

**2026
GRADUATE STUDENT
CONFERENCE**



PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES IN THE LIFE SCIENCES

May 2-3

**Western Interdisciplinary Research Building
(WIRB) 1170**

Program Book

Keynote Speakers



Dr. Lauren N. Ross
University of California, Irvine



Dr. Dani S. Bassett
University of Pennsylvania

About 2026 RGSC

The Rotman Graduate Student Conference (RGSC) is an annual event organized by the graduate students of the Rotman Institute of Philosophy. It aims to foster interdisciplinary dialogue between philosophy and the sciences by bringing together graduate students working at their intersection. This year's theme is philosophical issues in the life sciences. We are delighted to welcome Lauren N. Ross and Dani S. Bassett as our keynote speakers.

Focusing on this theme, the conference highlights work in the philosophy of the life sciences that examines how biological, psychological, and genetic sciences generate knowledge, construct explanations, and shape our understanding of living systems. Philosophy of the life sciences engages with foundational questions across a range of disciplines. These include the nature of biological function, causation, and mechanism, debates about reduction and emergence in genetics and neuroscience, and the social and ethical dimensions of scientific practice. Central to the field is a concern with the conceptual frameworks that make scientific inquiry possible and the kinds of understanding it produces.

This year's program reflects the breadth of the field, featuring 9 student talks, 6 poster presentations, and 2 keynote addresses spanning a wide range of topics at the intersection of philosophy and the life sciences.



About the Keynote Speakers

Lauren N. Ross (she/her) is a Dean's Professor and Chancellor's Fellow in the Department of Logic and Philosophy of Science at the University of California, Irvine. Her research focuses on explanation in the biological and biomedical sciences, with particular attention to causal reasoning, causal selection, causal constraints, and complexity in scientific practice.

Ross received her Ph.D. in History and Philosophy of Science from the University of Pittsburgh, her M.A. in Bioethics from Pitt's Center for Bioethics and Health Law, and her M.D. from the University of California, Irvine. She is the author of *Explanation in Biology* (Cambridge University Press), which develops a systematic account of explanatory patterns in the life sciences and examines how biologists justify causal claims. Her work has appeared in leading journals, including *Philosophy of Science*, *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, and *Synthese*. Her collaborative article with co-keynote speaker Dani S. Bassett, "Causation in Neuroscience: Keeping Mechanism Meaningful," appeared in *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*.

Dani S. Bassett (they/them) is the J. Peter Skirkanich Professor at the University of Pennsylvania, with appointments in Bioengineering, Electrical and Systems Engineering, Physics and Astronomy, Neurology, and Psychiatry, and is also an External Professor at the Santa Fe Institute. Their research integrates neural and systems engineering to study the structure and function of brain networks, with a focus on cognition, learning, and mechanisms of neurological and psychiatric disease.

Bassett received their B.S. in Physics from Penn State University and their Ph.D. in Physics from the University of Cambridge as a Churchill Scholar and NIH Health Sciences Scholar. Bassett is the author of more than 300 peer-reviewed publications. Their trade book *Curious Minds: The Power of Connection* (MIT Press), co-authored with Perry Zurn, explores how curiosity builds networks of ideas and relationships by tracing its diverse styles and cognitive patterns.

May 2, 2026

9:15 AM

Opening Remarks

9:30 AM

The Vehicle Indeterminacy Problem in Neuroscience

Caitlin Mace (University of Pittsburgh)
Presentation: 9:30 AM - 10:00 AM, Q&A: 10:00 AM - 10:15 AM

10:30 AM

Experiments as Models: Agents and Context in Biology

Sydney Doering (University of Calgary)
Presentation: 10:30 AM - 11:00 AM, Q&A: 11:00 AM - 11:15 AM

11:30 AM

Mechanisms, Mathematics, and Motives: Towards a Radical Explanatory Pluralism for Biomedical Science

Xavier Piccone (Colorado State University)
Presentation: 11:30 AM - 12:00 PM, Q&A: 12:00 PM - 12:15 PM

