**Phil 76700: Ignorance and Stupidity**

Tuesdays 6:30-8:30 (in GC: 7395)

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When explaining behavior, we are often caught between two uncomfortable poles: interpreting the actors as either stupid or evil. Although ascribing actions to evil may come easier (and is more satisfying), the safe bet is on stupidity. What might first look like a vast conspiracy turns outs to be due to bungling bureaucrats and diffusion of responsibility. What appear to be the worst-laid plans turn out to be no plans at all. One cannot underestimate the vast idiocy of the human psyche.

And yet the notion of ubiquitous idiocy is in deep tension with the core of cognitive science: Chomsky has forever been pointing out how deeply creative people are, instantly and effortlessly generating and parsing novel sentences; Bayesians are constantly stressing how accurate our judgments of probabilities are and how excellent we are at using scant information; perceptual psychologists’ main job is uncovering unconscious mechanisms that allow perception to automatically solve terribly difficult problems. How can we, as Rationalists like Chomsky suggest, be (innately and unconsciously) sensitive to formal and logical aspects of reasoning and yet also display such striking irrationality?

Reconciling base stupidity with our impressive problem-solving faculties will be a goal of the course. Along the way we’ll try to understand exactly what ignorance and stupidity are, as well as why we think we are smarter and less biased than others, why we think groups we belong to are better than groups we don’t, why we are so bad at telling when we are being daft, why we fall for propaganda so easily, why flowery nonsense often sounds profound, why people believe in the supernatural and paranormal, why people believe they have more free will than others do, why we double check to see if we locked the door even when we know it’s locked, and why we ignore probabilities and base rates. In sum, we will look at our reasoning capacities as well as our metacognitive capacities, touching on the traditional philosophical topics of belief and rationality.

There are more educated people now than ever before, and yet we live in the dumbest of times. This especially stupid time demands reflection; hence, this course on the cognitive science of ignorance and stupidity.

In essence, we’ll start out work on ‘agnoiology’ —the study of ignorance. Agnoiology (also rebranded as ‘agnotology’) was coined as the dual to epistemology. It has, to put it lightly, not caught on like epistemology. But it is at least as important. What we’re doing here is trying to set the foundation for a serious study of ignorance. As it is there is just no real trail for us to follow, so we’ll make it up as we go along.

**Requirements:** Either two short papers (first due by March 27) or one longer paper due May 22

**Readings**

(nb: these are suggestions, to be used as a bibliography. I don’t expect anyone to read all of these).

**Jan 30:** **Creativity and Cognitive Revolution: the Rationalists and Irrationality**

Chomsky: “Problems and Mysteries in the Study of Language”

Dratch: “On the Creative Use of Language”

Chomsky’s reply: “A Note on the Creative use of Language”

**Recommended:** Fodor: Chapter 4 of Modularity of Mind

Pinker: “So How Does the Mind Work?”

Fodor: “Reply to Pinker”

Pinker: “Reply to Fodor”

Fodor: The Mind Doesn’t Work that Way, Ch2&3

**Feb 6: Belief Acquisition and Introspection**

Readings: Mandelbaum “Thinking is Believing”

Hall et al: “Lifting the Veil of Morality- Choice Blindness and Attitude Reversals on a Self-Transforming Survey Hall Johansson”

**Recommended:**

Hall et al.: “How the Polls Can Be Both Spot On and Dead Wrong- Using Choice Blindness to Shift Political Attitudes and Voter Intentions”

Lind et al.: “Speakers’ Acceptance of Real-Time Speech Exchange Indicates That We Use Auditory Feedback to Specify the Meaning of What We Say”

Johansson et al. “Choice Blindness and Preference Change: You Will Like This Paper Better If You (Believe You) Chose to Read It!”

Aucouturier et al. “Covert Digital Manipulation of Vocal Emotion Alter Speakers’ Emotional States in a Congruent Direction”

Asp et al. “Benefit of the doubt: A new view of the role of the prefrontal cortex in executive functioning and decision making”

Marquez et al. “Hearing a statement now and believing the opposite later”

Sperber “The epidemiology of beliefs”

**(FAKE NEWS)**

Pennycook and Rand “Assessing the effect of “disputed” warnings and source salience on perceptions of fake news accuracy”

Pennycook et al “Prior exposure increases perceived accuracy of fake news”

Pennycook (2017a) “Who falls for fake news - analytical, motivated, political and bullshit”

# Feb 13: The Evolution of Intelligence with Guest Prof. David Papineau

# Papineau: “The Evolution of Intelligence”

# Recommended: Detecting Cheaters

# Cosmides et al. “Adaptive specialization social exchange and the evolution of intelligence”

# Delton et al. “The Psychosemantics of Free Riding- Dissecting the Architecture of a Moral Concept”

**Feb 20: NO CLASS (Monday Schedule)**

**Feb 27: Polarization and Bayesianism**

Mandelbaum “Troubles with Bayesianism”

Ettengenger et al. “Naïve Utility Calculus: Computational Principles Underlying Commonsense Psychology”

Howe and Krosnick “Attitude Strength”

**Recommended**:

Pomerantz et al. “Attitude Strength and Resistance Processes”

Marcus and Davis “How Robust Are Probabilistic Models of Higher-Level Cognition?”

