

## Skepticism and Social Epistemology

University of Haifa, April 8, 2019

Location: Education Building, Room 570

מיקום: חדר 570, בניין חינוך

### Schedule

|       |  |  |
|-------|--|--|
| 10:00 | Welcome and Introduction   |  |
| 10:15 | Boaz Miller, Community Information Systems, Zefat Academic College                                   | "Fake News and the Social-Epistemic Norm of Online Posting"  |
| 11:00 | Sandy Goldberg, Philosophy, Northwestern University  | "Social Expectations, Normative Defeat, and Skepticism"  |
| 11:45 | Coffee Break   |  |
| 12:00 | Aviv Barnoy, Community Information Systems, Zefat Academic College & Philosophy, University of Haifa | "A Skeptic Point of View on News Journalism"   |
| 12:45 | Lunch Break  |  |
| 14:15 | Arnon Keren, Philosophy, University of Haifa   | "On Living the Testimonial-Skeptic's Life: Can Testimonial Skepticism Be Dismissed?"               |
| 15:00 | Bryan Frances, Philosophy University of Tartu  | "The Epistemology of Minority Belief"  |
| 15:45 | Coffee Break   |  |
| 16:00 | Ori Freiman, STS, Bar Ilan University  | "Infrastructure-Based Trust"   |
| 16:45 | Maya Roman, The Cohn Institute for History and Philosophy of Science and Ideas, Tel Aviv University  | "Men-Made Physics: Examining Masculinity as a Strategy for Creating Feminist Critiques of Physics" |
| 17:30 | End of Workshop  |  |
| 18:15 | Informal Workshop Dinner at local Restaurant   |  |

## Abstracts

### **Fake News and the Social-Epistemic Norm of Online Posting**

Boaz Miller, Community Information Systems, Zefat Academic College

We identify a major overlooked catalyst for the online spread of fake news and other epistemically toxic content, which is the lack of a stable social-epistemic norm of posting content in digital social networks, such as Facebook and WhatsApp. Drawing inter alia on current work on the epistemology of testimony, specifically the debate about the knowledge norm for testimony, we argue that unlike speech acts such as telling, which are governed by well recognized social epistemic norms, posting is an under-regulated speech act. We identify two causes for the lack of a norm of posting: (1) the young age and rapid change of socio-digital technologies, which prevent norms to stabilize around them; (2) context collapse and collision. We argue that the lack of a norm of posting often leads readers to misunderstand a post and its conversational implicatures (in Grice's sense). It also allows readers to attribute excess or insufficient credibility to a post, and at the same time allows posters to evade epistemic accountability for their posts. We identify several types of posting, including commenting, trolling, and sharing (e.g., reposting, retweeting). We argue that with respect to the spread of epistemically toxic content, sharing is the most problematic act. Based on this analysis, we argue that the spread of epistemically toxic content online can be effectively mitigated if (1) users and platforms significantly add more contextual information to shared posts by and in them; (2) platforms nudge users to develop and adhere to recognized epistemic norms for posting.

### **Social Expectations, Normative Defeat, and Skepticism**

Sandy Goldberg, Philosophy, Northwestern University

In this paper I will develop the doctrine of normative defeat, developed most recently in my book *TO THE BEST OF OUR KNOWLEDGE* (2018), and I will suggest how this doctrine provides the basis for a route from social expectations to a new kind of (socially-induced) skepticism. The aims of the paper are three: to present this route; to argue that the resulting form of skepticism is mild; and to defend the idea that (in part because it is mild) this form of skepticism is an acceptable implication of our reliance on others.

### **A Skeptic Point of View on News Journalism**

Aviv Barnoy, Community Information Systems, Zefat Academic College & Philosophy, University of Haifa

Can news reports be a source for knowledge? Most of the information people have about public affairs still comes from legacy media (often mediated through social media and other people), yet it remains unclear whether the newsmaking process can justify ones' decision to adopt a belief. This study explores this possibility by investigating news reporters' epistemologies – what they know about the stories they publish and how – based on a mix of qualitative and quantitative reconstruction interviews. Findings suggest that skepticism regarding the possibility of knowledge can be reduced for two reasons: First, since journalists invest significantly more epistemic resources, verifying and obtaining evidence, in stories where there is a factual conflict – in tandem with the *complex-centered* approach; Second, since stories with greater risk entail significantly less unestablished adjudications – in accordance with the *pragmatic encroachment* theory. However, reporters publish most of their stories without having positive justifications to believe in the published version, or even without adopting belief. Furthermore, journalists identified inaccuracies in 5% of their publications (in hindsight). I argue that the main reasons to remain skeptic, is the *norm of opacity* characterizing journalism, which makes it impossible for readers to determine how a specific story was obtained and processed.

