

Sharif-Fribourg Conference
Consciousness, understanding and Self-Knowledge

6-7 July 2019

Speaker:

Gianfranco Soldati

Title:

Autonomy and Control

Abstract:

An action is autonomous when it is determined by the will. Following some kantians, this is the assumption we need in order to account for the way rational requirements apply to action. Humean principles of instrumental reason, based on desire and belief, do not suffice. In action a subject knows what she does in so far as she has executive control over her behaviour. It has been suggested that there is a strong relation between autonomy and control. Control is not identical to the sort of motivation delivered by belief and desire. It adds a normative dimension that depends on the way the subject engages in her activity. This paper inquires into the relation between autonomy, control, and rationality.

Speaker:

Martine Nida-Rümelin

Title:

Is the Metaphysical Nature of Conscious Subjects Revealed in Pre-Reflective Self-Awareness?

Abstract:

According to the reply developed in my talk, the metaphysical nature of conscious subjects is partially revealed by pre-reflective self-awareness.

In general, the metaphysical nature of individuals of a given ontological category is characterized by what it takes for them to be identical across time (transtemporal identity) and by what it takes for them to be identical across possible worlds (individuality).

I will argue that we have cognitive access to what transtemporal identity and individuality in the special case of conscious beings consists in *because* we are conscious beings ourselves and as such permanently aware in a pre-reflective manner of what it takes for several experiences to belong to one single subject. I will argue that – based on that awareness – we have the capacity to form a *nature-revealing* understanding of transtemporal identity and individuality of conscious subjects.

According to that understanding, as I will argue, identity of conscious individuals across time and across possible worlds is *ontologically irreducible*. Since that understanding is *nature-revealing* (that is, it reveals to the thinker what identity and individuality in the case of conscious subjects *consists in*), the transition from the conceptual observation just mentioned to the corresponding ontological claims is warranted. This means that we should accept the so-called simple view of transtemporal identity of conscious beings. No informative and non-circular reply is available to the question: “What does identity of conscious beings consist in?” Furthermore, we should accept the corresponding claim about their individuality. Conscious beings are ‘perfect individuals’: their individuality does not allow for any non-circular reductive explication.

These anti-reductivist claims are compatible with the thesis that we *do* have a clear and substantial understanding of what identity and individuality of conscious subjects consists in by engaging in what I will call ‘*taking perspectives*’. Taking perspectives is a conceptual activity. We engage in that activity when we think of ourselves or other individuals that we take to be conscious. In order to explain what it is to think about conscious subjects by taking perspectives I will use a series of examples.

Closely related published work:

*Martine Nida-Rümelin [2006], Der Blick von Innen, Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft.
(Translation to appear soon with OUP).*

[2008], «An argument from transtemporal identity for subject body dualism », in George Bealer and Robert Koons, The Waning of Materialism, Oxford University Press.

[2012], « The Non-descriptive Individual Nature of Conscious Beings », in Georg Gasser & Mathias Stefan (eds), Personal Identity : complex or simple ?, Cambridge University Press.

[2016], « Self-awareness », Review of Philosophy and Psychology.

Speaker:

Miloud Belkoniene

Title:

Grasping in Relation to Understanding

Abstract:

This paper aims at elucidating the notion of grasp in relation to the notion of understanding. While, in the recent debate concerning the nature and epistemology of understanding, some simply equate grasping with understanding, others take it to be rather an aspect of or a requirement on understanding. This paper relies on the idea that grasping is a specific relation between mind and reality involved in the understanding of complex representations that purport to account for physical phenomena. The means by which a subject comes to understand such representations are examined and it is claimed that in understanding such representations, a subject grasps how they can account for physical phenomena. This grasp is further characterized as a particular way of apprehending modal reality in the sense of apprehending how, according to a given account of physical reality, things stand in modal space. General conclusions are then drawn regarding the relation between the understanding we have of complex representations that purport to account for physical reality, our understanding of physical reality itself and our ability to apprehend or grasp modal reality.

