



UNIVERSITY
OF
JOHANNESBURG

Epistemic Blame Workshop: Theory and Practice

16th – 17th March 2022

African Centre for Epistemology and Philosophy of Science (ACEPS)

Department of Philosophy

University of Johannesburg
South Africa

[Zoom Link for Registration](#)

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Programme

Times (SAST)	16th March
10:00-11:00	Sebastian Schmidt – <i>Moralizing Epistemic Blame.</i> University of Zürich (In person)
11:10-12:10	Jesús Navarro - <i>Putting the Blame on the Radical Sceptic.</i> University of Seville (Online)
Coffee	
12:30-13:30	Melanie Sarzano - <i>The Epistemic Innocence of Medical Gaslighting.</i> University of Zürich (Online)
Lunch	
14:30-15:30	Robin McKenna - <i>Medina on Epistemic Responsibility.</i> University of Liverpool (Online)
Coffee	
15:50-16:50	Marie van Loon - <i>'How Can You Even Believe This?': Surprise as a Blaming Reactive Attitude.</i> University of Zürich (Online)

Times (SAST)	17th March
10:00-11:00	Cameron Boulton - <i>Norms of Epistemic Criticism.</i> University of Brandon (In person)
11:10-12:10	Arturs Logins - <i>Degrees of Epistemic Blameworthiness.</i> University of Zürich (Online)
Coffee	
12:30-13:30	Veli Mitova – <i>Epistemic Blame without Relationships.</i> University of Johannesburg (In person)
Lunch	
14:30-15:30	Anne Meylan & Sebastian Schmidt – <i>Refusing COVID-19 Vaccine: is there anything wrong with this?</i> University of Zürich (Online)
Coffee	
15:50-16:50	Elise Woodard - <i>Epistemic Blame and Atonement.</i> University of Michigan (Online)

Abstracts

Sebastian Schmidt

University of Zürich

Moralizing Epistemic Blame

Cameron Boulton argues that the puzzle of epistemic blame consists in how the moral notion of blame can be at home in the epistemic domain. He solves the puzzle by spelling out the notion of epistemic blame as reducing one's epistemic trust, and he argues that this is a reactive attitude that is not moral, but epistemic. In this presentation, I argue that we should instead moralize epistemic blame. If epistemic blame is defined as an appropriate response to the violation of a distinctively epistemic norm, then it is an open question whether moral reactions like resentment, indignation, or guilt can count as epistemic blame. I present a case in which someone's belief causes harm even though no distinctively moral norm has been violated, and in which the person is still genuinely blameworthy for causing that harm. I argue that this blameworthiness, although looking more like moral blame, is still grounded in the violation of a distinctively epistemic norm. The ambition is to thereby make room for an evidentialist view of reasons for belief that can explain moral aspects of doxastic normativity, including phenomena like doxastic wrongdoing.

Jesús Navarro

University of Seville

Putting the Blame on the Radical Sceptic

The radical sceptic certainly blames us for attributing knowledge to ourselves and others, but she seems to consider herself blameless for not doing so. You cannot be too careful, she seems to say. My aim in this paper is to explore different ways in which we may put the blame on the sceptic. My first attempt takes the form of an ethics of belief suspension. This fails though, since scepticism is not primarily about belief, but about knowledge attributions. However, by focusing on the ways in which doxastic and epistemic deliberation are conceptually intertwined, I show that the sceptic is forced to downgrade her beliefs as cognitive states, producing either mere "opinions" or just "credences". One way or the other, those fall short of full beliefs, and the sceptic fails to play her due part in our common effort to figure out how the world is.

Melanie Sarzano

University of Zürich

The epistemic innocence of medical gaslighting

Gaslighting is a process by which a person influences another into believing that their cognitive faculties, or sense of reality, are unreliable. Not only is this process often morally damaging to its victims, but it is also epistemically problematic. Interestingly, the term has recently been specifically applied to the medical context, with patients accusing medical practitioners of medical gaslighting. These cases however, seem significantly different from the paradigmatic cases of gaslighting described in the philosophical literature, where the gaslighting is usually understood as purposefully manipulative (Spear 2020; 2019; Abramson 2014). In this talk, I explore whether medical gaslighting is likely to rely on similar epistemically faulty states, and whether this specific kind of gaslighting is likely to meet the conditions for epistemic innocence (Bortolotti 2015; 2020; Bortolotti and Sullivan-Bissett 2018; Sullivan-Bissett 2015).

Robin McKenna
University of Liverpool

Medina on Epistemic Responsibility

Heather Battaly has argued that vice epistemology has what she calls a “responsibility problem”. Put broadly, the problem is how to reconcile a picture of ourselves as deeply socially situated and our characters as shaped by social forces beyond our control with the idea that we are responsible for our character traits. In this talk I argue that the version of virtue and vice epistemology developed by José Medina in his *The Epistemology of Resistance* has the resources to deal with the responsibility problem. For Medina, epistemic agency and responsibility are themselves socially situated. The social relationships in which we stand to others, and the social influences others can exert on us because we stand in these relationships, do not pose a challenge to epistemic agency and responsibility. They are rather the grounds in which epistemic agency and responsibility are based.

