

Brain and Mind – from Concrete to Abstract

BELIEF AND THE BRAIN | OCTOBER 24TH 2022

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

Dr Anita Avramides

Anita Avramides is Senior Research Fellow in Philosophy at St Hilda's College in Oxford. She is the author of »Other Minds«, published by Routledge, »Meaning and Mind: An Examination of a Gricean Account of Meaning«, published by MIT Press, and co-editor of »Knowing Other Minds«, published by Oxford University Press. She has written many articles in the philosophy of mind.

Dr Daniel Yon

»Seeing is believing«

... or so the adage goes. A traditional way of thinking about the mind and brain casts perception as the servant of belief. In this typical picture, our eyes and ears are like cameras and microphones, simply picking up signals for higher parts of the mind to interpret and understand. However, in recent years a radically different picture of the mind has begun to emerge. New theories cast the brain as a 'prediction engine' and suggest that the information streams in our head don't only flow in one direction. Instead, at every level, our brain mixes together incoming signals emanating from the external world with top-down predictions supplied by our own internal models. This allows our beliefs, knowledge and expectations to percolate into what we perceive.

In this talk Dr Yon will describe some results from psychology and neuroscience which suggest that the boundary between perception and belief is more permeable than it initially seems.

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TIMETABLE

18.00

Introduction by Dr Anita Avramides,
St Hilda's College, Oxford, UK

18.10

»Seeing is believing«

Dr Daniel Yon,
Department of Psychological Sciences,
Birkbeck, University of London

18.30

»So Help Me God?

Religious Discrimination in the Courtroom«
Prof Ryan McKay, Professor of Psychology
at Royal Holloway University, London

18.50

Discussion

19.00

»Some varieties of believing«

Dr Guy Longworth
Professor of Philosophy
at the University of Warwick

19.20

Discussion and Dinner

20.00

End

Appreciating the predictive nature of perception can explain how and why we misperceive, and also provide a new perspective on unusual experiences – such as hallucinations. In the end, these results combine to suggest that seeing is indeed believing – but not in the way that you might initially expect.

Dr Daniel Yon studied Psychology at Oxford before moving to Birkbeck for his PhD – which he received in 2018. He is now a member of the faculty at Birkbeck, where he directs The Uncertainty Lab. His lab combines tools from experimental psychology and cognitive neuroscience to understand how our brains build models of ourselves and the world around us. His first book for a popular audience – Seeing is Believing - will be published by Penguin in 2024.

Prof Ryan McKay

»So Help Me God? Religious Discrimination in the Courtroom«

Distrust of atheists is globally pervasive and intuitive, and has important judicial implications. In countries such as Britain, Ireland and the United States, court witnesses must publicly declare that they will provide truthful evidence, and are often compelled to publicly choose between religious (»oath«) and secular (»affirmation«) versions of this declaration. In his lecture Prof Ryan McKay will present evidence that people associate choice of the oath with credible testimony; and that jurors – particularly jurors who themselves choose the oath when being sworn in – discriminate against hypothetical defendants who take the affirmation, judging them more likely to be guilty. He will additionally discuss the real-world implications of these findings and suggest the religious oath is an antiquated legal ritual that needs reform.

Prof Ryan McKay is interested in how we form and revise our beliefs about ourselves and the world, and in how this process can derail to produce »pathologies of belief«, ranging from bizarre delusions in clinical settings, to »collective delusions« where thousands or millions of people adopt poorly evidenced beliefs. He studied undergraduate psy-

chology at the University of Western Australia in Perth and completed his PhD at Macquarie University in Sydney. He did postdoctoral work in Boston (Tufts University), Belfast (Queen's University), Zürich (University of Zürich) and Oxford (University of Oxford) and also worked for a while as a clinical neuropsychologist at the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery in Queen Square, London. He has been at Royal Holloway, University of London since 2010, where he is now Professor of Psychology and head of the Morality and Beliefs Laboratory (MaB-Lab). He is also a member of the COVID-19 Psychological Research Consortium (C19PRC).

Dr Guy Longworth

»Some varieties of believing«

Drawing on some work by John Cook Wilson (1889–1915), Dr Guy Longworth will sketch a contrast between two views about believing, one that looks close to a more-or-less ordinary view and another that seems less ordinary. According to the ordinary seeming view, defended by Cook Wilson, believing is only one of a variety of broadly truth- or fact-directed attitude. According to the less ordinary seeming view, favoured by many contemporary philosophers, the various attitudes distinguished by Cook Wilson are all forms of a more generic kind of believing. Drawing on the sketched contrast between the two views, he will raise some questions, especially about the less ordinary seeming view.

Guy Longworth is Professor of Philosophy and Head of the Philosophy Department at the University of Warwick. He works mainly in three general areas: J. L. Austin and Oxford Realism (e.g., John Cook Wilson and H. A. Prichard); knowledge, reasons, and sources; and understanding and first-person thought. He is the Editor of the Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society.

