Transcript

Speaker 1: You're tuned in to 90.7 FM, k a l x Berkeley. My name is Tesla Munson. And this is the graduates, the interview talk show where I speak with UC Berkeley graduate students about their work here on campus and around the world. Today I'm joined by a philosophy graduate student, Dylan Marie in the Department of Philosophy. We have one of those here. Right. Awesome. Yeah, no problem. Not My pleasure. Uh, yeah, as I was just mentioning, I mostly do signs episodes. So this is a, this is going to be a new one for me, but you say you are not just philosophy, you have [00:00:30] some elements of science in there.

Speaker 2: I have kind of a foot in psychology and cognitive science sort of broadly construed and also getting into some research and sociology more recently.

Speaker 1: Okay. So you have a foot in there. Not, not ahead cause that's, that's an easy joke. But [inaudible]

Speaker 2: keep my head in philosophy, uh, where the official money comes from.

Speaker 1: Okay. And then the limbs everywhere else. So if you could just tell us in like one or two sentences, what is it [00:01:00] that you work on and what does it have to do with psychology, for example.

Speaker 2: So I mainly work on moral responsibility and freewill and the related notions of praise and blame, earthiness, things in, in that vicinity. And so there's a connection with respect to just what things affect our moral responsibility that we need to actually go do the relevant empirical work. I think at least to find out sort of what the threats are, whether they're real, where they're coming from.

Speaker 1: [00:01:30] Okay. You said so many words right there. I heard praise, I heard blame worthiness and then threats. Okay, these all sound different to me, so we'll have to break it down a little bit. What are those all part of one concept?

Speaker 2: No, not necessarily though. You might think that they're pretty importantly connected. So you might think that you're only really praise or blame worthy for things that you are morally responsible for. And you might think that this is even more controversial perhaps, that you're only really morally responsible for those actions that you have free will [00:02:00] with respect to,

Speaker 1: okay. So you can't be blamed for something that you didn't have any choice in the matter. So if I wanted to say things like people take other people to concentration camps because they were ordered to, where does that fall on that spectrum?

Speaker 2: Yeah, that's definitely one of the questions, uh, in the, in the mix.

Speaker 1: Okay. So how did you get interested in this? Were you just, were you just like being blamed for everything by your siblings growing up and you're like, you know what, I need to find out [00:02:30] why this has happened.

Speaker 2: That's right. Academic research interests usually, you know, have, have some sort of roots in early childhood. Probably no, in my case, I as an Undergrad didn't really have much of an idea going in what I wanted to study, gravitated toward history and then political science early on. And then a combination of things sort of happened roughly going into my junior year, I sort of realized that it wasn't so much the political science aspects of political science. I was more interested in [00:03:00] than political theory, which already basically is political philosophy in a way. And around the same time I started to becoming very interested in this sort of combination of neuroscientific work on what were traditionally thought of as philosophical topics. So the nature of consciousness, also the nature of moral judgments, things like that. There had just started to be some recent work on and I had recently learned that I wasn't [00:03:30] going to be able to go on one study abroad program, realized that one of the study abroad programs I still could go on was the Budapest semester in cognitive science, which was basically a crash course in that entire field in all of its sub areas.

Speaker 2: And so I went on that and uh, the rest is kinda history came, came back from study abroad, decided to major in philosophy and here I am.

Speaker 1: So have advancements in technology played a role in sort of this neuro psych [00:04:00] perspective on these big questions? Is that, is that where that is coming from?

Speaker 2: I think so, yeah. So traditionally, you know, the philosopher has been seen as this person who just sits in their arm chair and you know, thought is the primary tool that they're using to investigate the things that they're interested in. And more recently you've had some people, so-called experimental philosophers for one start to use the methods of the sciences to address [00:04:30] philosophical questions. Still a relatively new research area, fairly controversial, but you've had people start to use sort of the methods of social psychology in particular. So survey response format, uh, type studies, but also things like Fmri and other methods of, of the cognitive science to address traditional philosophical questions.

Speaker 1: Armchair, I thought it was a Hammock, the Hammock, the Hammock when you can get it. Yeah. Okay. Okay. Uh, so do you in particular [00:05:00] consider yourself to be one of these experimental philosophers?

