Philosophy 596K: Philosophy of Mind
‘The Rationality Wars’

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office hours: Thursday, noon-2pm, Paradise Bakery; and by appointment

Course theme

This course is a tour of the last several decades of exchanges in the philosophical and psychological literatures about the relationship between rationality and the empirical science of human cognition. We will be considering such questions as: is it even possible or epistemically coherent for the human mind to demonstrate its own irrationality? How are we to determine what are the appropriate norms against which actual human cognition is to be measured? How do evolutionary considerations figure in to both the descriptive and normative elements of this debate? Perhaps most interestingly, how (if at all) should results in the descriptive science of human cognition impact our decisions about what the correct normative theory of reasoning might be?

Course requirements

Pump primers (2 x 20%): Each student will be responsible for producing two泵primers泵 for the assigned texts on a given date, which will be an approximately 3,000-4,000 word document whose mission is to get the class engaged with & thinking seriously about the assigned text before we come into the classroom. Roughly one-third to a half of any given pump-primer should be a synopsis of the readings, in which their key arguments are summarized and, where it would be helpful to do so, clarified or further explained; when there are multiple texts, part of your job here will be to make legible their relationship to each other.

The remaining half to two-thirds should be a critical engagement with the texts, pursuing concerns or objections, and where appropriate, also considering possible responses to those concerns or objections. A pump-primer’s job is, as the name suggests, to prime the pump for further discussion, and not so much to argue conclusively for any particular position, so it need not (and should not) be written like a full-scale philosophy paper. Nonetheless, they should be well-composed, clear, and cogently argued.

Note that on any given week we will likely have two, and maybe on occasion three, different pump-primers. This is an individual assignment, not something to be taken on as a group – I want to see the different perspectives of the different seminar participants in action, and hopefully, in dialogue.

Pump-primers must be posted by 10am Monday morning of the assigned week.

Discussion (20%): I am hoping that our classes can start in medias res, with substantial discussion having already taken place online before Wednesday afternoon. To
incentivize that, you are required to have participated once on each pump-primer by midnight Tuesday night. Ideally there will be significant back-and-forth between the various members of the seminar, including people challenging the arguments made by the pump-primer authors and those authors posting back in response. Your participation in the classroom will also figure in to this component of your grade, but it is not necessary to do A-level work both online and in-class to get an A here — different people have different strengths, in this regard, and that’s fine. But you must do at least the required amount of posting in order to receive at least a B in the class.

Note: auditors are required to read the forums and post at least once each week as well.

Final paper (40%): A final paper. Students must meet and discuss a proposal of at least 1-2 pages in length by the week after Thanksgiving break.
Schedule – First Seven Weeks

W, 8/22  Selection from Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*

W, 8/29  Tversky & Kahneman, “Judgments under uncertainty: heuristics & biases”
         Tversky & Kahneman, “Extensional versus intuitive reasoning”
         Stich & Nisbett, “Justification and The Psychology of Human Reasoning”

W, 9/5   Dennett, “True Believers”
         Stich, “Dennett on Intentional Systems”
         Dennett, “Making Sense of Ourselves”
         Stein, “Can We Be Justified in Believing Humans are Irrational?”

W, 9/12  Cohen, “Can Human Irrationality Be Experimentally Demonstrated?”
         Symposium in BBS (the whole darn thing)

W, 9/19  Gigerenzer & Hoffrage, “How to Improve Bayesian Reasoning Without Instruction: Frequency Formats”
         Gigerenzer, “How to Make Cognitive Illusions Disappear”
         Gigerenzer, “On Narrow Norms and Vague Heuristics”

W, 9/26  Gigerenzer, selections from *Rationality for Mortals*
         Vranas, “Gigerenzer’s Normative Critique”

W, 10/3  Cosmides & Tooby, “The Logic of Social Exchange: Has natural selection shaped how humans reason?”
         Stanovich & West, “Evolutionary Versus Instrumental Goals: How Evolutionary Psychology Misconceives Human Rationality”

W, 10/10 Samuels, Stich, & Tremoulet, “Rethinking Rationality”
           Samuels, Stich, & Bishop, “Ending the Rationality Wars”
           Fetzer, “Evolution, Rationality, and Testability”

Of the remaining 7 meetings, 3 will be devoted to Sterelny’s *Thought in a Hostile World*. The other 4 will be decided by mid-October, and in response to student suggestions & interests. Possible topics include rationality and pragmatism (or) emotion (or) experimental philosophy; Stanovich’s work on the high-performing cognizers; the most recent iterations of the Gigerenzer/Kahneman battles; philosophical implications of and/or engagements with the dual-process cognitive architecture.