

# Workshop on Mutual Understanding Department of Philosophy, Yale University

## Abstracts

### **The Many Ways of Understanding Others**

**John Bengson, UW-Madison**

Understanding other people is not one size fits all; it admits of a number of different forms. But such diversity is compatible with the unity of these forms. For they share a generic cognitive structure that is realized in different ways in different cases. Identifying this structure carries a number of potential benefits for work on the philosophy and psychology of understanding.

### **Bad at Empathy**

**Paul Bloom, Yale**

Emotional empathy—the capacity to put ourselves in the shoes of others, to feel what they feel—is seen as a powerful moral force, essential for everything from the development of compassion in children, to apology and forgiveness in adults, to the success of social movements like Black Lives Matter and MeToo.

I think this is mistaken, and want to focus here on one problem with this view: We are much worse at feeling the experiences of others than we think we are. It's not merely that we are bad at grasping what it's like to be a bat, or a baby, or someone with radically different experiences. We are also bad at appreciating the feelings of those close to us, and even our future selves five minute into the future.

This is sad news. When Louis Armstrong sang, "Nobody knows the troubles I've seen/Nobody knows my sorrow", he was expressing a universal human condition. (He then adds: "Nobody knows but Jesus", but this talk will not address this theological claim.) On the bright side, there are other forces that drive moral development, redemption, and social progress; we can achieve some degree of understanding and respect without empathy.

### **The Role of Empathy in Linguistic Understanding**

**Herman Cappelen, Oslo & St Andrews**

I outline how empathy plays an important role in linguistic understanding. Empathy, I argue, plays a particularly important role in understanding speech containing context sensitive language. Along the way, I present an account of what empathy is and how linguistic understanding is graded.

### **Scaling the Epistemic Wall in Moral Decision-making**

**Molly Crockett, Yale**

TBA

## **Understanding in the Natural and Social Sciences**

**Kareem Khalifa, Middlebury**

There is a longstanding debate among methodologists of the social sciences. Interpretivists argue that a distinctive kind of understanding (e.g., *Verstehen*) strongly differentiates certain social sciences from the natural sciences; naturalists disagree. Drawing upon recent work from epistemology and the philosophy of natural science, I propose a naturalistic account of social-scientific understanding. Using examples from both the natural and social sciences, I argue that this account outperforms recent interpretivist alternatives.

## **Distinct Forms of Explanatory Understanding Support Abstraction and Mental Simulation**

**Tania Lombrozo, Princeton**

In this talk I'll argue for two distinct forms of understanding: abstractive and experiential. Abstractive understanding arises from grasping abstractive explanations, which are familiar from accounts of explanation within philosophy of science: they typically involve subsuming the explanandum under a more abstract generalization, law, or explanatory pattern. Experiential understanding also has an explanatory analogue in the form of experiential explanations (Aronowitz & Lombrozo, under review), which typically involve a narrative or "story" with temporal structure and sensory detail. I'll suggest that these two forms of explanation and understanding serve different functions, and that experiential explanations may play a special role when it comes to understanding other people

## **Arrogance and Misunderstanding What Matters**

**Michael Patrick Lynch, UConn**

One common—and frustrating—fact about human life is that we often misunderstand one another—that is, we misunderstand each other's motivations, reasons, feelings and convictions. Such misunderstanding, whether mutual or not, obviously is a problem in our personal lives, but it is a problem for our political lives as well. In this talk, I'll investigate one such problem—the problem of thinking we understand more than we do about what other kinds of people care about and why, and how this form of what I'll call epistemic arrogance can be corrosive of democracy.

## **How "Inappropriate" Affect Signals Emotional Propensities: The Case of Agent-Regret**


**Shaun Nichols, Arizona**

TBA

## **Capturing the Character of Others**

**David Pizarro, Cornell**

A great deal of our moral cognition is spent in the service of judging those around us—figuring out who are the 'good guys' and who are 'bad guys'. We make these judgments of moral character quickly and easily, from a very young age, and even take delight in



judging the character of complete strangers and fictional characters. I will summarize a growing body of evidence demonstrating that this motivation to assess character in others is a central feature of moral cognition, and will argue that understanding how these judgments are made is fundamental to our understanding of human morality more generally.

### **Humanistic Understanding** **Michael Strevens, NYU**

Historians and philosophers of history have traditionally placed a high value on historical explanations' ability to do what's variously described as "taking a first-person perspective", "eliciting empathy", or "putting yourself in historical actors' shoes". I will argue that this constitutes not only a difference in literary or cognitive style, but also a difference in the kind of understanding that historians strive to impart, by contrast with the understanding imparted by social scientists working on historical topics.