Speaker 2: I will count myself among them as long as that means that I still get to be a plain old philosopher as well.

Speaker 1: Yeah, no, of course. I'm not making any calls on that. I think that's all on you. Uh, okay. And remind us where, I don't think we've mentioned, where did you get your undergraduate degree at? Kalamazoo College. Kalamazoo place in West Michigan. Okay. I was going to say that was my next question. It's the word we've all heard of Kalamazoo, right? Right. Yeah. Okay. Michigan. [00:05:30] Awesome. And then what brought you out here to Berkeley?

Speaker 2: You know, it was kind of the, the best place that I got into and the one that seemed like it would be the best to spend, you know, upwards of seven years out.

Speaker 1: So it's not just like the fact that we have great weather for Hammocks and does that help?

Speaker 2: The weather certainly helps though. It was mostly quality of the program,

Speaker 1: I believe you. Of course, of course. So, okay. Experimental philosophy are some of the methods that you use [00:06:00] in particular.

Speaker 2: So a decent amount of the work that I've done presents people with. And of course depending on the condition that the subject is randomly assigned to the vignette will be different. But often we'll give them some sort of short story about say a particular person or a set of people and we'll describe some, you know, sequence of events that occurs within that vignette. And then we'll ask people some judgement about, [00:06:30] you know, did the person act with freewill in that scenario or did they know the proposition that they were sent to, you know that they asserted it within that vignette and things like that. And then we compare compare responses across conditions.

Speaker 1: So how do you take into account all of the different elements of that person's background that might play into their response?

Speaker 2: Well, that's a good question. Recently there have been quite, I mean there's been a lot of, a lot more interest than [00:07:00] there was, you know, even 10 years ago in so gender effects and other effects, you know, that are coming out of sort of demographic variables. Most of my work has not been so concerned with controlling for those differences. So long as those differences don't seem to be driving the effects that we're more interested in. I'm kind of usually happy to to just chalk that up to, you know, more noise.

Speaker 1: Okay. But to play devil's [00:07:30] advocate, I was just reading an article on North Korea this morning, so like clearly cultural differences must play a role because I don't think that those North Koreans are going to say the same things about freewill as us Americans for example.

Speaker 2: Oh well that's, that's interesting. And certainly for, for some target phenomenon there are important cultural and gender and all sorts of other differences. One of the most interesting studies that's come out of the freewill literature recently though is it seems as though [00:08:00] there's not too much cultural variability in people's conception of freewill. I mean further, further work of course remains to be done, but the initial work on that looks like it's relatively universal in the grand scheme of things.

Speaker 1: So what do we mean by freewill here then?

Speaker 2: Well, that's also, I mean a topic of considerable debate though. For my purposes. Usually I'm primarily just interested in whatever sort of free will, would ground moral [00:08:30] responsibility. There's some people think that you might get freewill and moral responsibility to come apart in interesting ways.

Speaker 1: Okay. Well you gotta define at least one of those things for me. So if you want to define moral responsibility, I'll take that too. But either one, can you define one of them just so I know?

Speaker 2: Sure. So I think usually of moral responsibility as being that quality, such that if a person has it, then they're, you know, blame worthy if the thing that they've done is a bad action, [00:09:00] praiseworthy, if the thing they've done is a good action. Other things being equal where potentially a loss being packed into the other things being equal clause. But that's, that's the basic bare bones of, of the notion I think.

Speaker 1: So if we're watching like a lot of crime shows, could we think or courtroom shows I should say, can we think of this maybe as being like the insanity defense and that someone who is not capable of knowing right from wrong shouldn't be tried in the same way. Right? Because you might think they weren't [00:09:30] morally responsible, but what causes the lack of moral responsibility? Is it purely biological or social?

