

Rational Belief and Normative Commitments

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Abstracts of Talks

Ruth Weintraub (Tel Aviv): *Does Friendship Require Epistemic Irrationality?*

Friendship, everyone thinks, involves partiality. If X is a friend of Y, then he is (by and large) keener to spend time with Y than with strangers, more concerned about what happens to Y than is a stranger, more motivated than a stranger is to further Y's interests even at the expense of his own, etc. In this paper, I will consider another form of partiality that friendship has recently been argued to involve - a *doxastic one*. It is constitutive of friendship, according to the "friendly bias" view, that one's *beliefs* be biased in favour of one's friend. It is sometimes required that a friend assign a credence to a favourable belief about a friend that is higher than the one supported by the evidence.

I will distinguish between three importantly different versions of the claim that the demands of friendship and those of epistemology might clash: Keller's (2004), Stroud's (2006) and Jollimore's (2011), and consider several *general* objections to the "friendly bias" view, and some objections specific to each version. My conclusion will be that the "friendly bias" view is false.

Paul Faulkner (University of Sheffield): *Giving the Benefit of the Doubt*

Our epistemic dependence on persons and instruments are different. Faced with evidence that an instrument reading is wrong, we cannot reasonably believe it regardless. Faced with evidence that what is person said is false, we can nevertheless believe what they say choosing to give them the benefit of the doubt. This is particularly notable when the person is a friend, or someone we are close to. Towards such persons we demonstrate a remarkable epistemic partiality. We can believe our friends even when we have significant evidence that what they tell us is false. And insofar as belief is possible, it is also possible to acquire testimonial knowledge on those occasions when the friends know what they tell us. We can learn from our friends even if it remains true that we have significant evidence that what they tell us is false. This paper seeks to explain these psychological and epistemological possibilities.

Daniel Statman (University of Haifa): *Friendship, Epistemic Partiality, and the Legal Duty to Prevent Crime*

I start with the widely accepted assumption that true friendship leads to epistemic partiality vis-à-vis one's friends and to an enhanced and often ungrounded trust in them. I then examine the implications of this assumption to the interpretation of the sections in the Israeli Penal Code that impose a duty to report to the police on crimes that one knows are about to take place. I analyze several decisions of Israeli courts to support my argument that if one takes friendship seriously, this duty should be interpreted narrowly.

Sam Lebens (University of Haifa): *Rationality, Reasonableness and Religion*

This paper tries to motivate a three-part definition of religiosity, in order to pave new directions for thinking about what it might mean to justify a life devoted to religion, in terms of rationality and reasonableness.

Arnon Keren (University of Haifa): *Trust's Meno Problem: Belief, Evidence and the Value of Trust*

The paper studies the relations between the value of trust and its nature, and between these and the argument from trust against evidentialism. The argument against evidentialism is based on the claim that trust's relation to evidence is very different than the kind of relation that, according to evidentialism, belief should have to evidence. While this claim, in itself, does not present a challenge to evidentialism, it does seem to give rise to a strong argument against evidentialism when conjoined with two other claims: the indispensability claim, according to which trust is indispensably valuable, and the doxasticist claim that trust is, or involves, a belief.

The paper explores an unappreciated tension between the latter two premises of the argument from trust against evidentialism. The indispensability claim raises a challenge before doxasticism about trust: Why should it matter, when it comes to the prospering of what we value, whether we genuinely trust others, and believe them to be trustworthy, or merely rely on them in ways characteristic of trust, without holding such beliefs? The paper examines how doxastic accounts can meet the challenge. Perhaps surprisingly, it concludes not only that doxastic accounts can successfully meet it; but moreover, that considerations relating to the indispensable value of trust support both evidentialism and doxastic accounts of trust.

Christian Pillar (University of York): *Beware of Safety: What Our Epistemic Concerns Teach Us about Knowledge*

Our paradigmatic epistemic concern is a concern for truth. This concern, I argue, is an asymmetric matching concern. We want our beliefs to match the facts: whatever the world is like (in some aspect of interest to us), we want, if the world contains a specific fact, to believe that this fact obtains. It is not part of any epistemic concern to want the world to match our beliefs. We do not want, for examples, wars to continue, because we think they will. Safetytheorists violate this condition on the very nature of epistemic concerns. A true belief that *p* is safe, they say, if it remains true in close-by possible worlds. An interest in safety would thus be an interest in the modal stability of what the world is like. Epistemic interests, by contrast, our concerns about ourselves, about how we do as believers; they are not concerns about whether the world matches (with modal stability) our beliefs. Epistemologists have been misled by failing to notice the distinction between safely believing a truth and being a safebeliever of truths. The former is epistemically irrelevant; the latter amounts to being sensitive to some distinction. Only conceptions of sensitivity manage to capture what is important about safety, properly understood, i.e. about being safe in the ways we achieve true beliefs.

