

Nammour Symposium 2011

# On Being Wrong

April 26 & 27<sup>th</sup>  
Hinde Auditorium, University Union

We know why people lie: truth is a valuable commodity; knowledge is power. But if that is so, why aren't humans truth-seeking machines? It is not just that we are imperfect truth-seekers; rather, much of our behavior seems systematically designed to make us ignorant and keep us that way. We *hate* being wrong. We ignore evidence of error. When people contradict us with easily confirmed truths, our instinct is to attack them. This year's Nammour Symposium is an inquiry into the psychological and social factors that underlie human false-seeking. When do we do it? Why do we do it? Why is it so hard to acknowledge our mistakes, when denying them is so much more costly?

April 26<sup>th</sup> 10:00AM-Noon

## Explaining Wrongness

### **Informed and Wrong: The Scourge of Misinformation in American Politics**

Kim Nalder, Department of Government, Sacramento State

American democracy is threatened by apathy and a lack of knowledge about politics, yet we often assume that paying more attention to the news and having an interest in politics will solve those problems. Unfortunately, misinformation is even more pernicious and exists even among those who are "informed". New social science research is uncovering some fascinating instances in which interested, attentive, educated citizens believe that they "know" facts which simply are not true. Surely if we're wrong we're more tentative and will change our minds if we get factual corrections, right? Sadly, no. "Death panels", "birthers", California's Prop. 13, and many other disheartening examples will be explored.

### **Wrongology: Knowing My Own Mind**

Matt McCormick, Department of Philosophy, Sacramento State

Surely I know what I do and don't believe, and I know why I believe it. I know when I change my mind, and I know why I change it. And when I'm certain, then I really know it. All I have to do to know my thoughts and to know them perfectly is just introspect them. Right? Wrong. Cleverly constructed research shows that we are predictably and systematically wrong about lots of what we think is going on in our own heads. We change our minds and disguise the changes from ourselves. Others lead us to change our minds, then we revise our memories and report having the altered view all along. We have beliefs that we aren't really aware of, or we report having a belief that we don't have. We habitually confabulate explanations about why we think some claim is true. External stimuli provoke thoughts in us without our noticing. What's really going on in your head is as much a mystery to you as what's going on in other people's heads. You don't have special access; your estimations of your own beliefs and behaviors amount to an empirical theory, and it's a really bad theory. You'd have better luck with astrology or phrenology.

### **You Have No Idea How Wrong You Are**

Garret Merriam, Department of Philosophy, University of Southern Indiana

There are a lot more ways to be wrong than there are ways to be right. Yet somehow, many of us think that we are probably right most of the time. Prior generations were wrong about almost everything they believed, but this does not stop our unflinching confidence that we, being so much more enlightened, have things for the most part figured out. In this talk I give a short tour of the myriad surprising ways in which (and degrees to which) we can be wrong about even the most seemingly obvious things. This pervasive fallibility will cast doubt not only on our beliefs about matters of objective fact, but also subjective and personal matters such as our predictions about what will make us happy, what we actually believe, and what emotions we are feeling. Drawing on insights from history, psychology and philosophy, I attempt to pin down some of the reasons why we are so often and so profoundly wrong, and why our being wrong (to say nothing of our recalcitrant confidence that we are nonetheless right) is unlikely to change any time soon.

April 26<sup>th</sup> 1PM-3PM

## **Managing Wrongness**

### **Beyond Right and Wrong: Managing Wicked Public Problems**

David E. Booher, Center for Collaborative Policy, Sacramento State

In business and government there is a growing movement to use collaboration as a strategy for dealing with “wicked” complex problems: problems in which causal factors are not well understood, patterns don’t reliably repeat, and there is disagreement about both means and ends. In collaboration the key is to move beyond debating who is right and who is wrong to include all parties in creating options that allow them to meet their needs while enhancing the resilient capacity of society to manage the challenges of uncertainty and rapid change. Several philosophies help inform theory that is the foundation for collaborative practice. In this talk I will summarize this practice and theory and sketch its grounding in established philosophies such as phenomenology, critical theory and American pragmatism.

