

Calum McNamara

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Areas

AOS: Decision Theory, Epistemology, Metaphysics

AOC: Logic, Philosophy of Economics, Language, Science

Education

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, PhD in Philosophy, 2024 (expected)

Dissertation: *Choice and Credence in Context*

Committee: James M. Joyce (chair), Gordon Belot, Sarah Moss, Brian Weather-
erson, Ezra Keshet (Linguistics)

New York University, Visiting Graduate Student, Fall 2022

King's College London, BA in Philosophy, First Class Honours, 2018

Papers

Journal Articles

“Causal Decision Theory, Context, and Determinism”

Forthcoming in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. Early Online:
doi.org/10.1111/phpr.13021

“The Punctuated Equilibrium of Scientific Change: A Bayesian Network Model”
(with Patrick Grim, Frank Seidl, Hinton Rago, Isabel Astor, Caroline Diaso)

Synthese, vol. 200, no. 4 (2022), 297, doi.org/10.1007/s11229-022-03720-z

“Scientific Theories as Bayesian Nets: Structure and Evidence Sensitivity” (with
Patrick Grim, Frank Seidl, Hinton Rago, Isabel Astor, Caroline Diaso, and Peter
Ryner)

Philosophy of Science, vol. 89, no. 1 (2022), 42-69, [doi:10.1017/psa.2021.18](https://doi.org/10.1017/psa.2021.18)

Work in Progress

“Why (Not) Conditionalize?”, with Snow Zhang (revise and resubmit)

“Desire-as-Belief in Context” (draft available)

“Learning ‘If’” (draft available)

“Most Counterfactuals are Indeterminate” (draft available)

“Decisions in Context”

“Actual Value and Indeterminacy in Decision Theory”

“Accuracy and Epistemic Modalities” (with Mikayla Kelley, Richard Roth, and Snow
Zhang)

Conference Participation

Talks

“Learning ‘If’”

Workshop on Matthew Mandelkern’s *Bounds: The Dynamics of Interpretation*,
University of Massachusetts, Amherst, May 2024

“Is Polarization Really Rational?” (with Eduardo Martinez)

[APA Central Division Meeting](#), Colloquium, February 2024*

“Accuracy and Epistemic Modalities” (joint work with Mikayla Kelley, Richard Roth,
and Snow Zhang; presented with Mikayla Kelley)

Accuracy Workshop, University of Chicago, December 2023

“Why (Not) Conditionalize?” (with Snow Zhang)

University of Texas at Austin, February 2023

“Counterfactuals in the Image of Chance”

[APA Eastern Division Meeting](#), Colloquium, January 2023*

“Decision and the Closed Future”

[Australasian Association of Philosophy Conference](#), Colloquium, July 2022*,¹

“Humean Causation”

[UT Austin Graduate Philosophy Conference](#), April 2022*

“Causation, Determinism, and Decision-making”

[APA Central Division Meeting](#), Colloquium, February 2022*

“Is Polarization Really Rational?” (with Eduardo Martinez)

Michigan-MIT Social Philosophy Workshop, June 2021*

“Probabilistic Reasons” (with Elise Woodard)

[Michigan-Princeton Metanormativity Workshop](#) August 2019*

(‘*’ = refereed)

Comments

Jim Hutchison, “Moral Principles and Normative Generality”

[APA Pacific Division Meeting](#), San Francisco, April 2023

Jason Konek, “Aggregating Imprecise Probabilities Using Epistemic Utilities” (with
Elise Woodard)

[University of Michigan Philosophy Alumni Conference](#), May 2019

Jennifer Carr, “Epistemic Observation, Pragmatic Intervention”

[University of Michigan Spring Colloquium](#), January 2019

¹Withdrew due to COVID.

Awards and Fellowships

- Cornwell Prize**, University of Michigan, 2023-24
Full year fellowship, awarded for my paper “Causal Decision Theory, Context, and Determinism”
- Rackham One-term Dissertation Fellowships, University of Michigan, 2022
Awarded in the Winter and Fall terms
- Rackham Research Grant**, University of Michigan, Summer 2022
- Faculty Prize for Excellence in Teaching, University of Michigan, 2022
- Weinberg Pre-doctoral Fellowship**, University of Michigan, Summer 2021
- Jelf Medal Nomination, King’s College London, 2018
Prize for the best overall performance by an undergraduate in the School of Arts and Humanities, nominated by the Department of Philosophy
- Arts and Humanities Research Council Studentship, 2018 (declined)
Full scholarship for graduate study at Oxford University
- King’s College London MPhilStud Bursary, 2018 (declined)
Scholarship for graduate study at King’s College London
- Bob Meyer Memorial Scholarship, Australian National University, 2016
Full scholarship to take part in a Summer School in Logic