Speaker:

Elodie Malbois

Title:

The Direct Social Perception Thesis and the Problem of Other Minds

Abstract:

According to direct social perception, we can often directly perceive other people's mental states. We do not need to infer them from others' behaviour. Rather, we can directly see the sadness or the anger on their face, for example. This thesis intends to explain how we ascribe mental states to others, but also to answer the problem of other minds by showing that the minds of others are not hidden from and inaccessible to us. In this talk, I would like to challenge this thesis and discuss whether we can really directly perceive others' mental states and especially emotions. This will lead me to argue that we can directly perceive that others are experiencing some emotion but not the emotion itself. I will then explore what consequences this has for the problem of other minds

Speakers:

Julien Bugnon and Martine Nida-Rümelin

Title:

Why should one care about one's own future?

Abstract:

One might think that there is an obvious reply to the title question, namely that one should care about one's future simply because it is one's own. If I know that I will experience unbearable pain tomorrow unless I act now to prevent it, then I have a reason to do so because it is bad for me to suffer pain and because I want to avoid what is bad for me. The fact that I am the one who will suffer gives me a reason to prevent such an event from occurring – a reason quite different from reasons I might have to prevent similar events involving the suffering of other people. That is the 'natural attitude' we wish to defend here. Derek Parfit famously rejected the natural attitude and developed sophisticated arguments for the radical view that it does not – or rather should not – matter for me whether I am the one involved in some future events I consider now. For Parfit, facts of personal identity are unimportant: they should not play any role in the way I should rationally evaluate future events and be motivated to act relative to them.

We believe that Parfit's view is deeply mistaken about the origin of the values and the corresponding reasons rationally guiding us in such cases. In this paper, we shall focus on developing an argument in favor of the natural attitude he rejects. The natural attitude appears obvious and it is easy to see the counterintuitive air of its denial. What is less obvious, however, is how one can voice in a clear manner what makes that rejection so counterintuitive. We shall propose a diagnosis. In making explicit a way in which one may justify the 'importance of identity', as well as the way a 'Parfitian' should react to such an argument, we want to reveal and articulate the intuition underlying the natural attitude, and ultimately vindicate it.

Speaker:

Alireza Kazemi

Title:

Wherein Lies the Authority of Self-Knowledge: Some Lessons for and from Mental Normativism

Abstract:

A number of philosophers have found it interesting to explain the authority of self-knowledge, particularly the self-ascription of intentional states, through the constitutive normativity of the mental states. As they see the matter, the fact that intentional states, like beliefs, intentions, and desires are constituted by norms of rationality can serve to explain why it is that our self-ascription of intentional states (like the judgment that 'I believe thus and so'), though fallible, has an authority which other forms of knowledge (e.g., ascription of intentional states to others) lack. I discuss two attempts to explain the authority of self-knowledge through mental normativism, propounded by Akeel Bilgrami (2006) and Julia Tanney (2002). First, I show how these normativist conceptions of the authority of self-knowledge can help us defuse an objection to

mental normativism, according to which because of the great amount of irrationality in our thinking, intentional psychology, conceived as constitutively normative, is not descriptively adequate and, as such, is untenable. Then, drawing on Robert Brandom's version of mental normativism, several asymmetries between self-knowledge and knowledge of others are brought into the light.

Speaker:

Majid Davoody Beni

Title:

Social Aspect of Self-Consciousness

Abstract:

In this talk, I will draw on the dynamical interplay between the mirror neuron system, which embodies the social aspects of the self, and the default mode network, which realizes the reflective aspects of the self-structure. I proceed to explain how the coupled system underpins social and moral aspects of the self as well as its phenomenal aspects. I follow up with some discussion of insights into the relation between self and its aspects. There is also more general discussion of relation between neuro-computational theories of the self and phenomenal and normative issues.