Speaker 2: I think it can come from a number of different directions. So traditionally philosophers who have mainly been interested in the possibility of a global threat to freewill and moral responsibility in the form of causal determinism where for the philosopher's purposes, causal determinism has a various specific definition. [00:10:00] Universe is deterministic if necessarily given the past and the laws of nature within that universe. Everything that happens in that universe had to happen so long as the past and the laws remained the same. So you could imagine sort of rolling back a universe to its initial conditions and as long as you have the same initial conditions and the same laws of nature every single time you play forward [00:10:30] a deterministic universe. Exactly the same things will happen in an in deterministic universe in contrast, different things might happen. But for my purposes, I actually think that determinism is not sort of the interesting threat to be focused on. And I've started to try to move into discussing some other ones.

Speaker 1: Do you believe that everything is causally deterministic in that the universe has a set of dominoes and we hit it and that's it?

Speaker 2: No though so certainly [00:11:00] right. The going consensus is that at least on the micro level, things are not deterministic. Right. Um, the advances of quantum physics, you know, seem to provide strong evidence that,

Speaker 1: or even just like the random mutation and recombination that is [inaudible] plays such an important role in evolution and natural selection.

Speaker 2: Sure. Yeah. I think there's maybe a open question about, yeah, I mean at the sort of macroscopic level whether things are deterministic in some interesting sense, [00:11:30] but for me as a compatiblist, so compatiblist think that actually, even if the universe word deterministic, putting aside whether in fact it is or not, even if it were, we could still have free will and moral responsibility. So for me, the question of determinism just doesn't even really come into focus.

Speaker 1: We're just tuning in. You're listening to graduates here on Calyx. My name is Tesla. Today I'm joined by Philosophy Grad student, Dillon Marie telling us a little bit [00:12:00] about his work on freewill and blame, blame worthiness and praise and uh, the determinist nature of the universe, if you believe that or if you don't [inaudible] yeah. Or lack thereof. I'm sure that one is up for debate and will not be resolved anytime soon. No, presumably not. So okay. But you were just saying that, um, determinism aside, even if everything's determined already, there's still a place for free will. Can you explain that concept [00:12:30] a little more? The concept of free will or the concept of free will and a determinist universe.

Speaker 2: Ah, yeah. So compatiblist philosophers have different accounts of what for you will ends up amounting to such that it would be possible to have it even in a deterministic universe. And then, you know, we get different, uh, different philosophers saying different things, but some type of control over your actions that you might lack in other cases. So you might think that reflexive [00:13:00] actions that you don't have the same sort of control over as those that you deliberate and then decide to perform. Perhaps those are not actions that are freely willed or that you would be say morally culpable for, um, if they resulted in some sort of harm to someone. Yeah, I think, I think that's, that's the basic approach that, that I would want to, to take toward understanding what free will is.

Speaker 1: So is this the basis of your dissertation, the Dis Freewill and praise and blame [00:13:30] scenario? Yep. So can you just walk us through like a typical day? How is that, you know, in science, you know, you do a ton of reading, you form a hypothesis, you test the hypothesis, and then you sort of present your results. So how does that, what does that look like in philosophy?

Speaker 2: Well, so there's certainly nothing so cotton, uh, cotton drive course, but a straight forward as a, the philosophical method perhaps. But it works much the same way. I mean [00:14:00] you have some initial idea typically, and then you try to think further through that idea. Often it's mistaken and some too often perhaps uninteresting way. Um, it's interestingly wrong though, then you can start to pursue, uh, why it was wrong, um, and perhaps come up with better hypotheses to then continue to, to test in your Hatton as it were. So in my case, in, in other experimental philosophers case, perhaps we can sometimes test them with actual data or against the [00:14:30] scientific, uh, Corpus that already exists.

Speaker 1: So does this mean you have to read every piece of literature that's ever been written on the topic in order to make intellectual advances?

Speaker 2: Well, there are of course, different schools of thought, uh, and in different fields about, about that. Um, I try to do as much of, you know, the background I can and given the state of contemporary philosophy, there are certainly those who think that it should have a much more historical focus. [00:15:00] And those that think it should have a less historical focus. I'm probably somewhere in between for my purposes. I don't want to be ignorant about potentially relevant things that have been said, but at the same time, of course there have been thousands of years of written philosophy at this point and no one can read all of them. So there's that trade off between sort of doing the responsible spadework as to what's already been done while still trying to accomplish your [00:15:30] own work.