12:30 PM

Lunch

1:30 PM

“Explanatory Aptness”: How to Justify Hypothesis Prioritization in Life Science Research

Paul Kelly (University of Wisconsin, Madison)
Presentation: 1:30 PM - 2:00 PM, Q&A: 2:00 PM - 2:15 PM

2:30 PM

(Micro)Biology and the Causal Closure of the Physical

João Pinheiro da Silva (University of St Andrews)
Presentation: 2:30 PM - 3:00 PM, Q&A: 3:00 PM - 3:15 PM

3:30 PM

**Dr. Dani S. Bassett
University of Pennsylvania**

Presentation: 3:30 PM - 4:30 PM, Q&A: 4:30 PM - 5:00 PM

May 3, 2026

9:30 AM

Charges of Anthropomorphism in Debates about Biological Agency

Larissa Wilks (University of Calgary)

Presentation: 9:30 AM - 10:00 AM, Q&A: 10:00 AM - 10:15 AM

10:30 AM

Thinking Collectives: Biological Naturalism and the Problem of Group Minds

Georgie Newson (University of Edinburgh)

Presentation: 10:30 AM - 11:00 AM, Q&A: 11:00 AM - 11:15 AM

11:30 AM

Allocation and Transition Problems in the Evolution of Brains A Case Against Cognitive Gradualism

Farid Saberi (Western University)

Presentation: 11:30 AM - 12:00 PM, Q&A: 12:00 PM - 12:15 PM

12:30 PM

Lunch

1:30 PM

(Potential) Patient Input: A New Desideratum for any Account of Vulnerability

Manuela Rondón-Triana (McMaster University)

Presentation: 1:30 PM - 2:00 PM, Q&A: 2:00 PM - 2:15 PM

2:30 PM

Posters (5 minutes each)

Naomi Dodgson, Ashar Khan, Abel Peña, Rachael Green, Kinzie Gamaleldin, Alyssa D'Ambrosio

3:30 PM

Dr. Lauren Ross

University of California, Irvine

Presentation: 3:30 PM - 4:30 PM, Q&A: 4:30 PM - 5:00 PM

5:00 PM

Closing Remarks - Awards

The Humanity of Science

by **Dani S. Bassett (University of Pennsylvania)**

The progress of science is made possible by the exchange of information between people, whether informally over a cup of coffee or formally through peer-reviewed publications. In the formal exchange occurring in scholarly articles, we use references to buttress our communication: we cite the work of other scholars to build our arguments, contextualize our results, and foreground possibilities for future research. Despite being a critical feature of science communication—as well as a history of ideas—little remains known about how scientists choose references and how those choices influence the exchange of information that subtends advancement in the field. Here I will examine citation practices—who we cite and how favorably or critically we cite them—in several disciplines from 1995 to today using extensive bibliometric analysis and capitalizing on recent advances in large language models. In describing the results of 3 separate studies, I will demonstrate that citation practices differ by author gender, vary with journal prestige, and track social norms of small groups, larger disciplines, and whole countries. Collectively, the results demonstrate that science is social, and scientific practices are bound by the complexities of human behavior. This fundamental humanity of science raises important questions about social justice and inequalities of privilege that have critical import for educating the next generation of young scientists.

Scientific Explanation: Distinguishing Good, Bad, and Better **by Lauren N. Ross (University of California, Irvine)**

This talk examines causal explanation in the life sciences--- primarily biology and neuroscience---with a focus on clarifying standards for causal explanation in these domains. Specifying standards for scientific explanation is important for many reasons. These include the fact that such standards (i) guide decisions about which research is funded and published, (ii) they allow us to justify why science provides our best understanding of the world (in contrast to horoscopes, reading tea leaves, and mere guesses), and (iii) they support successful science communication to expert, public, and other audiences. This talk provides an analysis of standards that distinguish causal explanations that are good, bad, and better. More specifically, these standards distinguish (a) explanations from non-explanations, and (b) explanations that differ in terms of their quality, “explanatoriness,” or “explanatory power.” I suggest that these standards can be captured with a control element account, on which causal explanations appeal to factors that provide information about control over the explanatory target. I introduce this account, show how it achieves the goals outlined above, and discuss how it differs from alternative accounts in the literature.