## On Living the Testimonial-Skeptic's Life: Can Testimonial Skepticism Be Dismissed?

Arnon Keren, Philosophy, University of Haifa

Despite growing interest in the epistemology of testimony, contemporary literature has not seriously engaged with the skeptic about testimonial knowledge. Underlying this neglect of testimonial skepticism is a widely held assumption about the dismissibility of the view. Testimonial skepticism, it is assumed, is not only highly counter-intuitive: It is an untenable view that can be quickly dismissed and with which we need not engage (Weiner 2003; Fricker 2002). This dismissibility assumption also underlies the central debate between reductionists and nonreductionist in the epistemology of testimony. As Gelfert notes, "all contributors to the debate operate under ... the [non-skeptical] 'constraint', that is, the acknowledgment that 'testimony is, at least on occasion, a source of knowledge'". Thus, it is not merely a weighty consideration against a view that it entails a form of testimonial skepticism. Rather, it is a "constraint" on any view worthy of discussion that it not have such skeptical implications, a constraint uniformly accepted, as Gelfert notes, because all agree that "testimonial skepticism is no live option" (2010, 387). While I am not a testimonial skeptic, I argue that testimonial skepticism cannot be dismissed, and in particular, cannot be dismissed on grounds of its non-optionality. To make the strongest case for this claim, I assume in this paper that some forms of skepticism—global, external-world, and inductive skepticism—are dismissible. Moreover, I assume, quite controversially (Greco 2007), that valid grounds for the dismissal of skeptical positions include their being non-optional, either in the sense that the skeptic cannot live by her skepticism, or in the sense that she cannot sincerely believe her skepticism. The question is whether testimonial skepticism can be dismissed on similar grounds.

The paper defends a negative answer to this question. While contemporary literature mostly focuses on a view, Epistemic Egoism, which denies the possibility of testimonial justification, I focus here on skepticism about testimonial knowledge (STK). STK denies the possibility of testimonial knowledge, thus violating the non-skeptical constraint, without denying the possibility of testimonial justification. I argue that even if epistemic egoism can be dismissed on grounds of non-optionality, STK cannot. The paper discusses various possible understanding of the non-optionality claim, and argues that those senses of the claim that could validly ground the dismissal of a skeptical view do not apply to STK, and those senses that do apply to STK are not valid grounds for dismissing a skeptical position.

While this conclusion does not suggest that STK is true, or even plausible, it does point at two significant shortcomings of contemporary epistemology of testimony. First, it suggests that lack of engagement with the testimonial skeptic is a significant fault of contemporary literature. And second, it suggests that some of the most important debates in the field—in particular, that between reductionists and non-reductionists about testimony—are based on a mistaken assumption about the dismissibility of testimonial skepticism.

## The Epistemology of Minority Belief

Bryan Frances, Philosophy, University of Tartu

Philosophers defend, and occasionally believe, controversial philosophical claims. Since they aren't dolts, they are usually aware that their views are controversial—often enough, the views are definitely in the minority amongst the relevant specialist-experts. However, isn't it foolish to believe a philosophical view when you admit that (i) you're a philosopher of more or less average abilities and (ii) the clear majority of specialist-experts on the view reject it?

I'll argue that even when one concedes both (i) and (ii) with regard to a recognized minority philosophical belief P, it may be the case that one's belief in P starts out epistemically reasonable, one's retaining of that belief upon realizing that it is rejected by the clear majority of experts may be reasonable, and one's retained belief P may be reasonable. That's the good news. The bad news is twofold. First, often enough the retaining of P is unreasonable—that's the reason for the use of 'may' in the first sentence of this paragraph. Second, even when retaining P is reasonable, there usually is an irrational belief that goes along with the reasonability just mentioned. So, even though there are cases in which one's retaining belief in the minority P upon learning of its minority status is rational, in such cases one is usually guilty of some other significant irrationality in retaining P. In yet other cases, however, there is no irrationality at all in the reaction to the minority status of P but there inevitably is a relevant false belief involved in the subject's response to the recognition of minority status.

