

*The Human Mind Project*

# Agency, Morals & the Mind



26-27 September

Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, London

Lecture Theatre

The sense of *agency* – the feeling that we are in control of our thoughts and actions – is a central feature of the human mind. The experience of agency influences the conscious selection and avoidance of courses of action, our sense of responsibility, interaction with other people and the way in which we address societal challenges. It also has crucial implications for what we deem to be right and wrong in human behaviour.



**How can we define the relation between agency, moral responsibility and the brain?** Can cognitive explanations shed light on the subjectivity and voluntariness of action? How can the science of evolution help us understand the nature of ethical constructs, and address the possibility of moral progress? What turns the mere control of bodily movements into conscious acts of morality or immorality?

Our workshops bring together experts from diverse disciplines to encourage challenging and inclusive debate. This one and a half day workshop will be structured around three themed sessions. At the end of each session, a joint Q&A will allow space for discussion among the speakers and with the public. We will close the workshop with an open roundtable discussion on the 'Future of Research' on agency and morality, chaired by Colin Blakemore.

# Event Programme

Monday 26<sup>th</sup> September 2016

14:30 *Registration and Coffee*

14:45 Opening remarks

**Mattia Gallotti**

Research Fellow in Philosophy; Project Manager, *The Human Mind Project*, School of Advanced Study, University of London

## Morals, Culture and Society

Chair: **Mattia Gallotti**

15:00 WILL TO FIGHT: DEVOTED ACTORS AND THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION OF HUMAN CONFLICT

**Scott Atran**

Director of Research, CNRS; and Research Fellow, University of Oxford

15:30 RESPONSIBILITY AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

**Catherine Wilson**

Anniversary Professor of Philosophy, University of York

16:00 HOW DOES THE BEHAVIOUR OF OTHERS INFLUENCE WHAT WE DO?

**Emma Flynn**

Professor of Developmental and Comparative Psychology, Durham University

16:30 *Coffee Break*

17:00 Joint Q&A

18:00 *Wine Reception*

20:00 *Dinner*

Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> September 2016

09:00 *Registration*

## Agency and Subjectivity

Chair: **Robyn Repko Waller**

Lecturer in Philosophy, King's College London

9:30 VOLITION AND VALUE

**Patrick Haggard**

Professor of Cognitive Neuroscience, University College London

10:00 GETTING OUT OF YOUR HEAD - ADDICTION AND THE MOTIVE OF SELF-ESCAPE

**Lucy O'Brien**

Professor of Philosophy, University College London

10:30 THE HEART OF HUMAN SOCIALITY

**Keith Jensen**

Lecturer of Psychology, University of Manchester

11:00 *Coffee Break*

11:30 Joint Q&A

12:30 *Lunch*

**Towards a (Neuro)Science of Morality**

Chair: **Sofia Bonicalzi**

Postdoctoral Researcher, *The Human Mind Project*, School of Advanced Study, University of London

14:00 MORALITY, SELF-CONTROL AND THE BRAIN

**Richard Holton**

Professor of Philosophy, University of Cambridge

14:30 THE PRICE OF PRINCIPLES: EXPERIMENTS IN MORAL DECISION-MAKING

**Molly Crockett**

Associate Professor of Experimental Psychology, University of Oxford

15:00 IS A "PSYCHOCIVILIZED SOCIETY" POSSIBLE?

**Steve Fuller**

Auguste Comte Professor of Social Epistemology, University of Warwick

15:30 *Coffee Break*

16:00 Joint Q&A

**The Future of Research on Agency, Morals & the Mind**

Chair: **Colin Blakemore**

Professor of Neuroscience and Philosophy; Project Leader, *The Human Mind Project*, School of Advanced Study, University of London

