

Department of Philosophy Talk

Alexander Klein



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3-5pm



HIB 55

William James, Epiphenomenalism, and the Hard Problem

This talk offers a new reading and assessment of William James's argument against epiphenomenalism. James developed an evolutionary objection to such a view that is still discussed today. But recent responses do not grasp its full depth. He argued that our life-essential, phenomenal pleasures and pains have three features that suggest that they were likely shaped by natural selection: they are natively-patterned, those patterns are systematically linked with antecedent brain states, and the patterns are universal among humans. If epiphenomenalism were true, phenomenal patterns could not have been selected (because epiphenomenalism precludes phenomenal consciousness affecting reproductive success). So epiphenomenalism is likely to be false. This talk also draws out some unexpected consequences of James's argument for today's philosophy of cognitive science. Accepting James's objection to epiphenomenalism should push us to reject the distinction between access- and phenomenal-consciousness, and to reject versions of the "hard" problem that are articulated in terms of this distinction.

If you have any questions, please contact philos@uci.edu

BIO

- Alexander Klein's research focuses on the history and philosophy of psychology, with a special emphasis on interactions with classic pragmatism and early analytic philosophy.
- He is a Canada Research Chair, Director of the Bertrand Russell Research Centre, and Professor of Philosophy at McMaster University, where he also established the Digital Philosophy Laboratory.