### **The Right to be Wrong: Religion, Parenting, and Pediatrics**

Gregory Bock, Department of Philosophy, Walters State Community College

In our pluralistic society, we protect the right of individuals to believe what they want even if it is wrong. We also allow parents to raise their children according to their religious beliefs even if we disagree with them. This talk explores parental liberty by looking at a number of cases and investigating its limits. For example, in *Prince v. Massachusetts* (1944), the Supreme Court famously stated, "Parents may be free to become martyrs themselves. But it does not follow they are free, in identical circumstances, to make martyrs of their children before they have reached the age of full and legal discretion when they can make that choice for themselves." This case is often cited in pediatrics when parents make requests that violate the standard of care. I will introduce the standard way of limiting the kinds of requests parents can make in the clinic, and I will argue for an approach that is more culturally sensitive while still upholding a high moral standard.

### **Being Wrong about Being Right**

Jeremy Garrett, Children’s Mercy Bioethics Center, Children’s Mercy Hospital, Kansas City, Missouri

Few headlines grab and hold public attention like moral failure. From politicians like John Edwards and Mark Sanford to sports stars like Roger Clemens and Tiger Woods, people just can’t get enough schadenfreude. When these stories arise, people often wonder how such spectacular failures are possible and confidently affirm to themselves and others that they could never suffer a similar fate. Paradoxically, it is precisely this belief in one’s own incorruptibility that often is the biggest factor in setting someone on the road to moral failure. In this talk, I explore how the illusion of moral invincibility can lead to ethical lapses and compromised integrity. Along the way, I point to the need for humility and scientifically-informed realism about one’s self, as well as awareness of the power that situational factors, “small steps,” and self-justification play in our moral lives. I conclude with several concrete strategies for preserving moral integrity in light of these threats.

April 27<sup>th</sup> 10AM- Noon

## **The Problem of Forgiveness**

Winners of Student Essay Competition (TBA)

April 27<sup>th</sup> 1PM-3PM

## **Acknowledging Wrongness**

### **Forgive me Father, for I Have Painted the Llama: Why Sin is Not a Moral Failing**

David Corner, Department of Philosophy, Sacramento State

It has been argued that, given the nature of God as a perfect being, God cannot properly be said to forgive. Yet the concept of God's forgiveness plays an important role in theistic religion. I will argue that the difficulties over the possibility of divine forgiveness can be overcome by understanding that which is forgiven— namely, sin— in non-moral terms.

### **The Fault Lines of 'I'm Sorry': Preserving the Face of Self and Others**

Cindi SturtzSreetharan, Department of Anthropology, Sacramento State

"It is easier to ask forgiveness than it is to get permission" could have easily been a Japanese proverb but it isn't. (It is typically attributed to Rear Admiral Grace Murray Hopper). Listening to everyday conversations or interactions in Japan, one quickly learns the importance of apologizing for committing mis-deeds— either in the act, already done, or still to come. In this brief presentation, I consider the 'apology' in Japanese social interactions: What purposes are served? What kinds of wrong-doings are forgiven (and what kinds are not)? In considering the use of verbal apologies, a picture develops that suggests being wrong is a co-constructed event, successful only in the acceptance or denial of the apology.

### **"Say You're Sorry": How to Apologize and Mean It**

Russell DiSilvestro, Department of Philosophy, Sacramento State

Some practical parenting problems raise broader philosophical questions. The formula I used for teaching my children how to apologize and accept apologies was this: "I'm sorry for doing X to you." "I forgive you." However, one concern my children raised is this: "Should I still say this if I don't actually feel sorry (or forgiving)?" This raises at least two questions: (1) do apologies (and their acceptances) essentially involve affections? (2) do the apologetic scripts I was teaching my children communicate (perhaps falsely) the presence of affections? If (1) and (2) can be answered 'no' and 'yes' respectively, then one option for parents is to allow "affectionless" apologies to count as real apologies. For example, one way of giving an apology without any feigned affections is this: "I did something wrong by doing X to you; will you forgive me?" One way of accepting an apology without any feigned affections is this: "I won't hold it against you." Not surprisingly, one cost of making these options available to children is that it can lead to "cold" apologies where both parties use the "affectionless" formulations rather than the original ones. But are there any better alternatives that don't have even higher philosophical or practical costs?