Hagit Benbaji (Ben Gurion University): *To Feel or Not to Feel: A puzzle about emotions and reasons*

The rationality of emotions provokes a puzzle hitherto unrevealed. Consider the grief that befalls one on being informed of the loss of a close friend. It is appropriate to feel it, indeed, how else should one feel in the face of such loss? Yet, grief is painful—we wish not to suffer it. The painfulness of grief, it seems, gives us reason to eliminate it. Grief, and negative emotions in general, appear to have a Janus face, providing us with contradictory reasons: to feel them, in light of the painful state of affairs to which they respond, and to get rid of them, in light of their

painfulness. The puzzle is that a negative emotion, by its very nature, gives rise to the irresolvable question: to feel or not to feel?

The puzzle is the upshot of near truisms about emotions: that emotions feel positive or negative (e.g., joy feels pleasant, anger feels painful), and that they are responsive to reasons. The purpose of this paper is to contrast reasons for emotion (I will focus on grief) with reasons for action and belief in order to elaborate on, and argue for, the puzzle of conflicting reasons for emotions.

Ariel Meirav (University of Haifa): *Trust and Hope as Affirmations of Goodness*

My purpose in this paper is to sketch a unified account of trust and hope (i.e. of the attitudes referred to in prominent uses of 'trust' and 'hope') which construes them as ways of affirming that some person (a person we trust, or a person we base our hope on) is good in a certain respect. Such affirmation contrasts with believing that the person is good in that respect. I argue that this account can help to explain certain perplexities concerning the relations between trust and belief (and parallel ones concerning the relations between hope and belief). In particular, it can help to explain why (1) trusting that p needn't conflict, rationally, with failing to believe that p, and yet (2) trusting a person necessarily conflicts, rationally, with failing to believe that he is trustworthy. In conclusion, I will comment briefly on the implications of this account of trust and hope for our understanding of the nature of religious faith.

Ittay Nissan-Rozen (Hebrew University of Jerusalem): *A Pragmatic Argument against Equal Weighting*

We present a minimal pragmatic restriction on the interpretation of the weights in the “Equal Weight View” (and, more generally, in the “Linear Pooling” view) regarding peer disagreement and show that the view cannot respect it. Based on this result we argue against the view. The restriction is the following one: if an agent, *i*, assigns an equal or higher weight to another agent, *j*, (i.e. if *i* takes *j* to be as epistemically competent as her or epistemically superior to her), she must be willing – in exchange for a positive and certain payment – to accept an offer to let a completely rational and sympathetic *j* choose for her whether to accept a bet with positive expected utility. If *i* assigns a lower weight to *j*, she must not be willing to pay any positive price for letting *j* choose for her. Respecting the constraint entails, we show, that the impact of disagreement on one’s degree of belief is not independent of what the disagreement is discovered to be (i.e. not independent of *j*’s degree of belief).

Sophie Archer (Oxford University): *Why 'Believes' is Not a Vague Predicate*

Belief attribution is not always easy. In fact, there are lots of different kinds of cases in which it is extremely contentious what someone believes. Imagine someone who sincerely maintains that *p* but all of their automatic behaviour is as if they do not believe that *p*. I will address a particular line of response to such difficult cases, according to which they reveal that ‘believes’ is a vague predicate, or that one can ‘half-believe’ that *p* (Price (1969)), or be ‘in-between believing’ that *p* (Schwitzgebel (2001, 2002, 2010)). I will argue that this is not so: the kinds of cases these authors consider do not help to establish this. Rather, if we properly appreciate the rich resources of folk psychology – which extend well beyond the concept of belief – we can understand these cases without distorting our concept of belief. I will conclude by offering some suggestions about how my alternative understanding of these difficult cases can shed light on the boundaries between our epistemic and practical lives.

Levi Spectre (Open University of Israel): *Statistical Belief*

Consider the thesis that rational credences relate exclusively to evidential states. Even if this thesis is only roughly true, it seems to imply a complex relation between rational beliefs and credences. This is because (among possible other reasons), one, rational binary beliefs are claimed to shift with some changes in the practical environment of the agent. Two, we seem to have doxastic obligations that are sensitive to the type of relations we have to the agents the doxastic attitudes are about. Third, a certain types of evidence—statistical evidence—is claimed to affect the rationality of binary belief (or attitudes that are tightly connected with binary beliefs).

I inspect these examples and the pressure they place on a seductively simple picture regarding the connection between rational credence and binary belief, namely, a version of the Lockean Thesis: rational belief entails a rational credence level above a contextually set (non-maximal) threshold. I argue that the challenge to the Lockean Thesis that is set by the combination of the stability of rational credence and the shiftiness of rational beliefs, is not as clear cut as it may initially seem.

Yair Levy (Tel Aviv University): *There are No Permissive (Epistemic) Rules*

I describe a problem that arises when we combine two initially plausible ideas, namely (a) that epistemic rationality or reasoning is a rule-governed practice; and (b) that at least some epistemic norms encode permissions (e.g. a permission to believe that p, if it visually seems to you that p). After rejecting several attempts to dissolve the problem, I suggest a way to solve it. I conclude by drawing out some implications of my solution.