

Assistant Professor Excellence (APeX) Speaker Series

“Can animals understand that others have minds? Putting psychology, biology, and philosophy back together again”

Wednesday, October 25, 2017, 12:15 - 1:15 pm

UCBB, Room 506 (Brown bag lunches welcome)

Dr. Cameron Buckner

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Researchers have proposed only humans can understand that others have minds, and that this fact explains our distinctive abilities to learn language, cooperate politically, use tools and technology, and pass on a complex culture. Recently, however, experiments appeared to show that chimpanzees, dogs, dolphins, and ravens understand that others might see or know the world from a different perspective than their own. Skeptics, however, argued that these experiments can be explained in terms of associative learning mechanisms (think: Pavlov's dog). In this talk, I explain the hidden philosophical assumptions that have deadlocked this debate for almost fifteen years. I end by describing a recent experiment that collaborators and I performed on ravens to overcome the stalemate by requiring ravens to generalize from their own experience and project their knowledge onto others, suggesting that complex social cognition can evolve independently in animals with very different evolutionary history but similar social lives.

Speaker Biography

Buckner began his career in artificial intelligence, and moved towards philosophy as he began to ask questions about the relationship between logic-based models of intelligence and the messier and more intuitive ways that humans and animals solve problems. His current research covers philosophy of mind and cognitive science, focused primarily on issues in the empirical comparison of human and animal intelligence. His work has been published in a wide variety of journals, including Nature Communications, Mind & Language, The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science, and Synthese, and has been covered by media outlets like The Washington Post, The Guardian, and Wired.

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