

First-Personal Data

A workshop at the University of Bergen

Abstracts

Kevin Reuter: 'Knowing that we have minds'

Several scholars, e.g. Sellars (1956), Meltzoff & Gopnik (1993), have construed the attribution of mental states as being governed by a folk-psychological theory in which mental states function as theoretical entities. It follows from this position that knowing that I have a mind is on par with knowing that you have a mind because such a theory can be applied both on a first-personal level and on a second- or third-personal level. In this talk I will defend a Sellarsian-inspired parity account of self-knowledge. It is (a) limited in that it applies to sensory experiences only, and (b) makes a crucial distinction between knowing that we have experiences and knowing what we experience. What we experience, we know by the non-inferential processes of perceptual attention and recognition. However, I will claim that our knowledge that we experience is acquired by theorising about the circumstances we often find ourselves in. In the first part of this talk, I will argue that people usually think about experiences after having gone through an inferential process from which we can derive the minimal but also sufficient conditions for the possession of the concept experience. In the second part, I defend the claim that experiences are postulated as theoretical entities against two objections.

Jon Simon and Ole Koksvik: 'Killer Beliefs and Access Internalism'

Access Internalism states that epistemic facts about which doxastic attitudes one has justification to hold are accessible to one by introspection and a priori reflection alone (Smithies 2014). We present a series of cases, among them the case of killer beliefs, which we argue are counterexamples to this thesis.

Nicholas Silins: 'The Evil Demon Inside'

How mistaken can we be about our current mental states? I begin by briefly examining Descartes' evil demon and Descartes' case for the claim that he can achieve some certainty about his own mind no matter how an evil demon has interfered with him. I then examine more generally whether you could be radically deceived about your current mental states. Here I evaluate philosophical as well as psychological literature. Finally, I argue that we can have justified beliefs about our current mental states whether or not we are reliable about them.

Patrick Greenough: 'Mental Plasticity'

Is there anything epistemologically distinctive about our (core) mental states? Broadly speaking, Cartesians say: Yes. While Anti-Cartesians say: No. One epistemological principle up for grabs is the Luminosity principle which says: For all (core) mental states C, if a subject is in C then they are in a position to know, via introspection, that they are in C. Williamson (2000) offers arguments against Luminosity, while Greenough (2012) offers arguments against both Luminosity and a bag of weaker (and more interesting) Cartesian principles, using less resources than those marshalled by Williamson. The

purpose of this talk is to answer these Anti-Cartesian arguments via the idea that, under certain conditions at least, mental states are plastic. Mental Plasticity turns out to be a two-fold thesis: (i) these states are response-dependent, (ii) they fail to obtain in relevantly similar cases. A novel model of response-dependence is offered to make sense of mental plasticity.

Maia Spener: 'Introspection and Abilities'

The use of introspective data in philosophical and scientific theorizing about consciousness has been criticized in recent years. One reason for criticism is that the privacy of introspective judgements delivering introspective data has as a consequence that we cannot determine the range of contents for which introspection tends to be reliable. In this presentation I suggest a way of fixing on such a range by appeal to the explanatory role that introspective judgements play vis-à-vis our abilities. My aim is to restore the idea that some uses of introspective data are methodologically sound, while being sensitive to a variety of sceptical worries concerning introspection. I will then turn to the question of whether these methodologically sound uses support non-trivial scientific and philosophical theorizing about consciousness.

Jennifer Corns: 'Pain and Infallibility'

Can we be wrong about whether we are in pain? In this talk, I argue that there is nothing plausibly pain about which we are plausibly infallible. I first argue that if we accept either of two dominant philosophical views of pain, as a sensation or as an evaluative perception, then we are sometimes wrong about whether we are in pain. This may suggest that we should, following the International Association for the Study of Pain, simply let pains be whatever they are reported as being. In rejection of this, I highlight problems using first-person reports in pain language to determine whether someone is in pain. I close with a brief discussion of the implications of the implausibility of infallibility for pain treatment.

Ophelia Deroy: 'Synaesthesia: A paradigmatic case of scientific analysis of first-person data'

What should we do with reports of atypical or sometimes paradoxical perceptual experiences, such as experiences of coloured sounds, bright pains, or shaped flavours? After being rejected as confabulation, these first-person reports are now accepted as genuine – as least in the sense that they capture a real psychological and neurological condition, known as synaesthesia. In this talk, I will show why synaesthesia offers a paradigmatic example of how first person phenomenological reports can be approached and validated by cognitive neuroscience, but also what price is then paid. The scientific and philosophical investigation of synaesthesia has minimized their atypical character by analysing them as an unusual conjunction of two typical sensory contents, experienced in isolation by normal perceivers. I will suggest an alternative account which makes more sense of both the synaesthetic reports and the empirical evidence, and opens new ways to look at the perceptual status of synaesthetic experiences: In this new account, synaesthesia covers cases where individuals enjoy a single, richer experience than typical perceivers. The fact that this account makes such experiences hard for us to imagine should not be taken as an objection, and highlights the atypical character of synaesthetic experiences.