

BIAP DISTINGUISHED LECTURES SERIES

INAUGURAL LECTURES WITH PHILIP KITCHER (COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY, NY)

25 – 27 OCTOBER 2023, 15:00 – 17:00

ABSTRACTS

WEDNESDAY 25

SCIENTIFIC PROGRESS

Although some people express scepticism about the concept of progress, there are many mundane instances in which talk of progress appears justified. I distinguish two forms of progress: *teleological progress* achieved by diminishing the distance to some fixed long-term goal, and *pragmatic progress* consisting in overcoming problems and transcending limits. Science is one form of human inquiry (there are many others), and I argue that its progress is pragmatic. Recognizing this focuses attention on how problems are identified as significant, and reveals the entanglement of science with values. Progressive sciences make contributions to human lives and to human societies. The most obvious such contributions are practical.

This approach to scientific progress appears to slight the ideal of knowing truths about the natural world “for their own sake”. The lecture attempts to show that this ideal is more problematic than usually appreciated. I consider how the idea of seeking truth might have emerged, and suggest that the “world” about which investigators attempt to learn is one thoroughly structured by human decisions and human values, thus dependent on the problems we have attempted to solve during the long history of our species. Wanting “truth for its own sake” is a latecomer in a process of inquiry primarily dominated by the practical.

THURSDAY 26

PROGRESSIVE VALUATION

Besides the progress human beings have made with respect to factual knowledge, we also seem to have made advances with respect to values. My talk explores various aspects of this form of progress. I build on the account offered in an earlier discussion (*Moral Progress*) to explore more systematically the character of our moral progress, our ethical progress, and our progress with respect to other types of values.

I begin with a clarification: talk of “values” is often misleading; we do better to focus on the activity, on valuing. The central task is to work out, in various contexts, how individuals and societies should attempt to decide what is worth pursuing. Thus I replace the orthodox approaches in meta-ethics, the programs for developing semantics or ontology, with an emphasis on methodology. Viewing progress not as teleological, but as a matter of solving problems and overcoming limitations, I draw on the long history of moral practice to offer suggestions about how we might conceive of moral problems and of strategies for solving them. The lecture extends this into the realm of the ethical (conceived as subsuming the moral domain), and explores how people make progress with respect to their styles of personal valuation. I conclude with some brief remarks on the dynamics among moral, ethical, and personal valuation.

FRIDAY 27

SCIENTIFIC METHODS

Despite the popularity of the idea of “the scientific method”, there is no interesting general process undergone by scientists when they are doing their jobs properly. Philosophers recognize a successor project to the enterprise of characterizing the alleged method: offer a theory of evidence, specifying (preferably formally) how hypotheses and theories are assessed. Scientists, journalists, and other non-philosophers commenting on the sciences tend to cling to the concept of scientific method, understanding it in terms of a blend of ideas drawn from Karl Popper and Thomas Kuhn (a proposal most philosophers, aware of the incompatibilities between Popper and Kuhn, tend to dismiss as absurd).

I recommend approaching these issues by thinking about the sciences as collective practices, and considering the stages of inquiries as they move from initially addressing a question to the certification of that question by the pertinent community and the transmission of new knowledge to a wider audience (sometimes with consequences for public policies and human lives). Given this perspective, the traditional philosophical focus is revealed as far too narrow, both in the aspects of scientific practice it considers and the ways in which it pursues its focal issue. I argue that the public image of scientific method (the Popper-Kuhn blend) is more defensible than it appears at first sight. It supplies a relatively banal answer to the thin methodological question (what method do all sciences share?). When that image is taken seriously, it should inspire much broader philosophical reflection, informed by engagement with specific fields of science. For there are scientific methods, different for distinct sciences. Characterizing them – the project of thick methodology is where the action is. One central theme of this lecture will be the role of ethical judgments in pursuing that project, a theme I shall illustrate by considering some recent work in behavioral genetics.