

Brain and Mind – from Concrete to Abstract

»ANXIETY AND THE BRAIN« OCTOBER 20TH 2025

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY WORKSHOP BETWEEN MSH AND ST HILDA'S COLLEGE OXFORD UNIVERSITY

Prof. Oliver Robinson

»The overlapping neurobiology of adaptive and maladaptive anxiety«

Anxiety is unique in that it contributes to mental health disorders but is also an adaptive, necessary function. I will present work from my lab that indicates that, at the level of the brain, there is considerable overlap between pathological and adaptive anxiety before turning to computational modelling (specifically reinforcement learning) to try to understand what this brain activation might represent.

Oliver Robinson is a professor of Neuroscience and Mental Health at University College London. He has held consecutive Medical Research Council Career Development and Senior Non Clinical fellowships and is currently a European Research Council Advanced Fellow. Prior to this he did his postdoctoral training at the National Institute of Health in Bethesda, MD, USA and an undergrad in Neuroscience and PhD in Psychiatry at the University of Cambridge.

Dr. Alex Lau-Zhu

»Anxiety and Imagination«

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health difficulties across the lifespan, with adolescence marking their peak onset. We have powerful treatments - but, with a few exceptions, one striking feature of anxiety is often overlooked: the vivid, intrusive mental images of "worst-case" scenarios. For decades, these flashes of imagined fears have been recognised, yet rarely targeted directly. In this talk, I'll explore why it's worth "travelling back" to this neglected aspect of anxiety - and how doing so could help us reimagine and improve the ways we understand and tackle anxiety in the future, especially early interventions.

TIMETABLE

6:00 pm

Introduction

6:10 pm

»*The overlapping neurobiology of adaptive and maladaptive anxiety*«

Prof. Oliver Robinson,
University College London (UK)

6:30 pm

»*Anxiety and Imagination*«

Dr. Alex Lau-Zhu,
University of Oxford (UK)

6:50 pm

Discussion and break

7:30 pm

»*Heidegger on Anxiety and Fear*«

Prof. Stephen Mulhall,
University of Oxford (UK)

7:45 pm

Discussion

8:00 pm

End of Workshop

Brain and Mind – from Concrete to Abstract

Dr. Lau-Zhu is an MRC Clinician Scientist Fellow at the Department of Experimental Psychology, University of Oxford, and Committee for Children Research Fellow at Linacre College. He recently established the ReimagineLab – their mission is to improve youth mental health through the psychological science of imagination. Alongside his research, he works as a Clinical Psychologist at Oxford Health NHS with young people affected by trauma.

Prof. Stephen Mulhall

»Heidegger on Anxiety and Fear«

In this talk, I will try to explain the nature and significance of Martin Heidegger's conception of anxiety (or Angst), in part by exploring the contrast he draws between fear and anxiety. Two ideas will be central: the claim that emotional states in general are intentionally-structured - that is, that they are directed at particular objects or situations, and so can be rationally evaluated as (in)appropriate to their objects; and the claim that anxiety is an illuminating exception to, or variation upon, that general point.

Stephen Mulhall is a Fellow and Tutor in Philosophy at New College, Oxford. One of his research interests is the work of Martin Heidegger, and in the broader French and German philosophical traditions in which he was a very significant figure.



Next event:

»Anorexia and the Brain«

2nd of February 2026

