Sawyer Seminar on Social Epistemology, August 27, 2017

Jeff Russell, USC

“Testimonial Evidence”

I’ll discuss the following two-part view. (1) In cases of successful testimony, the hearer’s evidence includes what they are told—and not merely the fact that they have been told it. (2) There are cases of successful testimony in which the hearer’s antecedent evidence does not guarantee that the teller is reliable. I’ll explore the consequences of this view for higher-order evidence and probability, in particular reflection principles and "level-splitting". I’ll then apply these lessons to the case of testimony about miracles (and other extremely surprising events): in particular, I argue that these cases involve especially striking divergence between first-order and second-order probabilities.

Rebecca Kukla, Georgetown

“Epistemic Risk, Infertility, and Disease Definitions”

I begin with an analysis of some varieties of epistemic risk. Philosophers interested in inductive risk have argued that there are ineliminable epistemic risks in inferences from evidence to hypothesis acceptance or rejection, and that these must be balanced in light of values and interests. I argue that the generation of scientific evidence also involves epistemic risks that can’t be managed except by appeal to values and interests. I focus on the example of disease operationalization and definition, and more specifically on infertility. I argue that in the context of medical research and clinical care, we should do away with the category of infertility altogether. Like many or perhaps all disease categories, any operationalization of the category of 'infertility' for clinical purposes will require us to make value-laden choices about how to manage a variety of epistemic risks. But in the case of infertility, I argue: (1) that these value-laden choices will almost inevitably push in the direction of reaffirming problematic gendered, heterocentric, and pronatalist assumptions about what 'normal' reproductive lives look like; and (2) that from the point of view of clinical care and research methodology, more specific and proximate categories such as low sperm count, endometriosis, vaginismus, and so forth are much more useful.

Michael Lynch, University of Connecticut

“Can We Be Reasonable?”

Reasonableness—understood as a social norm—is the idea that public discourse should involve the practice of giving and asking for (both practical and epistemic)
reasons, and in particular, reasons that participants can potentially recognize as reasons.

In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of skepticism about whether reasonableness, so defined, is feasible for human beings as they are, or whether it is, in the words of one author, a philosophers “delusion”. This paper will be concerned to distinguish and critically examine a particularly virulent form of skepticism about reasonableness—one made all the more interesting because it seems to have considerable empirical support from recent work in cognitive psychology on implicit bias and belief-formation. While I will stop short of claiming that the formal version of the skeptical argument is sound, I argue that significant skeptical residue remains about reasonableness. I therefore suggest that we adopt a skeptical solution to these doubts, one that accords significant political value to an epistemic norm.

Ishani Maitra, University of Michigan

“New words for old wrongs”

In recent years, Miranda Fricker and others have argued that introducing terms like ‘sexual harassment’ can fill previously existing cognitive lacunae, and as such, constitute significant cognitive achievements. In this talk, I diagnose the nature of the cognitive achievement in such cases. Roughly, I argue that that achievement consists in the recognition that the phenomenon under discussion is a further instance of some already recognized and relatively well understood phenomenon. While that is indeed a genuine achievement, I’ll also argue that the assimilation involved here can come to have significant downsides. Again roughly, that assimilation can occlude aspects of the phenomenon under discussion, and so come to constitute a cognitive hindrance as our cognitive purposes evolve. I’ll argue that these results have consequences for how we understand the underlying linguistic/epistemic injustices, and when those injustices can be said to have been repaired.