The Vehicle Indeterminacy Problem in Neuroscience **by Caitlin Mace (University of Pittsburgh)**

Neural representations are a controversial posit in neuroscience. While positing representations helps researchers talk and reason about neural activity and its relation to cognition or behavior, some want to press that such neural representations are real. Theories about neural representations distinguish between representational vehicles—i.e., concrete neural patterns—and content—i.e., what the patterns represent. This distinction has allowed some philosophers to be realists about vehicles but not their content, which is supposed to offer a more secure position than being a realist about the complete representation. Yet no accounts tells us why we should be realists about vehicles. In this paper, I treat vehicles as scientific entities in order to investigate the basis for which we should be realists about vehicles. I argue that many realist criteria fail because of the vehicle indeterminacy problem, which is the problem of determining which patterns in the brain are representational vehicles given many fitting candidates. Ultimately, vehicle realism is supported only by a very weak realist criterion, which is this: we should be realists about entities posited by scientific theories. In light of both familiar and novel objections to this criterion, I conclude that vehicle realism is unsupported at present.

Experiments as Models: Agents and Context in Biology by Sydney Doering (University of Calgary)

Scientific models are central to understanding, investigating, and predicting phenomena. While traditional accounts often focus on abstract, mathematical models derived from theory or constructed with extensive experimental data, experiments themselves can function as models. I look at experimental models in the biological sciences, where the models are composed of living systems that are used to explore biological possibilities. I develop a view of experimental models that integrates Bas van Fraassen's account of representational activity with Marcel Weber's view of experimental modeling. This framework emphasizes the role of intentional activity and the context in which a model is used. I illustrate this view through an analysis of a study in experimental evolution performed by William Ratcliff and Michael Travisano on the transition from unicellularity to multicellularity.

Mechanisms, Mathematics, and Motives: Towards a Radical Explanatory Pluralism for Biomedical Science

by Xavier Piccone (Colorado State University)

While the past two decades have seen a rise in pluralistic approaches to general philosophy of science and other special sciences (wherein a handful of explanatory kinds are accepted), the medical sciences have remained staunchly monist – focused on causal explanation, more specifically causal-mechanistic explanation. I argue that if the philosophy of medicine wishes to retain its grounding in the philosophy of biological science (which I contend it should), it too must adopt pluralism. The uniquely pragmatic character of medical science further justifies this. Not only will an adequate pluralism have to recognize those more common non-causal explanations offered by mathematics (topology and statistics) that unify disparate patterns of behavior, but also more pragmatic explanations directed towards best policy practices, and individual cases of treatment and intervention. Oftentimes these explanatory kinds will overlap and intertwine uniquely in practice. The nature of medicine thus calls for a radical explanatory pluralism. To this end, I suggest that explanations in the medical science will instantiate a family resemblance class, or “cluster-concept” grounded in particular scientific contexts and what researchers take to be genuinely explanatory/understanding-furnishing at distinct scales and levels of inquiry (Wittgenstein, 1953). The job of the philosopher of medicine then is to catalogue such cases, thereby enriching the domain of the cluster-concept and our normative resources for further analysis, improvement, and classification.

“Explanatory Aptness”: How to Justify Hypothesis Prioritization in Life Science Research **by Paul Kelly (University of Wisconsin, Madison)**