Marie van Loon
University of Zürich

How can you even believe this?: Surprise as a blaming reactive attitude

In the Strawsonian tradition, blame is but one of many possible reactive attitudes towards some moral failing. Turning to the epistemic realm, it seems plausible that many of those reactive attitudes are the same as in the moral realm: indignation, resentment, anger, and so on. Despite the compatibilist spirit of Strawson’s view, it does seem that what makes those reactive attitudes appropriate is that at some level the agent had a say in choosing to act the way they did. One problem specific to the epistemic case, is precisely that we never have a say in the doxastic attitudes we form, at least in the way we do with our actions. This problem has spurred a body of literature which seeks to solve this issue. In this talk, I propose to bypass this problem by inquiring into surprise as an instance of an epistemic reactive attitude. This proposal has two advantages: 1) surprise does not entail that the agent was free in forming their belief; 2) surprise can be understood as a blaming reactive attitude which is epistemic not only because of the object it targets but also because the reaction itself is epistemic.

Cameron Boulton
University of Brandon

Norms of Epistemic Criticism

It might seem fairly natural to suggest that the appropriate way of responding to someone for doing something epistemically criticizable is by epistemically criticizing that person in some way or another. However, this idea has received far less attention than it deserves. In this paper, I defend our practice of epistemic criticism, but not without subjecting it to scrutiny first. I introduce the idea of an “epistemically precarious position”—roughly, an epistemic position such that whether S is likely to acquire or lose epistemic goods is highly contingent on how other epistemic agents respond to S for their culpable epistemic conduct. Examining features of a paradigmatic case, I develop some core constraints on norms of epistemic criticism. More specifically, I draw a distinction between epistemic criticism and “epistemic assistance”, and argue that only under fairly circumscribed circumstances is the latter called for.

Arturs Logins
University of Zürich

Degrees of Epistemic Blameworthiness

According to an increasingly popular view, there is a distinctive sort of blame that is epistemic (cf. Brown 2020, Boulton 2020, Schmidt 2021). However, this claim has also received a number of criticisms in recent debates. The present paper looks into a somewhat neglected issue of degrees of epistemic blameworthiness. First, we will explore degrees of blameworthiness in general and then look specifically into degrees of epistemic blameworthiness. We will rely in our discussion on some recent insights from the linguistics of gradable adjectives (cf. Kennedy 2007). The hope is that our discussion on the degreed nature of blameworthiness could help us tackle the more general question of whether there is a specifically epistemic sort of blame.

Veli Mitova
University of Johannesburg

Epistemic Blame without Relationships

Blaming someone epistemically is one of our main ways of holding them responsible for their intellectual conduct. According to the ‘relationship-based account’ (Boulton MS), to epistemically blame you is—very roughly—to modify my epistemic relationship with you in response to judging that you have impaired this relationship in some way. A big advantage of this account is that, unlike its competitors, it acknowledges the social nature of our epistemic practices in virtue of foregrounding our epistemic relationships. But, I argue in this talk, even it remains too individualistic. In particular, by focusing on individual epistemic relationships, the account occludes important forms of epistemic blame which either involve broader structural relationships, no relationship at all, or (most importantly) in which the blame is precisely blame for a lack of relationship where there should be one. I offer a friendly modification to the relationship-based account that allows it to accommodate such cases and hence to better reflect the sociality of our epistemic practices.

Anne Meylan and Sebastian Schmidt
University of Zürich

Refusing COVID-19 vaccine: is there anything wrong with this?

COVID-19 vaccine refusal seems like a paradigm case of collective irrationality. Vaccines are the best way to get us out of this pandemic. And yet many people who are dissatisfied with the current situation refuse to get vaccinated. In this paper, we analyze vaccine refusal with the tools of contemporary philosophical theories of responsibility and rationality. First, we argue that paradigmatic vaccine refusers are fully responsible for their beliefs. Second, we argue that their beliefs might, after all, be rational.

Even if vaccine refusers are, in our view, rational, there certainly remains something disturbing in refusing to follow a public health policy that is supposed to get us out of a crisis. In the third part of our talk, we intend to clarify what, if anything, is wrong in refusing to be vaccinated.

The outcomes of this talk are, in our view, important because they have consequences for how we ought to engage with vaccine refusers. Understanding the mistake vaccine refusers commit without attributing them a lack of responsibility or rationality should lead us to treat them seriously (not just like “obstacles” to deal with in the vaccination campaign) and should also permit us to adapt our public health policies.

Elise Woodard
University of Michigan

Epistemic Blame and Atonement

When we think about agents who change a long-standing belief, we sometimes have conflicting reactions. On the one hand, such agents often epistemically improve. For example, their new belief may be better supported by the evidence or closer to the truth. On the other hand, such agents often face criticism—especially by those who think they made the right change. Examples include politicians who change their minds on whether climate change is occurring or whether vaccines cause autism. What explains this criticism, and is it ever justified? To answer these questions, I introduce the notion of epistemic atonement. Epistemic atonement involves the process of making up for one’s previous epistemic mistakes, such as failures to believe in accordance with the evidence. Central to my account is the idea that epistemic atonement requires restoring trust and indicating trustworthiness. To develop my proposal, I draw upon philosophical and empirical literature on apologies, demonstrating that epistemic blame and atonement parallels the moral domain in a number of under-appreciated respects.