17:00 ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION WITH ALL SPEAKERS

18:00 *End of Event*

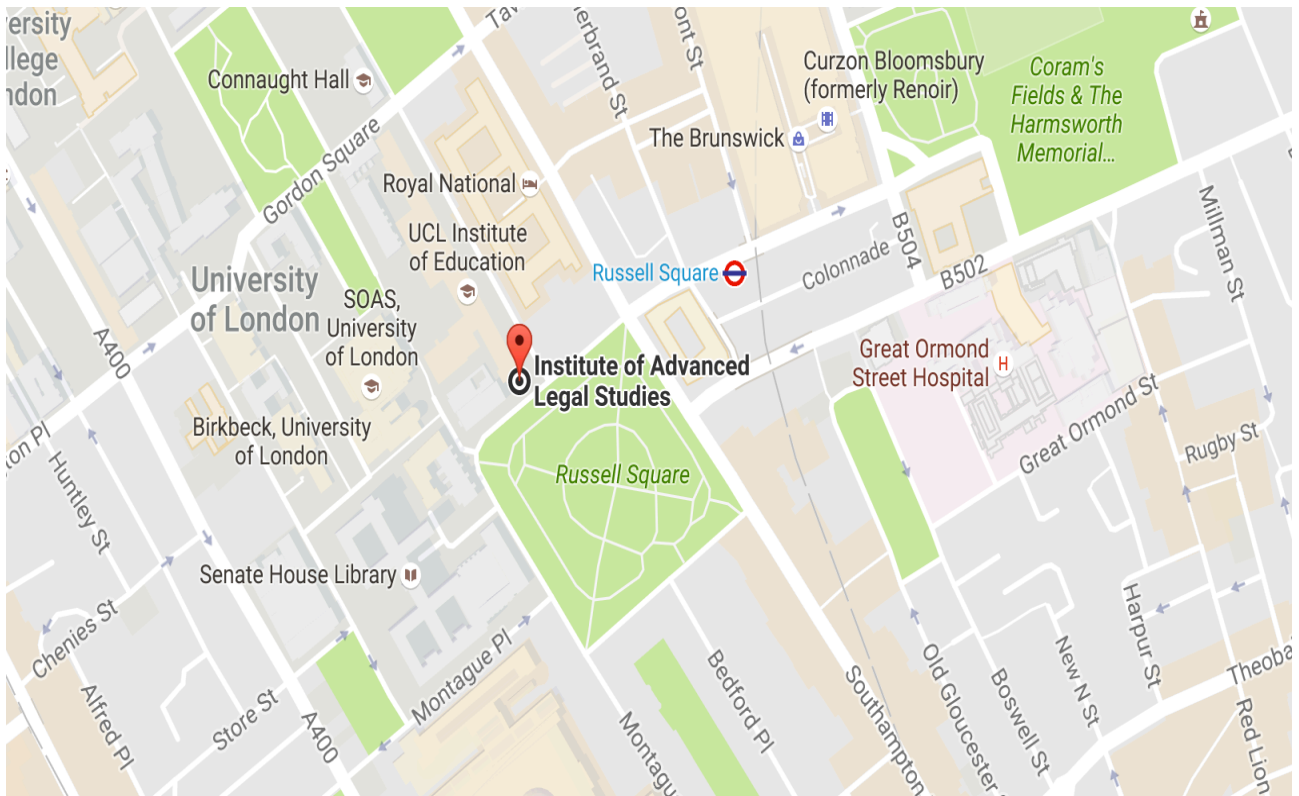
Please note that *Agency, Morals and the Mind* will be held in the **Lecture Theatre of the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies**, University of London (NOT in Senate House!)

**Institute of Advanced Legal Studies**

**Charles Clore House**

**17 Russell Square**

**London WC1B 5DR**



# Abstract Booklet

WILL TO FIGHT: DEVOTED ACTORS AND THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION OF HUMAN CONFLICT

**Scott Atran**

Director of Research, CNRS; and Research Fellow, University of Oxford

Uncompromising wars, revolution, rights movements, and today's global terrorism are in part driven by Devoted Actors who adhere to sacred or transcendent values that generate actions independently, or all out of proportion, from rationally expected outcomes, calculated costs and consequences, or likely risks and rewards. Field-based observation, surveys and experimental studies in real-world political conflicts show ways in which Devoted Actors, who are unconditionally committed to sacred causes, and whose personal identities are fused within a unique collective identity, willingly make costly sacrifices including fighting and dying, thus enabling low-power groups to endure and often prevail against materially much stronger foes. Explaining how devoted actors come to sacrifice for cause and comrade not only is a scientific goal, but also a practical imperative to prevent and resolve seemingly intractable intergroup disputes that can spiral out of control in a rapidly interconnecting world of collapsing and conflicting cultural traditions in search of salvation. Fieldwork and experiments in Europe, NorthAfrica and on the frontlines in the battle with the Islamic State in Iraq help to make the case.

RESPONSIBILITY AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

**Catherine Wilson**

Anniversary Professor of Philosophy, University of York

From an empirical perspective, it is important for an animal to distinguish between its own doings, the kinds of actions over which it exerts control, and things that 'just happen' to it. However, the distinction is not precise, and the animal is, after all, just a complicated mechanism in which and to which things happen. When we move into the realm of human agency, the distinction between doings and happenings becomes extremely vague, yet at the same time hugely important because of the ways in which we punish people for what we regard as deliberate offenses, including moral offenses and criminal actions. Metaphysicians have tried but have not succeeded in defining free-will and responsibility for us, let alone in showing that they are more than conceptual fictions linked to subjective feelings of ownership, pride, guilt, etc. In this talk, I'll argue that we can and sometimes do employ a notion of the ownership of actions based on intuitive estimates of what social learning can or can't accomplish by way of modifying attitudes and behaviour, and I'll comment on its advantages and disadvantages.