Speaker 1: Do you typically go back thousands of years and your literature reviews or is there a certain like decade or century that is most applicable to your work?

Speaker 2: Most of my work is fairly contemporarily driven though everyone sort of has their favorites within the history of philosophy. You know, I go back to Aristotle not infrequently.

Speaker 1: What is it about Aristotle that makes him one of the greats?

Speaker 2: Well, for me, partly that he was as naturalistically [00:16:00] driven as he was, you know, in comparison to someone like Plato for instance, most most people I think probably would consider Aristotle to be an yeah, one of the, if not the first great sort of naturalistically minded philosopher.

Speaker 1: And can you tell us what naturalistically minded means in this, in this scenario?

Speaker 2: Well, I mean, something fairly broad where to the alternative would just be, you know, the super or extra natural, whatever that amounts to.

Speaker 1: So then with aerosol, you just [00:16:30] mean that he was using the natural world as inspiration for some of his philosophical questions.

Speaker 2: Yeah. And part of that is that he didn't treat because there just wasn't a separation in fields at the time. He didn't really treat philosophy as being discontinuous with what we now think of as the natural sciences, whereas other philosophers, especially later, philosophers do see a sharp distinction between philosophy and the rest of academia as it were.

Speaker 1: [00:17:00] Where do you fall on that? A line of thinking on very, very much in the naturalistic camp. So you definitely think that there should be some overlap in philosophy and other disciplines and obviously in the methods that are used and yeah. And just discourse and all that stuff.

Speaker 2: I think we could use even more of it than we currently have. Yeah.

Speaker 1: Yeah. So what would be the fields you would wanna uh, mingle with?

Speaker 2: Well, so I spend a decent portion of time, uh, amongst [00:17:30] psychologists and cognitive scientists and neuroscientists though I do wonder that philosophy has this I think, interesting potential to sort of bridge much of the sciences and the humanities a sort of unique role, uh, in fact, just because of where it's sort of placed within the academic disciplines. I think for my money to say a lot of what we probably should be saying to the rest of the humanities, we also need [00:18:00] as philosophers to become a bit more ready to lean on sociology and water typically seen as the softer sciences then has been terribly popular.

Speaker 1: Yeah. So, um, what is it that you need to say to, uh, to people and you said as philosophers, if we are going to say what we need to say, what is that you're going to say it here? Did we get to hear it? Oh,

Speaker 2: I can say part of it though, uh, you know, the, the abstract version, I think part of, part of your [00:18:30] thought is just that we could be a bit more relevant to the rest of academia than we are or have traditionally been for say the past hundred or so years. I think we do have all sorts of interesting contributions to make to the things that people in history and public policy do. Uh, um, we're just currently not doing as much of that work is as we once did. In fact.

Speaker 1: So when you say relevant, can you [00:19:00] give any specific examples that illustrate that idea? [inaudible]

Speaker 2: sure. Though this might take, might take a little, a little buildup to get to, but please go for it. Yeah. So, yeah. Um, I said before that I'm, I'm more interested in threats other

than, you know, this global threat of determinism, purported threat in particular. Um, there's been a lot of research coming out of so-called dual processing theories that seem to suggest that we really don't sort of do the things [00:19:30] that we do for quite the reasons that we used to think. So just just to put a little meat on those bones. The basic dual processing picture is that your psychology is comprised not only of sort of the thought processes that you are consciously aware of, the explicit thoughts that you go in for when you deliberate about what to do and you think about what your reasons are and then you self-consciously very reflectively decide what to do.

Speaker 2: There are those processes, but there are also [00:20:00] processes that operate as it were entirely underneath the radar. You're typically unaware of them. They occur through associative mechanisms rather than through reasoning, rule based mechanisms. You're typically performing those processes entirely automatically. This is where a sort of implicit biases and the other sorts of phenomena that have been widely discussed over the past couple of decades are coming in. Those are the system one processes as they're often referred [00:20:30] to and you might worry. The more our behavior seems to be driven by those system one processes, the less it looks like we're sort of morally responsible for the resulting actions. Right. These look a little bit more like those behaviors that we were talking about before and philosophers who started to discuss what the dual processing results might mean for moral responsibility, but other fields have already started [00:21:00] to pick up on this work and interesting and it ways as well. So the behavioral economists and the public policy walls have recently started to discuss how dual processing research might be used to inform public policy. So nudge this famous book that was written a little while back is all about sort of how we might shape public policy using the dual processing research. And I think that philosophers have a role to play in sort of that discussion.

