

CENTER FOR NEURO-ENGINEERING & COGNITIVE SCIENCE (CNECS) & BIOLOGY OF BEHAVIOR INSTITUTE (BoBI) PRESENTS...

Philosophical Issues in Comparative Cognition Research



Friday, February 13, 4:00 p.m.

Location: CBB Room 106

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Many prominent scientists--Hawking, Dawkins, deGrasse Tyson, Kandel--have begun to publicly wonder whether philosophy still has anything useful to contribute to our knowledge of the natural world. These critics often concede that some philosophers are still helpful, but these exceptional individuals are so engaged with empirical work that they are basically scientists themselves. In this talk, I will provide a beginner's overview of several philosophical problems that arise from within comparative cognition research yet cannot be solved merely by the application of existing empirical methods. I will focus especially on a cluster of related issues: the relationships between different and apparently inconsistent models of behavior (especially cognitive and associative models), appeals to parsimony in arbitrating empirical disputes, the role of representational attributions in cognitive theorizing, and how to decide when an empirical category (e.g. 'concept', 'cognition', 'Theory of Mind') is a legitimate target for empirical debate. I will illustrate these issues primarily through a case study of the interdisciplinary debate over whether any nonhuman animals possess a Theory of Mind. My conclusion will be the contrapositive of the skeptical conclusion about philosophy mentioned above: that the best scientists are also philosophers, and so our thinking about disciplinary boundaries needs to become considerably more subtle if we are to continue making empirical progress on some of our most difficult questions about the natural world.

Speaker Biosketch

Cameron Buckner began his academic career in computer science--specifically, in logic-based approaches to artificial intelligence. This research inspired an interest into the (usually messier) ways that humans and animals actually solve problems, which led him to obtain a PhD in Philosophy at Indiana University in 2011. He is now an Assistant Professor In Philosophy at University of Houston, specializing in philosophical issues that arise in the study of animal cognition.

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