HOW DOES THE BEHAVIOUR OF OTHERS INFLUENCE WHAT WE DO?

**Emma Flynn**

Professor of Developmental and Comparative Psychology, Durham University

How do we become members of our cultural group? How, and why, do we learn the traditions of the society within which we live? In my talk I present research which examines how young children learn from other individuals in their social group. I present a series of diffusion experiments that investigates how 'cultural norms' are established, transmitted and altered. My results show that

children are excellent imitators, copying with high fidelity tool use behaviour that they witness others perform, even copying actions which appear to be functionally irrelevant; that is they 'overimitate'. Such overimitation allows traditions that may be causally opaque (often the case within cultural traditions) to be sustained within groups. However, equally my work demonstrates that while children are predominantly imitators, occasionally they introduce new behaviours into their social group, which are adopted and transmitted across the group. I end my talk by exploring whether a more abstract behaviour than tool use, that is cooperation, is transmitted across groups of children, showing that, across many different forms of tasks, groups of young children do adhere to cooperative behaviour.

#### VOLITION AND VALUE

##### **Patrick Haggard**

Professor of Cognitive Neuroscience, University College London

#### GETTING OUT OF YOUR HEAD - ADDICTION AND THE MOTIVE OF SELF-ESCAPE

##### **Lucy O'Brien**

Professor of Philosophy, University College London

#### THE HEART OF HUMAN SOCIALITY

##### **Keith Jensen**

Lecturer of Psychology, University of Manchester

Human prosocial behaviour might be unique in the animal kingdom. The fact that we cooperate on a large scale with nonkin might be underlain by psychological mechanisms not seen in their full form in other species. Other-regarding concerns, concern for the welfare of others, might be a core component of human sociality. While empathy might also us to know something about the feelings of others, we need to care about others so that we act. However, the ability to *feel into* others and to be concerned about others does not guarantee prosociality. We may also be uniquely antisocial, taking pleasure in the misfortunes of others and distress at their happiness. These concerns can motivate a range of behaviours from helping to punishment, from fairness to spite, from morality to cruelty. In this talk, I will present experimental evidence from human children and chimpanzees to suggest that other-regarding concerns emerge early in children and might not exist in our closest living relatives.

#### MORALITY, SELF-CONTROL AND THE BRAIN

##### **Richard Holton**

Professor of Philosophy, University of Cambridge

There are at least two pressing questions about our moral behaviour. One concerns how we make moral judgements; another concerns how we bring ourselves to act on them. I am here concerned with the second question. My suggestion is that we might start from an area that we already know something about, namely how we resist addictive drugs. The evidence there is that the desire for an addictive drug comes from the dopamine system; but that resistance requires frontally mediated

self-control. Perhaps much moral self-control follows a similar pattern. But perhaps in addition moral beliefs give rise over time to a disgust reaction, that makes self-control much easier. I canvass the possibility that these two systems work in a complementary way.

THE PRICE OF PRINCIPLES: EXPERIMENTS IN MORAL DECISION-MAKING

**Molly Crockett**

Associate Professor of Experimental Psychology, University of Oxford

Universal moral codes prohibit harming others for personal gain. Previous work has identified brain networks and neuromodulator systems involved in moral decision-making, but how these systems compute and shape moral values remains unknown. Here I will describe a novel experimental framework for examining the neurocomputational basis of moral decisions in humans. We invited participants to trade off profits for themselves against pain for either themselves or another person, and built computational models to quantify the relative values people ascribe to pain for themselves and others. Across several experiments we found that most people would rather harm themselves than a stranger for profit. Neuroimaging revealed that these moral preferences were associated with reduced sensitivity in the striatum to profits gained from harming others. Pharmacological studies showed that serotonin and dopamine play distinct roles in shaping moral preferences. These findings have implications for potential treatments of social dysfunction that is a common feature as well as a risk factor for many psychiatric disorders.

IS A "PSYCHOCIVILIZED SOCIETY" POSSIBLE?

**Steve Fuller**

Auguste Comte Professor of Social Epistemology, University of Warwick

The phrase 'psychocivilized society' derives from the subtitle of a notorious book published in 1969 by the Yale neuroscientist Jose Delgado. The book's title was 'The Physical Control of the Mind'. Delgado was the master of the remote control of behaviour through electromagnetic stimulation of the nervous system. During the Cold War this technique was popularized as 'mind control', but Delgado himself believed it would become the ultimate tool for 'psychocivilizing' society, that is, once 'unrestricted' experimentation could be made on human subjects. I shall reflect on this strangely neglected episode of recent history of science in light of today's neuroscientifically based claims about the prospects for 'moral enhancement' and other adventurous proposals for improving society on a large scale.