## Infrastructure-Based Trust

Ori Freiman, STS, Bar Ilan University

Emerging technologies raise increasing attention to their expected socio-economic impact (Rotolo, Hicks, & Martin 2015). One such recent emerging technology is blockchain (Xu *et al* 2017). Similar to other emerging technologies, blockchain carries a range of social promises. These promises suit various ideologies (Karlstrøm 2014; Swan 2015; Scott 2015; Golumbia 2015; Atzori 2015; Campbell-Verduyn 2018). Emerging technologies can be considered as emerging social arrangements (Johnson 2007, 27); and with blockchain - the social arrangements of some promises are built upon new social, political, and economic structures.

The organizational structures blockchain technologies enable to form are varied (Dupont & Maurer 2015; Wright & De Filippi 2015; Jones 2018). One such structure utilizes blockchain technology for enabling the formation of a collectively-owned and democratically-governed kind of cooperative (Cherry 2016). Such a blockchain-based structure carries a social promise of reducing harm and exploitation by huge monopolies. For example, platforms that are owned by tech giants can theoretically be owned by their users or workers (Schneider 2018). Blockchain enables the registration of distributive ownership, tokenization of economic incentives, and offer tamper-resistant voting (Swan & De Filippi 2017). I refer to institutions that are built over blockchain and have a social structure as hybrid institutions of humans and algorithms.

I show that in hybrid institutions, participants must have social and epistemic trust. While *epistemic trust* is (roughly) trusting the truthiness of propositions, *social trust* is (roughly) trusting someone else's intentions to act in your interest (McDowell 2002; Freiman 2014). These accounts of trust can explain trust formations among distributed labour within various communities (Freiman & Miller forthcoming).

My argument offers a third, new, kind of trust: infrastructure-based trust. In this kind, epistemic trust is directed at the system's infrastructure, rather than towards an individual or collective agent. It is a result of the design of the system, rather than the relations between agents. However, infrastructure-based trust does not encompass the social dimensions of hybrid institutions; their social structure renders social trust relevant as well. I end by suggesting conditions in which all of these kinds of trust play key roles in trust formation.

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## **Men-Made Physics: Examining Masculinity as a Strategy for Creating Feminist Critiques of Physics**

Maya Roman, The Cohn Institute for History and Philosophy of Science and Ideas, Tel Aviv University

Feminist epistemology, or feminist standpoint theory, has seen its heyday during the 1980's. This approach to philosophy of science suggested taking women's experiences into account can create a more objective and less biased scientific body of knowledge. This has led to several influential critiques of science. Particularly when it comes to the humanities and the social sciences, but also in archeology, biology and genetics. When it comes to critiquing the "harder sciences" and especially physics, feminist critiques have been far scarcer. This was seen as a clear sign of the limits that feminist epistemology and feminist philosophy of science can achieve and was part of the reason for its rapid decline in popularity.

The problem of creating feminist critiques of physics based on women's lives consists of two interrelated parts: the lack of women in the field and the abstract nature of the subject matter. Despite this, several feminist philosophers, such as Sharon Trawick and Barbara Whitten, have raised nuanced gender-based critiques of physics. The most famous and radical of these is Karen Barad's physics-philosophy based on Niels Bohr's interpretation of quantum mechanics.

These critiques expose the relationship between gender and physics but also pose a problem. Barad's work, for example, advocates for a more feminist understanding of matter based on Bohr's interpretation but ignores the question - why would Bohr's work be the starting point for a more feminist science?

This question cannot be ignored because feminist philosophers of science urge us not to discuss the abstract content of a theory on its own, severing the connection between knowing subject and object of investigation. Consequently, a feminist critique of physics must be rooted in an understanding of changing gender relations.

In the absence of women in the field, I suggest basing this understanding on shifting notions of masculinity. Such an analysis would focus on the way gender and science are co-constituted by power relations as Evelyn Fox Keller claims and can explain the holistic nature of Quantum theory in connection with the redefining of masculinity that took place between the two world wars in Europe.

In order to show how such a critique can be established I will discuss the case study of Alfred North Whitehead's philosophy of science and the different experiences that shaped his relationship to masculinity and gender, including his marriage, his involvement with women's rights in Cambridge and the death of his son north during the first world war.