

Capstone 2011, Titles and Abstracts

10:00: Ryan Brown, "Two Theories of Mind and the Mirror Neuron System"

There are two dominant theories of mind in philosophy today. These are Theory Theory and Simulation Theory. A theory of mind aims to explain how it is that a subject is able to attribute mental states to the minds of others as well as make predictions about their behaviors. Recently, neuroscientists have discovered a particular grouping of neurons in human brains and the brains of some species of primates that is called the Mirror Neuron System. Empirical evidence suggests that these neurons seem to allow for a subject to perform mental simulations of the mental states and physical movements of other subjects. This paper will discuss Theory Theory, Simulation Theory and the Mirror Neuron System. It will conclude in an attempt to shed some light on whether or not the Mirror Neuron System is empirical evidence in support of either theory of mind.

10:15: Alex Sell, "Shame and Moral Judgments"

One of the biggest discussions of philosophy in modern times is the question of free will. Free will is deeply ingrained in the culture and morality of western cultures but is now under investigation. Determinism is gaining a large following and questions of topics related to free will are bound to become troublesome. The topic I am most worried about is that of our moral judgments and how we could maintain them without free will. There have been many discussions along these lines and the most interesting of these have concerned the feelings of guilt, shame, and remorse. These emotions give to us a sense of obligation and sense of direction. Shame is uniquely interesting as it gives us an understanding of judgments in a society. If it is true that free will is an illusion, I believe that there is still a method for us to formulate moral judgments in shame.

10:30: Roseanne Frederick, "Selves"

Human beings are 98 percent ape. Upon birth, humans have a biological set of potentials that can be shaped and interact with various factors in a given environment. These are insufficient, however, in terms of ensuring that humans can survive. Beyond the information and biological potentials from birth, we need culture to fill in extra needed information to survive. This area of missing information, called the information gap, will be the main focus of the presentation along with an explanation of how culture satisfies this void. The fulfillment of this knowledge disparity leads to self conceptualization. I will explore the near absence of culture in the case of the feral child, Genie, to show how lack of culture leads to a severely undeveloped self and essentially no self concept. I will then examine the individualist American culture and the collective East Asian culture to examine how different cultures produce different selves and radically different views of the world and life purpose.

10:45: Marissa Backstrand, “The Possibility of Coercive Offers”

Philosophers have typically focused on cases of physical impediment or explicit threats as the best examples which capture attributes of coercion. Under the interpretation of Robert Nozick, whose essay sparked contemporary debate on the subject, coercion can only be described as a threat since it is the explicit or inferred penalty which becomes the motivating factor for the victim’s eventual submission to the coercer’s proposition. Although this still rings true, it has been contested by other philosophers that coercion may also include coercive offers – a conferred benefit which a person cannot refuse based upon the powerful desirability of the proposed benefit. However, this is not sufficient for coercion since either threat or benefit must also take away freedom of the will. In order to understand the fullness of coercion, I have delved into the literature of Harry Frankfurt in which he explains coercion in relation to his account of freedom as *second order volition*. With his interpretation, we can see that coercive offers are made within the economic market and arise from the disparity in bargaining power created by large disparities of wealth.

short break

11:15: Justin LaBeaux, “Pascal’s Wager Reconsidered”

This is an examination of Pascal’s Wager to determine whether or not it is rational to bet on the existence of God. I assert that it is irrational for the non-believer, whom is without any religious inclination, to take the wager and bet on God’s existence. I attempt to show where the Wager goes wrong by breaking it down into three mistaken assumptions: assumptions about religion and the nature of God, assumptions about the terms of the wager, and finally assumptions about the structure of the wager. The way in which the wager is set up it appears to be a safe bet, however the wager does not specify which religion it is we are supposed to adopt. The terms of the wager are also flawed because it assumes that we have little to lose but that is simply not the case. Finally we assume that the wager is the same for all candidates.

11:30: Karen Duffy, “On the Conceivability of Zombies”

A zombie, as employed in philosophical thought experiments, is a creature that is physically and functionally identical to humans, but lacks consciousness. The possibility of zombies has been used to argue that consciousness cannot be explained in terms of the physical, that is, that physicalism is false. Using zombies in this way is contingent on two premises: first, that zombies are conceivable, and second, that conceivability entails possibility. In this paper I focus on the first premise, the conceivability of zombies. I begin by considering arguments in favor of the conceivability of zombies, and then evaluate these arguments in light of arguments against the conceivability of zombies. Ultimately I conclude that the anti-conceivability arguments are successful and argue that the pro-zombie position involves a conflation of categories, using epistemological claims to justify metaphysical conclusions.

11:45: Dan Heng, "Should We be Causally Connected?"

This paper deals with a thought experiment involving a world in which causal determinism reigned. If given a free chance, should we choose to change this and to gain free will? Or should we choose to go back to being causally determined? I argue that we should choose to remain causally determined because the connections that causal determinism allows are preferable to the freedom we might gain by not being causally affected. To support this, I cite certain Buddhist views which paint a picture of a world in which we are all connected and cannot be understood as autonomous individuals since we are caused by so many things outside of ourselves. To oppose my claim, I cite dystopian novels which paint pictures of evil worlds we would definitely not want to be connected to. I conclude that even in such worlds, I would personally still prefer to be connected to the world, even though this would eliminate my free will and possibly my freedom to escape.