1982), Wittgenstein's rule-following paradox questions our ability follow rules, and thus, our ability to mean anything in particular when we use a word. If Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein is correct, we seem faced with the catastrophic conclusion that there is no objective fact about what we mean when we use a word or symbol. Ruth Millikan's (1990) naturalization of rule-following in terms of biological purposes provides a promising solution to this paradox, rescuing some of our intuitions about the objectivity and determinacy of language and meaning. However, Martin Kusch's (2006) defense of Kripke questions the validity of Millikan's response to the paradox, arguing that her theory is based on a metaphorical use of normative language, and that it fails to account for the objectivity it needs to counter the Kripke. This paper offers a response to Kusch's criticism of Millikan. I will argue that Kusch's criticism misses the mark because it is based on an inadequate portrayal of both evolutionary design and normativity. By defending Millikan against Kusch's meaning skepticism, I hope not only to salvage something of our intuition that language involves some kind of rule following, but also the insight that normativity is a biological phenomenon.

Commentary: **Vitaly Kiryushchenko** (York University)

10.50am - 11.10am

Break

11.10am - 12.00pm

**Derek Green** (Northwestern University)

### **The Normativity of Mental Content. A Defense.**

Once thought to be a commonplace truth, the thesis that intentional content is somehow distinctively normative looks beleaguered. Kathrin Glüer and Åsa Wikforss's criticism of the thesis, offered in numerous articles over the last decade, looks especially successful. The sense of "normative" at issue in the content normativity debate is prescriptive normativity. According to Glüer and Wikforss, content is normative only if the fact that one possesses the content implies that one is enjoined by prescriptions for using it (in, e.g., thought or speech), and these prescriptions must guide the behavior of the subjects who possess the contents. Glüer and Wikforss argue that no plausible proposal shows how possessing an intentional content could imply rules for use that guide behavior. This paper uses Glüer and Wikforss's critique as a foil in developing a positive account of the normativity of a

particular type of content – conceptual mental content. It argues, first, that genuine prescriptions do not have to guide those they enjoin, even though they are fully prescriptive, and, secondly, that there is a plausible conception of conceptual mental content facts that qualifies these facts as normative (given this proper understanding of prescription). The paper also shows how these two contentions overcome the most important applicable objections from Glüer and Wikforss and the major presumptive challenge to the normativity of mental conceptual content posed by naturalism.

Commentary: **Olivia Sultanescu** (York University)

12.00pm - 1.00pm

Lunch

1.00pm - 1.50pm

**Chris Melenovsky** (University of Pennsylvania)

**Rawlsian Objectivity and Naturalism**

In 1980, John Rawls sent a draft of his “Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory” lectures to H.L.A. Hart for his comments. In his response, Hart expressed general approval of the project but asked Rawls about his views on moral objectivity. In this paper, I will better explain the view of objectivity that Rawls sketches in his reply to Hart, relate it to his broader views, and highlight its strengths. The advantage to Rawls’s conception of moral objectivity, I argue, is that it bypasses many of the traditional disputes between objectivists and subjectivists, supports a view of morality that is not reducible to psychology, and remains thoroughly committed to naturalism. To do this, my argument will proceed in three stages. First, I want to review the general constructivist approach to explaining moral objectivity as intersubjectivity. This will allow me to set up a fundamental contrast between Kant’s constructivism and Rawls’s constructivism. While Kant’s constructivism grounds intersubjectivity in the conditions of rational agency, Rawls’s constructivism grounds intersubjectivity in substantive conceptions of the person and society. In the second section, I argue that Kant’s constructivism faces two challenges and, in the third section, I argue that Rawls’s constructivism can overcome these challenges. In this process, I hope to give a clearer picture of Rawls’s views on moral objectivity and to show the ways in which his approach to ethics is fully consistent with a commitment to naturalism.

Commentary: **Samuel Steadman** (York University)

1.50pm - 2.10pm

Break

2.10pm - 3.00pm

**Benjamin Wald** (University of Toronto)

**Normative Concepts and Normative Natural Kinds**

In his paper “Alternative Normative Concepts” Matti Eklund presents a challenge to a wide range of realist theories of moral semantics. He asks us to consider a scenario he calls the alternative scenario, in which two elements of normative concepts come apart. One of these elements is those features of the concept that fix its extension. Alongside these extension-fixing features, we also have the action-guiding features of the concept. These features link the normative concept to action and motivation. If it is in fact possible for these features to come apart, then it raises the question of how we could justify privileging our own normative concepts over these alternative normative concepts. After all, to ask which normative concepts we should use is to use a normative concept, *should*. Our own *should* concept will tell us that we should use our own set of normative concepts. However, a member of the *alternative* community can reason in a parallel way using her own analogue of *should*, call it *should\**. This threatens to trivialize moral inquiry, by rendering our moral concepts merely parochial. Eklund himself thinks that we can look to Ralph Wedgwood’s theory of normative semantics to resolve this worry. However, I shall argue that Eklund is mistaken in this, and that Wedgwood’s theory only pushes the problem back a step, with the same worry emerging at a higher level. Instead, I suggest that the best solution is to hold that some normative concepts are more natural, or better carve nature at the joints, and hence are epistemically privileged. This requires us to recognize normative joints in reality alongside the physical or chemical joints that determine the naturalness of concepts used in the natural sciences.

Commentary: **Abigail Klassen** (York University)

3.00pm - 3.30pm

Break

3.30pm - 5.30pm

**Muhammad Ali Khalidi** (York University)

**In Defense of Human Kinds**

Various reasons may be given for thinking that human kinds (or social kinds) cannot be instances of natural kinds. But I will argue that on a naturalist account of natural kinds, which I have elsewhere described as a “simple causal theory” of natural kinds (Khalidi 2013), there is no reason to suppose that some human kinds could not be natural kinds. I consider five arguments to the contrary, namely that human kinds: 1) do not pertain to the natural sciences, 2) are artificial and hence not natural, 3) are mind-dependent and hence not real, 4) are conventional not causal, and 5) are evaluative or normative. I attempt to provide a response to each of these arguments, paving the way for a naturalist account of human kinds. Among other things, the existence of human kinds should alert us to the dangers of considering mind-independence to be a requirement for realism about a domain.

## Acknowledgments

### Reviewing Committee

Èric Arnau Soler  
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Imola Ilyes  
Olivia Sultanescu

The organizers are especially grateful to Professors Alice MacLachlan, Bob Myers, and Claudine Verheggen for their support. Thanks to Olaf Ellefson for his work on the conference poster, and to Professor Muhammad Ali Khalidi for hosting the conference party.