

# Epistemology Colloquium Series



## Reasoning Through Time: Cartesian Insights

Elliot Paul (Barnard/Columbia)

**Thursday, Jan 11, 2018 ♦ 4:00 pm ♦ Watson Hall 517**

**Abstract:** How many inferences can you focus on at once? According to Descartes, I argue, the answer is: one. If you draw a second inference, then, you have to hold the previous inference in memory. This matters because, for Descartes, what you focus on is clearer than what you hold in memory, and clarity is the source of certain knowledge. I show how this reading resolves one of the most vexed questions in Cartesian scholarship: in Descartes's cogito — "I am thinking, therefore I am" — is "I am" intuited or inferred? (The answer is both.) And drawing on recent cognitive science, I argue that Descartes was right about how much information we can focus on, and how memory works to supplement our focus as we reason through time.

## Authoritative Knowledge

Juan Piñeros-Glasscock (Yale)

**Thursday, Jan 18, 2018 ♦ 4:00 pm ♦ Watson Hall 517**



**Abstract:** I argue that practical authority is a basic knowledge source: in the right situations, a person is epistemically warranted to form a belief (e.g. about what her subordinates will do) just on the basis of exercising her authority, yielding what I call 'authoritative knowledge'. I argue for this thesis by presenting arguments against an alternative, inferentialist account of authoritative knowledge, and then by offering a positive, virtue-theoretic account of direct warrant that explains what features of authority make it a basic knowledge source.



## In Defense of Empathy: The Value of Humane Understanding

Olivia Bailey (Harvard)

**Thursday, Jan 25, 2018 ♦ 4:00 pm ♦ Watson Hall 517**

**Abstract:** Critics of empathy argue that we must reject the commonsense conception of empathy as essential to virtuous social life. They contend that empathy runs the risk of enhancing dangerous moral myopia and provincialism, and they suggest that the goods empathy seemed fit to secure for us— knowledge of others' inner lives, judgment of others' emotions, altruistic motivation— are all available through less risky means. In response, I argue that this criticism overlooks empathy's most significant and interesting feature: it is the unique source of a particular form of understanding, which I will call humane understanding. Humane understanding of others is an epistemic good that is non-instrumentally morally valuable. Achieving this form of understanding is itself a way of caring, rather than just a means to promote other caring behavior.

## The Moral Stakes of Our Beliefs

Rima Basu (University of Southern California)

**Thursday, Feb 01, 2018 ♦ 4:00 pm ♦ Watson Hall 517**



**Abstract:** In many real-world scenarios, that the man standing in the lobby is black can indeed provide a substantial amount of evidential support for the belief that he is a staff member. This is an unfortunate fact about the world in which we live. On one hand, it seems morally impermissible to assume that he is a staff member. On the other hand, the belief seems epistemically justified. If one had more hands, one might go further and add that it would be epistemically irrational not to believe that he is a staff member. Many conclude that in such cases we face an irresolvable conflict between what morality requires and what we epistemically ought to believe. I disagree. I argue that we can resolve this conflict by appealing to a form of moral encroachment. That is, the epistemic justification of our beliefs can be determined, in part, by the moral demands of our situation, i.e., the moral stakes.



## Constancy of Belief and the Value of Self-Knowledge

Antonia Peacock (University of California, Berkeley)

**Tuesday, Feb 06, 2018 ♦ 4:30 pm ♦ Watson Hall 517**

**Abstract:** Some of the ways in which we praise self-knowledge (and criticize its lack) indicate that we value the constancy of belief over time. But why is it good for your beliefs to be constant? I argue that having constancy of belief is a necessary condition on having a self in a restrictive sense—a sense in which not all of us have selves. The value of constancy of belief is not properly epistemic value at all. That means there is at least one normative constraint on belief that does not have to do with truth, justification, or rationality.