All scientific fields involve identifying and evaluating hypotheses, but the space of possible hypotheses is far too large for researchers to investigate indiscriminately. As a result, scientists rely on methodological principles to guide which hypotheses are pursued. In this paper, I argue that two prominent debates over methodological principles in two life sciences (specifically, biology and cognitive science) share a common dialectical structure. In both cases, critics charge that a proposed methodological principle is deployed too broadly, generating an excess of false positives, and that the popularity of the principle is caused by incorrect beliefs about concept extension and explanatory biases present in the minds of the advocates of view. Even so, in recent years, both debates have settled in the same dialectical space: appealing to the inherently social nature of scientific knowledge and the value of permitting a “division of cognitive labor.” With the dialectical similarities between the two methodological debates made clear, I then argue that an interpretive framework (called The Logic of Research Questions) that was developed to analyze one of these principles can fruitfully be applied to analyzing the other. When this is done, the “demand” for a certain kind of explanation advocated for by some researchers becomes intelligible as a request that a specific research question be answered. Finally, drawing on recent discussions concerning the metaphysics of model-based explanation, I propose a way forward for both debates. Some types of models, I argue, are more “apt” at explaining some types of phenomena compared to others, and the recognition of this fact by scientists can often justify prioritizing the consideration of hypotheses which refer to those model-types over alternatives in their research. I conclude by illustrating the value of this new concept by applying it to cases within evolutionary biology and neuroscience.

(Micro)Biology and the Causal Closure of the Physical
by João Pinheiro da Silva (University of St Andrews)

Howard Robinson has criticized the contemporary revival of hylomorphism for, on the one hand, accepting the causal closure of the physical, while, on the other, ascribing a real and irreducible causal role to forms or structures. If the world is causally closed under physics, it makes no sense to postulate a structure or form that actively affects the distribution and motion of matter. After carefully formulating what I call Robinson's causal closure argument against hylomorphism, I demonstrate that the argument fails because it presupposes an overly strict conception of causal closure of the microphysical. Based on a case study from microbiology (information control in microorganisms), I argue that the argument fails yet a more modest – and more scientifically defensible – version of closure remains intact. Higher-level constraints can be causally efficacious even when all fundamental forces operate at the microphysical level. This means that a reformulated version of closure, capable of dealing with those cases, is also perfectly compatible with the hylomorphist claim that higher-level structures are causally relevant and an irreducible part of physical reality.

Charges of Anthropomorphism in Debates about Biological Agency

by Larissa Wilks (University of Calgary)

Scholars writing on the topic of biological agency often confront the question of whether ascriptions of agency to all organisms is an anthropomorphic error. This worry is motivated by the fact that humans have a psychological bias towards seeing the kinds of capacities or characteristics that they have in other organisms or entities when they do not have enough evidence to reasonably attribute these capacities. In this paper I will explore the ways that scholars argue that anthropomorphic bias is present in debates about agency, and evaluate whether these charges are productive in the literature on biological agency. I will first argue that the problem of anthropocentric bias, which has been given relatively little attention in these discussions, manifests as a harmful bias in these debates. Secondly, I will argue that arguments that make charges of anthropomorphism in conversations about biological agency contain harmful anthropocentric bias, as their understanding of agency is unreasonably centered around the human manifestation of it. Because charges of anthropomorphism are supported by unreasonable anthropocentric background assumptions, they are not warranted in debates about biological agency.

Thinking Collectives: Biological Naturalism and the Problem of Group Minds

by Georgie Newson (University of Edinburgh)

Dissatisfaction with computational functionalism has led philosophers of mind to consider a number of alternative frameworks for understanding cognition. Many of the most promising can be described as versions of biological naturalism (BN): the idea that cognition can only be instantiated in living matter. However, BN is not invulnerable to the criticisms levelled at its competitors. I claim, in parallel to Ned Block's 'China Brain' challenge to computational functionalism, that BN is committed to the 'group mind' hypothesis, or the idea that collectives of cognitive agents can themselves exhibit cognitive capacities. In developing this claim, I argue first that BN necessarily involves an adoption of some variant on the 'life-mind continuity' thesis. I then distinguish between 'weak' and 'strong' forms of this commitment, exploring how cognitive agency might be ascribed in each case. Both approaches, I argue, yield the conclusion that cognitive capacities are indeed instantiated in some social collectives. However, unlike Block's challenge to computational functionalism, my argument is not intended as a rebuttal of BN. Proponents of BN have, I suggest, a number of ways to deal with the problem of group minds. Alternatively, they may embrace the group mind hypothesis, and adopt a radical view in which collective agents are porously nested throughout ecological space.