Teaching

- Lead Instructor Phil 303: Introduction to Symbolic Logic, Summer 2023
- Teaching Assistant Phil 345: Mind and Language, James M. Joyce, Winter 2023
Phil 413: Formal Philosophical Methods (Grader, also ran Office Hours), Sarah Moss, Winter 2022
Phil 303: Introduction to Symbolic Logic, Gordon Belot, Fall 2021
Phil 444: Groups and Choices, Brian Weatherson, Winter 2021 (online due to COVID)
Phil 340: Minds and Machines, Eric Swanson, Fall 2020 (online due to COVID)
Phil 250: Changing the World, David Manley, Winter 2020
Phil 305: Introduction to Formal Philosophical Methods, Brian Weatherson, Fall 2019

- Qualifications Graduate Teaching Certificate, University of Michigan, 2023

Service

Refereeing of Journal Submissions: *American Philosophical Quarterly* ($\times 2$); *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*; *Ergo*; *European Journal of Philosophy*; *Minds and Machines*; *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*; *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*; *Review of Symbolic Logic*

Organizing

Michigan Philosophy Weekly Tea, 2020–present
Michigan Epistemology Working Group, co-organizer, 2018–present
[Michigan Philosophy Spring Colloquium](#), co-organizer, 2018–19
King’s College London Formal Philosophy Reading Group, 2016–18

Mentorship

COMPASS Mentor, 2020–present
Graduate Student Mentor (GSM), University of Michigan, 2022 and 2023-24

Other Service

Session Chair: [APA Eastern](#), January 2021; [APA Central](#), February 2024; [APA Pacific](#), April 2024
Editor, *Philosopher’s Annual*, 2020
Admissions Committee, University of Michigan, 2019–20
Co-author and tutor of a training course, “Reflexive strategies for better judgment and decision-making”, for the British Civil Service, with Julien Dutant and Alexandru Marcoci, 2016–17

Coursework

Philosophy

Recent Work in Epistemology, Sarah Moss, Winter 2023[†]
Optimistic Metaphysics, Maegan Fairchild, Winter 2023[†]
Truth-maker Semantics, Kit Fine (New York University), Fall 2022[†]
Bayesian Epistemology, Snow Zhang (New York University), Fall 2022[†]
Metaphysics: Essence and Grounding, Boris Kment (Princeton), Fall 2022[†]
Introduction to Formal Epistemology, James M. Joyce, Winter 2022[†]
Philosophy of Space and Time, Gordon Belot, Fall 2021[†]
Decision Theory, Boris Kment (Princeton), Winter 2021[†]
Decision Theory and Deliberation, Simon Huttegger (Irvine), Winter 2021[†]
Recent Work in Decision Theory, James M. Joyce, Winter 2021[†]
Recent Work in Philosophy of Mind, Sarah Moss, Fall 2020
Independent Study on Epistemology and Philosophy of Language, Sarah Moss, Winter 2020
Neoplatonist Metaphysics, Sara Ahbel-Rappe, Fall 2019
Formal Philosophical Methods, Sarah Moss, Fall 2019
Philosophy of Kant, Janum Sethi, Winter 2019
Revisionary Ontology, Maegan Fairchild, Winter 2019
Induction, Simplicity, and Learning, Gordon Belot, Winter 2019
Attunement to Reasons, Peter Railton, Winter 2019
Ethical Analysis, Peter Railton, Fall 2018[†]
Rational Choice Theory, James M. Joyce, Fall 2018
Skills and Achievements, Brian Weatherson, Fall 2018
Proseminar, Eric Swanson, Fall 2018
Language and Convention, Richmond Thomasson, Fall 2018[†]

Other Subjects

Introduction to Agent-based Modelling, David Sabin-Miller, Winter 2024
Introduction to Topology, Linh Truong, Winter 2022

Advanced Game Theory, Tilman Börgers, Fall 2020
Machine Learning, Honlak Lee, Winter 2020[†]
Probability Theory, Zach Norwood, Winter 2020
Mathematics of Data, Indika Rajapakse, Winter 2020
Formal Semantics and Pragmatics, Ezra Keshet, Winter 2019

(‘[†]’ = audited)

References

James M. Joyce
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Brian Weatherson
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Dissertation Abstract

Choice and Credence in Context

In this dissertation, I explore the role of *context* in decision theory and epistemology.