Speaker 1: [00:21:30] How might you shape public policy with philosophy?

Speaker 2: Well, so one of the examples that I quite like that comes from nudge, this is a cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler, his book is this question about the default option regarding organ donation. So currently in a lot of us states still the default is if you don't check the box on your driver's license, then you're not an organ donor. So it's an opt in system.

Speaker 2: [00:22:00] What's been discovered though is that system one, right? The system that sort of operates under the radar and contains all of these implicit biases and things that potentially push us off the track that we want to be on is highly sort of biased in favor of the default. So if you just change the default to an opt out system where you're automatically enrolled in organ donation, unless you checked that box, that system [00:22:30] gets a lot more people to be organ donors basically because people just stick with the default, whichever default it happens to be. So Sunstein and Thaler for instance, one of the suggestions they make for public policy research is that we just changed the default on how organ donation works.

Speaker 1: That's a great example actually. I also wonder how much, what kind of role do you think that biology as a biology or you know, as a biologist and as an evolutionary biologist [00:23:00] in particular, what kind of role do you think that biology and evolution play into this? I mean, you could think of, for example, this is a, this is an example I use with my students in human reproduction, that, you know, there's not really that much evidence for biological imperative to be monogamous. For example, in primates, only about 15% of primates are monogamous. But yet if you ask a lot of people, they would say that there is a moral imperative to be monogamous in some situations. So there's this sort of, this disjunct [00:23:30] between our evolution and, uh, you know, what we agree upon socially. So how do you think that plays into some of these questions?

Speaker 2: That's a great question. I'm, I'm attempted to, you know, jump at the monogamy example, but I'll at stay in safer territory. Um, I think one of the places that it comes in with respect to these discussions is we know that sometimes we should trust our sort of knee jerk automatic instinctual system, one [00:24:00] responses, right? I mean, if jerking your hand away from the hot stove is a system one response, right? It's not something that you sort of consciously, reflectively deliberate about. After all, sometimes we should trust them, but other times we shouldn't. As in the case of, you know, implicit racist and sexist and other biases. And one of the big questions is of course, when we should trust them and when we shouldn't. And I think the evolutionary considerations come in in part to suggest [00:24:30] where that line is drawn. So you might expect things that we, we're sort of right, evolved system one responses, perhaps those are born trustworthy, whereas newer situations, right, that we were not encountering on the Savannah, those you might expect system one not to have evolved or to address. And so to potentially be sort of out of, it's out of its steps in those contexts,

Speaker 1: in that some of the things, [00:25:00] some of the characteristics that we evolved, uh, for other reasons and maybe even co-opted in certain situations where they're being misused or misapplied. Yeah, exactly. Very interesting. So do you have any like punchlines of your dissertation you, you want to tell us or not yet and keeping it secret? Yeah. You know what I mean? I gotta go

Speaker 2: sell the, sell the book somehow. [inaudible] you're writing one? Well, I mean that's, that's sort of the game with the philosophy dissertation or at least the, the more traditional [00:25:30] approach. I guess just with respect to to that last bit that we were talking about, you know, I think, I think one place that I would really like more research to be done and I'm kind of trying to push in that direction myself is some nudges. Sure. They look pretty benign. I mean the Oregon nation example, I'm, I'm all in favor of having more organ donors. So if we want to change that default I think go for it. [00:26:00] But of course there are plenty who worry about nudges becoming a sort of outright pushes or sort of manipulative influences or at least paternalistic influences as

an acted by government in their own right. And I think that there is a real question in certain cases.