Allocation and Transition Problems in the Evolution of Brains: A Case Against Cognitive Gradualism **by Farid Saberi (Western University)**

Research on brain and cognitive evolution shows both revolutionary and conservative phases. Revolutionary phases involve structural changes enabling new forms of cognitive evolvability, while conservative phases feature neural reuse—reallocating existing resources for novel functions while preserving a generic and developmentally plastic brain. I call theories addressing revolutionary phases transition theories, and those addressing conservative phases allocation theories. The relation between the two has been explained through a form of evolutionary gradualism and extrapolationism: Allocation mechanisms, over long geological time, scale into patterns of increasing cognitive fitness, driving lineages toward new modes of cognition and major cognitive transitions. This paper challenges this view. I argue that cognitive transitions are best understood as a passive large-scale evolutionary trend which occurs in a heterogeneous regime of evolutionary forces; therefore, micro-level selection cannot be extrapolated to explain a macro-level phenomenon. Thus, while allocation makes brains more adaptive, it is insufficient to explain cognitive transitions. Contingency and selective pressures in directions other than increasing cognitive fitness are also central.

(Potential) Patient Input: A New Desideratum for any Account of Vulnerability

by Manuela Rondón-Triana (McMaster University)

In the frame of research ethics, vulnerability is a concept “[...] generally taken to designate a special status that an individual or group has [...] in a way that generates action-guiding requirement to pay extra attention to their wellbeing” (Wrigley, 2015, 478). The concept serves a clear goal: signaling to researchers they should be wary and implement additional measures to make sure that participating in their trials is as just and safe as possible. However, there is no agreement when it comes to identifying exactly what the concept means, and thus several ways of understanding and/or applying it have been put forward. In this paper I argue that a desideratum for an account of vulnerability is that it invites input from (potential) participants, and I discuss whether some of the main accounts of vulnerability meet it. Firstly, I argue that it is easier for researchers to know if running a trial is fair and, especially, what sorts of measures they should implement to make it safer and fairer for their participants if they consider their input. I do this by using the example of some Long COVID trials. My aim in this is to show that, if the goal that the concept serves is better achieved in this way, inviting (potential) participant input is a desideratum for any account of vulnerability. Secondly, I turn my attention to some of the most prominent accounts of vulnerability, namely, Luna’s (2009), Hurst’s (2008), and Lange, Rogers & Doods’ (2013), to examine whether they can satisfy this desideratum. I argue that the later account is the one that satisfies it the most. Finally, I discuss two possible objections to my argument: that it is not practical for researchers to consider participant input and that participant input may not be valuable because participants lack expertise.

How People Conceive of and Discuss Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

by Naomi Dodgson (Western University)

Diagnostic categories in psychology are socially constructed, thus how they are discussed and conceived of is of great importance. While there has been a great deal of discourse concerning terminology for Autism (e.g. the use of 'functioning labels'; identity- vs. person-first language), there has been very little such discussion for Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Objectives: The present study aimed to 1) examine how average people conceive of ADHD (e.g. Is it a disability? Is it a social construct?), and 2) provide a survey of which terms are most commonly used and preferred.

Methods: Participants completed a survey with demographic questions, measures of ADHD knowledge and proximity to people with ADHD, questions about how one conceives of ADHD, and questions about one's usage of and opinion of ADHD-related terms. Results: 480 participants were included and split into four interest groups (people with ADHD [n=208], parents of ADHD children [n=87], professionals in ADHD-related fields [n=177], members of the public [n=135]). Participants expressed discomfort discussing people with ADHD in the terms of "Disabled", "Disabled person", or "Has a disability". Participants viewed the term "Scientific/Medical Construct" as more accurate than "Social Construct" when applied to ADHD. All groups displayed broadly similar preferences for different terms. Person-first language ("person with ADHD") was preferred to the identity-first construction "ADHD person". The framing of "being" rather than "having" ADHD was viewed unfavourably by all groups.