Chapter 1, “Causal Decision Theory, Context, and Determinism”, discusses how a contextualist view about counterfactuals helps to resolve a striking problem faced by causal decision theorists. The classic formulation of causal decision theory (CDT) appeals to counterfactuals. Roughly, it says that you should aim to choose an option that *would* have a good outcome, *were* you to choose it. However, this version of CDT faces trouble if the laws of nature are deterministic. After all, the standard theory of counterfactuals says that, if the laws *are* deterministic, then if anything—including the choice you make—were different in the present, either the laws would be violated or the distant past would be changed. And as several authors have shown, it’s easy to transform this upshot of the standard theory of counterfac-

tuals into full-blown counterexamples to CDT. In response to these counterexamples, I argue that the problem lies, not so much with CDT's guiding idea—that it's the expected *causal* consequences of your actions that matter for rational decision-making—but with the fact that the classic formulation of CDT doesn't pay sufficient attention to the context-sensitivity of counterfactuals. I develop a contextualist version of CDT, which better accounts for this context-sensitivity. And I show that my theory avoids the problems faced by the classic formulation of CDT in deterministic worlds.

In Chapter 2, "Desire-as-Belief in Context", I apply a similar methodology to a very different problem. The so-called *Desire-as-Belief* (DAB) thesis says that your desire for a proposition *A*'s truth should match your degree of belief that *A*'s truth would be good. This thesis seems plausible; but David Lewis famously showed that it faces a serious difficulty: given only mild assumptions, the DAB thesis turns out to clash with standard decision theory. As Lewis acknowledges, this result is closely related to his own triviality results for Stalnaker's thesis, where the latter is a notorious thesis connecting your credences in indicative conditionals to your conditional credences. Given this connection, it's not surprising that philosophers have sometimes responded to Lewis's DAB argument in ways that parallel responses to his triviality results. However, it is surprising that one such parallel response—the strongest, in my view—hasn't yet been explored in the literature. A number of authors have shown that we can resist Lewis's triviality results for Stalnaker's thesis by appealing to a contextualist view about indicative conditionals. In my paper, I explore the analogous, contextualist response to the argument against the DAB thesis. I first make a case for a revised, context-sensitive version of that thesis. I then show that, by embracing this version of the thesis, we can block Lewis's argument. And finally I prove a tenability result, which establishes that, given the contextualist view, even the most general version of the DAB thesis can be made compatible with standard decision theory after all. I conclude the paper by discussing some residual cases in which there's still a tension between the DAB thesis and standard decision theory, and make some suggestions for what to think about them.

Finally, in Chapter 3, "Learning 'If'", I turn from decision-theoretic issues to epistemological ones. A long-standard puzzle faced by Bayesian epistemologists is to say how your credences should change when you learn an indicative conditional. Several well-known cases seem to show that the standard Bayesian update rules—conditionalization and Jeffrey conditionalization—give the wrong results in cases of this kind. Most famously, van Fraassen's *Judy Benjamin problem* seems to show that if, after learning an indicative conditional, your credences satisfy some intuitive desiderata, then you can't be updating your credences according to the standard Bayesian rules. However, in my paper, I argue against the prevailing view, and show that standard Bayesian rules can deliver the right results in cases like van Fraassen's. To do this, I draw on recent work on conditionals in the semantics literature. I show that, if we adopt a particular view of conditionals put forward in this literature—a view which is plausible on independent grounds, and which fits naturally with the contextualism about indicative conditionals that I've defended elsewhere—then the standard Bayesian rules turn out to deliver correct results in the apparently problematic cases. Better still, I prove that several alternatives to

the standard Bayesian rules, which have recently appeared in the philosophical literature, and which are intended to give the right answers in cases where you learn an indicative conditional, turn out to be equivalent to the standard Bayesian rules in certain contexts. The upshot is that, by adopting the specific view of indicative conditionals that I explore in the paper, we end up with a very nice, unified account of rational learning. My account also ties in well with discussions that have been taking place elsewhere in the literature, both in epistemology and philosophy of language. For example, my results connect up, in interesting ways, to Lewis's famous triviality results for Stalnaker's thesis, discussed in Chapter 2.