Speaker 2: So very recently people have suggested that section eight and other public housing assistance voucher programs should start [00:26:30] to use some of the dual processing research and we should start using nudges for that type of public policy making. And one of the suggestions that's actually been made is that the default get changed on where people can use housing vouchers. So one of the traditional problems has been even those who receive vouchers end up moving into very similar similarly disadvantaged areas rather than using the vouchers to move to other neighborhoods. [00:27:00] But I think especially in thinking about how those influences on sort of people's system one right by changing that default really operate are pretty important in thinking through the sort of normative question about whether we should be doing that type of thing or not. Right. I mean you can kind of see like changing the default about organ donation is one thing, but changing the default in a way that's potentially going to affect somebody's life [00:27:30] in so far as where do they live and who their neighbors are and what their life prospects are. That's a very different beast that I think actually the philosopher is sort of well-placed to have something to say about it. And so

Speaker 1: as we wrap up here, because we're actually out of time, what w is there anything that you as a philosopher or a philosophy graduate student really want the audience to know? Something that maybe they don't hear all the time, but that you are uniquely poised to say as someone [00:28:00] with expertise in this field? That's a tough one. This is sort of the soapbox moment. Uh, you know, last word, soapbox moment where, you know, just say what you want to say.

Speaker 2: Well, you know, I mean self interested. The more people should take philosophy classes. Uh, yeah. Why is that? That's straight forward, right? Well, I mean that's, that's, that's how I get paid.

Speaker 1: Yeah. Yeah. But I'm sure you could think of some beneficial reasons for themselves as well.

Speaker 2: There are actually, um, [00:28:30] a growing number of pieces of evidence suggesting that employers actually really do want a philosophy undergrads, right? I mean, it just is true for most jobs that you, they don't, they don't care what you've actually learned already. They're going to teach you what you need to do for that job on the job. And they do want people who are just better at, you know, they've learned how to learn is the important thing. And I think philosophy does, I mean with respect [00:29:00] to the critical thinking components and everything potentially a better job at that then than other majors do. But [inaudible]

Speaker 1: and so if you had to sell philosophy to the public, uh, what would you say? Why should the public be interested in this interview or in anything having to do with philosophy?

Speaker 2: Well, I think, you know, aside from the sort of intrinsic merits of just how interesting all of the topics that we discuss are, I do think that we're coming into a certain time [00:29:30] where we once again have more contact with the sciences, hopefully an increasing amount of that contact. And you know, we do have our inroads into the humanities as well. And I don't know, I mean speculation in a way, but I think it's possible that we could start to provide much more of a bridge between, you know, what are typically seen of is those two kind of separate cultures on, on campuses [00:30:00] across the country into much more contact than, than they have been. [inaudible]

Speaker 1: yeah. And you can read some Aristotle, Huh? That's, yeah, it was, it will you get a hammock and a hammock. I know. I'm right. Um, can you remind me, uh, when t h white wrote about the sword and the stone that has a lot of philosophical elements, can you remind me which, do you remember which philosopher he was? I thought it was Aristotle that he was sort of drawing on because there's so many naturalistic comparisons. No, actually that's a, that's a great, [00:30:30] I don't know if you've read that or not, but I've never read it. I highly recommend it. It's, it's really interesting. But, uh, what, what's the full title called? Oh my gosh. The once in future king. Yeah. And a really interesting intersection between philosophy and, and natural processes and biology. So I definitely recommend, recommend that, but I think it might be Aristotle because just because of what you said.

Speaker 1: Yeah. Okay. But I speak too much. We're out of time here. Do [00:31:00] you have any last words for the audience, Dylan? I don't think so. Just a take some parting shot, made my plug for the major and take some philosophy classes and think about some things and hey, hang out in the hammock if you have the time. Right. If you can get away with it. Yeah. Awesome. Well, uh, you've been listening to the graduates here on KALX Berkeley. My name is Tesla Monson. Today I've been joined by philosophy graduate student, Dylan Marie and the Department of Philosophy here on Berkeley campus. He's been telling us all about his work on [00:31:30] free will and praise and blame and moral responsibility. Right. Anything else that I missed? Nope. Those are all the big keywords. Yeah, and it's been a pleasure to have you here on the show today. My pleasure as well. Thank you very much. And yeah, well the graduates, we'll be back in two weeks with another episode until then, stay tuned. You're listening to k a l x Berkeley.