Conclusions: Despite the nature in which psychiatric diagnostic categories are defined, participants did not agree that ADHD is a social construct. Participants also appeared uncomfortable using the language of disability. There does not appear to be a desire for a shift in terminology used for ADHD at present (e.g. switching to "ADHD person" or referring to being ADHD), regardless of interest group.

by Ashar Khan (University of Waterloo)

Robustness is often invoked in scientific controversies as if it can deliver theory choice: if a result survives many changes in models and methods, it is taken to favour one framework over its rivals. This paper argues that this inference is frequently too strong. I use the contemporary dispute between the Energy Balance Model (EBM) and the Carbohydrate–Insulin Model (CIM) of obesity as a case study, focusing on Hall et al.’s (2022) claim that the EBM is “more robust” than the CIM. I develop a simple way to parse robustness arguments by distinguishing (i) the result said to be robust, (ii) the auxiliary assumptions varied to test its stability, and (iii) the core hypothesis that stability is supposed to support. Applied to the EBM modelling program, the key robust deliverable is a structural pattern: over the long run, energy imbalance is expressed primarily as changes in fat mass, while carbohydrate and protein stores are tightly regulated. This pattern remains stable across wide variation in modelling assumptions and recurs across distinct representational packages, supporting it as a non-negotiable constraint on adequate theories of obesity. However, I argue that this robustness does not underwrite a decisive explanatory comparison between the EBM and CIM. The same structural constraint is compatible with multiple, rival causal stories once mechanistic assumptions are allowed to vary. The philosophical upshot is a more modest role for robustness in theory disputes. Robustness can secure shared structure and constrain admissible explanations, yet, at least in this case, it falls short of licensing claims of explanatory superiority.

by **Abel Peña (Arizona State University)**

Biology can be thought of as consisting of two fundamental components: the universal process of evolution and the universal unit of life (i.e., the cell). However, even though evolution undoubtedly occurs at the cellular level, and every aspect of every phenotype is thought to emerge from cellular features, the research into the intersection of these two biological fields encounters several barriers. Evolutionary cell biology (EvoCellBio) is an emerging field that aims to overcome these barriers and integrate the study of biology's two basic universals. The barriers that EvoCellBio encounters take many forms. For starters, there are conceptual barriers insofar as evolutionary biology and cell biology seemingly interpret the same concept in different ways. For instance, evolutionary biology takes the position that macro-level evolution is a result of micro-level evolution over time, with micro-level evolution just being the change of gene frequencies in populations. But this concept of evolution does not easily accommodate historical changes in cells, such as the role of endosymbiosis in the evolution of mitochondria. There are also infrastructural barriers. Most major research institutions (i.e., universities) actively separate evolutionary biology departments from molecular and cellular departments. This artificial cloistering often results in frictions over limited resources, dismissiveness toward seemingly unrelated areas of research, and ultimately a lack of relevant familiarity and fruitful cooperation as research is segregated into different specialist journals. This poster aims to begin outlining the boundaries of EvoCellBio, to identify the conceptual, historical, and infrastructural components impeding its recognition and contributions to biology, and useful analogies and disanalogies with the development and maturation of other fields of research, such as evolutionary developmental biology (EvoDevo).

by Rachael Green (Colorado State University)

Heidegger's account of being-towards-death presents authentic existence as grounded in the anticipatory confrontation with one's own finitude. While this analysis is ontological rather than psychological, it raises an important question: to what extent can such an orientation toward death be concretely appropriated by human subjects without causing psychological destabilization? This paper examines Heidegger's concepts of anxiety, authenticity, and finitude alongside empirically studied psychological attitudes toward death—approach acceptance, escape acceptance, neutral acceptance, and death anxiety. I argue that although none of these attitudes fully instantiate Heideggerian authenticity, death anxiety most closely mirrors its existential structure, albeit at significant psychological cost. Neutral acceptance, by contrast, lacks existential resoluteness but better supports psychological well-being. The paper concludes that Heideggerian authenticity, while philosophically illuminating, may be only partially livable in practice, requiring compromises between existential insight and psychological sustainability.