Petty and Caccioppo: “The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion”

Gerstman: “How To Never Be Wrong”

**Additional**: Kahan et al: “Cultural cognition of Scientific Consensus”

Kahan et al. “Motivated Numeracy and Enlightened Self-Government”

Moore and Tumin: “Some Social Functions of Ignorance”

Bowers and Davis: “Bayesian Just-So Stories in Psychology and Neuroscience”

Jones and Love: “Bayesian Fundamentalism or Enlightenment?”

Kesler: “The Value of Ignorance”

Lake et al.: “Building Machines That Learn and Think Like People”

Tesser: “Cognitive Schemas and Thought as Determinants of Attitude Change”

Chaiken and Yates: “Affective-Cognitive Consistency and Thought-Induced Attitude Polarization"

Tesser: “Self-induced Attitude Change”

Liberman and Chaiken “Defensive Processing of Health Relevant Messages”

Petty et al.: “Elaboration as a Determinant of Attitude Strength”

# March 6: Arationality in Belief: Fragmentation, Sleeper Effects, and Selective Exposure

# Bendana and Mandelbaum: “The Fragmentation of Belief”

# Recommended:

# Petty et al “Implicit Ambivalence From Attitude Change: An Exploration of the PAST Model”

# Mandelbaum and Quilty-Dunn: “Believing without Reason: Or Why Liberals Shouldn’t Watch Fox News”

# Brannon et al. “The moderating role of attitude strength in selective exposure to information”

# Additional

# Fernbach et al. “Political Extremism Is Supported by an Illusion of Understanding”

# Kumkale & Albarracın: “The Sleeper Effect in Persuasion: A Meta-Analytic Review”

# Mandelbaum: “Attitude, Inference, Association”

# Brock & Balloun: “Behavioral Receptivity to Dissonant Information”

# Wicklund and Brehm “Resistance to Extinction and Selective Exposure”

# March 13: Reasoning

# Mercier and Sperber “Why do Humans Reason?”

# Recommended: Wilson et al “Just think: The challenges of the disengaged mind”

**March 20: Metacognitive Ignorance & Idiocy**

Dunning: “The Dunning/Kruger Effect: being Ignorant of One’s Own Ignorance”

**Recommended:** Lawson **“**The Science of Cycology: Failures to Understand How Everyday Objects Work”

Rozenblit and Keil: “The misunderstood limits of folk science- an illusion of explanatory depth”

Sharrer: “The seduction of easiness: How science depictions influence laypeople’s reliance on their own evaluation of scientific information”

Kominsky and Keil: “Overestimation of knowledge about word meanings: The “misplaced meaning” effect.”

**March 27: The Epistemology of Double Checking: Special guest Jane Friedman**

Friedman: “Checking Again”

**April 3: NO CLASS (Spring break**)

**April 10: Bullshit**

Pennycook et al: “On the Reception of Pseudo-Profound Bullshit”

McCabe and Castle: “2008 Seeing is believing- The effect of brain images on judgments of scientific reasoning”

**Recommended:** Frankfurt: “On Bullshit”

**April 17: Fluency as a Cue to Truth with Guest Presenter Prof. Steven Young**

Marquez et al. “Hearing a statement now and believing the opposite later”

Koriat & Ma’ayan “The effects of encoding fluency and retrieval fluency on judgments of learning”

McGlone & Tofighbakhsh “Birds of a Feather Flock Conjointly (?): Rhyme as Reason in Aphorisms”

**April 24: Perceptions of Self vs. Other**

Emily Pronin “How We See Ourselves and How We See Others”

Pronin “Perception and misperception of bias in human judgment”

Pronin & Kugler “Valuing thoughts, ignoring behavior: The introspection illusion as a source of the bias blind spot”

**May 1: Implicit Bias with guest visitor Michael Brownstein**

**May 8: Perception of Victims and Violent Behavior:**

Paluck et al “Ignoring alarming news brings indifference: Learning about the world and the self”

Littman and Paluck: “The Cycle of Violence: Understanding Individual Participation in Collective Violence”

Pinker and Mack on Historic Trends in Violence: http://www.slate.com/articles/news\_and\_politics/foreigners/2014/12/the\_world\_is\_not\_falling\_apart\_the\_trend\_lines\_reveal\_an\_increasingly\_peaceful.html

**May 15: The Value of Ignorance**

Kominsky et al “The Better Part of Not Knowing”

“Kessler: “The Value of Ignorance”

Kelly “Disagreement dogmatism and belief polarization”