

SBSI Brown Bag

Wednesday, September 18, 2019

12:00pm - 1:15pm

Solomon B50

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Flexible Ethics: On the Activation, Transformation, and Misperception of Moral Values

ABSTRACT: Philosophers have long compared moral rules to natural laws, as fixed and universal as gravity. Research in psychology, however, suggests that, at least when it comes to human judgment, morality is far from constant. The evolutionary pressures that shaped the human mind were, first and foremost, social ones, and so it is our relationships, more than objective reality, that shape our moral beliefs. In this talk I present three sets of studies examining how social forces affect morality. First, results of an app-based experiment show in real time how people's social context impacts their moral priorities. Across 13,000 data points, the mere presence of a close other increases the weight people afford moral principles. Next, findings from a longitudinal investigation of six multi-day mass gatherings reveal how collective experiences can elicit lasting prosocial transformation characterized by increased social connectedness and moral expansion. Finally, a representative survey of US adults tests the factors underlying the tendency for people to exaggerate the extremity of their political opponents' views, with implications for understanding and addressing political polarization. Together, these studies provide new evidence about what happens when we, as humans, rely for our moral judgments on an information-processing machine that is more attuned to people than to principles.

The presentation will begin at 12:00pm. Food and drinks will be provided.