by Kinzie Gamaleldin (Indiana University Bloomington)

Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) presents a fundamental challenge to Identity Theory of Mind (iToM), which posits a one-to-one on-to correspondence between mental states and brain states. This theoretical paper examines how DID, characterized by multiple distinct personality states within a single individual, creates epistemic difficulties for iToM on both temporal and spatial levels. Temporally, DID patients exhibit fragmented autobiographical knowledge and discontinuous agency that extends beyond normal personality evolution, contradicting iToM's requirement for unified mental-physical correspondence. Spatially, evidence from neuroimaging studies demonstrates that identical neural substrates can produce radically different mental states across alters without detectable structural brain changes. We analyze these challenges through examination of clinical case studies, including patients exhibiting alter-specific sensory capabilities, and consider the implications for psychiatric practice, which relies heavily on physicalist frameworks. We argue that iToM must either abandon its core one-to-one on-to mapping principle to accommodate DID or provide empirical evidence demonstrating complete temporal and spatial segregation of mental agents within shared neural architecture. This dilemma has profound consequences for psychiatric nosology, patient flourishing, and the philosophical foundations of mental health treatment. Rather than dismissing DID as an extreme variation of normality, we advocate for further empirical investigation to clarify the correspondence between mental states and brain states in dissociative conditions. Our analysis reveals that the relationship between consciousness, identity, and neural substrate is more complex than iToM's elegant framework currently acknowledges.

by **Alyssa D'Ambrosio (University of Calgary)**

This project examines how contemporary digital culture—particularly short-form, algorithmically driven platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and X—fosters a culture of spectatorship that undermines personal agency and authentic participation, especially among youth aged 13 to 18. Drawing on Aristotle's account of human flourishing, Charles Taylor's notion of evaluative horizons, Gabriel Marcel's distinction between participation and spectating, and William James's theory of the loop-line, this research situates digital media use within the philosophical problem of akrasia, or weakness of the will. I argue that digital environments systematically encourage akratic action by accelerating impulse, flattening value, and eroding the reflective capacities necessary for deliberation. Practices such as drift-scrolling and performative self-presentation exemplify this condition, drawing individuals into passive cycles of consumption despite an awareness of their diminished well-being. Ultimately, this modern form of akratic action pushes communities away from the truly virtuous life. Rather than framing digital overuse as a moral failing or a purely psychological issue, this project understands it as a structural and cultural phenomenon shaped by technological design. Through philosophical analysis and a proposed case study on Canadian youth, the research explores how agency might be restored by rebuilding attentional habits, evaluative judgment, and opportunities for embodied participation. Therefore, this work seeks to articulate a framework for understanding and resisting digital spectatorship, emphasizing the ethical importance of participation, reflection, and the deliberate cultivation of attention in the digital age.

About the Organizing Team



Kawthar Fedjki, Kardelen Küçük, Sara Varón Echeverri

Kawthar Fedjki (she/her/elle) is a PhD student in the Department of Philosophy. Her research interests meet at the intersection of philosophy of science and technology, bioethics, and epistemology. She is interested in biotechnologies like human enhancement, with a focus on the socio-biological interactions of systems with technology, including artificial intelligence, and the epistemic, ethical, and metaphysical implications of such integrations.

Kardelen Küçük (she/her) is a PhD candidate from Türkiye in the Department of Philosophy. Her research lies at the intersection of general philosophy of science and the philosophy of psychiatry. She focuses on complex systems approaches and dynamical models in psychiatry, examining the kinds of explanations they offer for understanding mental disorders, as well as their implications for personalized models and precision psychiatry.

Sara Varón Echeverri (she/her) is a Colombian PhD student in the Department of Philosophy. Her research focuses on the use of simulations for the study of climate change at the intersection of Philosophy of Science and Social Epistemology. She is particularly interested in how we produce meaningful future climate projections and how we communicate these results to a broader audience. Sara also has a passion for teaching science and philosophy.

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- Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry
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- Department of Biochemistry
- Department of Computer Science
- Department of Physics and Astronomy



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