

I am philosopher Lisa Bortolotti - AMA anything about rationality and the philosophy of mind!

LisaBortolotti¹ and r/Science AMAs¹

¹Affiliation not available

April 17, 2023

Abstract

Thank you everybody for participating in this session! I really enjoyed it. Logging off now! Hello! I am Professor of Philosophy at the University of Birmingham. At Birmingham I work mainly in the philosophy of psychology and psychiatry. At the moment I am not teaching undergraduates because I am in charge of a major project that takes most of my time, but I have ten PhD students working on very interesting issues, from the rationality of emotions to the nature and the consequences of loneliness. I have been at Birmingham for most of my career as a philosopher. Before getting a lectureship there in 2005, I was in Manchester for one year, working as a Research Associate on a European project led by Professor John Harris, and I mainly wrote about bioethical issues and the question whether and to what extent scientific research should be ethically regulated. I always loved Philosophy, since as a teenager in school I encountered Plato's dialogues featuring Socrates. I was fascinated by how Socrates could get his audience to agree with him, starting from very innocent-sounding questions and gradually getting people to commit to really controversial theses! I wanted that talent. So, at university I chose Philosophy and studied in my hometown, Bologna. For half a year I was an Erasmus student at the University of Leeds and immersed myself in the history and philosophy of science. Then I went back to Bologna to complete my degree, and moved to the UK afterwards, where I got a Masters in Philosophy from King's College London (with a thesis on the rationality of scientific revolutions) and the BPhil from the University of Oxford (with a thesis on the rationality debate in cognitive science). For my PhD I went to the Australian National University in Canberra. My doctoral thesis was an attempt to show that there is no rationality constraint on the ascription of beliefs. This means that I don't need to assume that you're rational in order to ascribe beliefs to you. I used several examples to make my point, reflecting on how we successfully ascribe beliefs to non-human animals, young children, and people experiencing psychosis. Given my history, it won't be not a big surprise for you to hear that I'm still interested in rationality. I consider most of my work an exercise in empirically-informed philosophy of mind. I want to explore the strengths and limitations of human cognition and focus on some familiar and some more unsettling instances of inaccurate or irrational belief, including cases of prejudice and superstition, self-deception, optimism bias, delusion, confabulation, and memory distortion. To do so, I can't rely on philosophical investigation alone, and I'm an avid reader of research in the cognitive sciences. I believe that psychological evidence provides useful constraints for our philosophical theories. Although learning about the pervasiveness of irrational beliefs and behaviour is dispiriting, I've come to the conviction that some manifestations of human irrationality are not all bad. Irrational beliefs are not just an inevitable product of our limitations, but often have some benefit that is hidden from view. In the five-year project I'm currently leading, funded by the European Research Council, I focus on the positive side of irrational beliefs. The project is called Pragmatic and Epistemic Role of Factually Erroneous Cognitions and Thoughts (acronym PERFECT) and has several objectives, including showing how some beliefs fail to meet norms of accuracy or rationality but bring about some dimension of success; establishing that there is no qualitative gap between the irrationality of those beliefs that are regarded as symptoms of mental health issues and the irrationality of everyday beliefs; and, on the basis of the previous two objectives, undermining the stigma commonly associated with mental health issues. There are not many things I'm genuinely proud of, but one is having founded a blog, Imperfect Cognitions, where academic experts at all career stages and experts by experience discuss belief, emotion, rationality, mental health, and other related topics. The blog reflects my research interests, my commitment to interdisciplinary research, and my belief that the quality of the contributions is enhanced in an inclusive environment. But nowadays it is a real team effort, and post-docs and PhD students working for

PERFECT manage it, commissioning, editing, scheduling posts and promoting new content on social media. Please check it out, you'll love it! I wrote two books, *Delusions and Other Irrational Beliefs* (OUP 2009), which was awarded the American Philosophical Association Book Prize in 2011, and *Irrationality* (Polity 2014). I have several papers on irrationality and belief, and the most recent ones are open access, so you can read them here. Shorter and more accessible versions of the arguments I present in the papers are often available as blog posts. For instance, you can read about the benefits of optimism, and the perks of Reverse Othello syndrome. Some Recent Links of Interest: Are We Biased About Love? - Philosophy247 podcast "Agency Without Rationality" - Inaugural Lecture, University of Birmingham, 9 May 2016 "Us and Them" no longer: mental health concerns us all - blog post Philosophy Bites podcast on irrationality The Upside of Delusional Beliefs

[REDDIT](#)

I am philosopher Lisa Bortolotti - AMA anything about rationality and the philosophy of mind!

LISABORTOLOTTI [R/SCIENCE](#)

Thank you everybody for participating in this session! I really enjoyed it. Logging off now!

Hello!

[I am Professor of Philosophy at the University of Birmingham](#) At Birmingham I work mainly in the philosophy of psychology and psychiatry. At the moment I am not teaching undergraduates because I am in charge of a major project that takes most of my time, but I have ten PhD students working on very interesting issues, from the rationality of emotions to the nature and the consequences of loneliness. I have been at Birmingham for most of my career as a philosopher. Before getting a lectureship there in 2005, I was in Manchester for one year, working as a Research Associate on a European project led by Professor John Harris, and I mainly wrote about bioethical issues and the question whether and to what extent scientific research should be ethically regulated. I always loved Philosophy, since as a teenager in school I encountered Plato's dialogues featuring Socrates. I was fascinated by how Socrates could get his audience to agree with him, starting from very innocent-sounding questions and gradually getting people to commit to really controversial theses! I wanted that talent. So, at university I chose Philosophy and studied in my hometown, Bologna. For half a year I was an Erasmus student at the University of Leeds and immersed myself in the history and philosophy of science. Then I went back to Bologna to complete my degree, and moved to the UK afterwards, where I got a Masters in Philosophy from King's College London (with a thesis on the rationality of scientific revolutions) and the BPhil from the University of Oxford (with a thesis on the rationality debate in cognitive science). For my PhD I went to the Australian National University in Canberra. My doctoral thesis was an attempt to show that there is no rationality constraint on the ascription of beliefs. This means that I don't need to assume that you're rational in order to ascribe beliefs to you. I used several examples to make my point, reflecting on how we successfully ascribe beliefs to non-human animals, young children, and people experiencing psychosis. Given my history, it won't be not a big surprise for you to hear that I'm still interested in rationality. I consider most of my work an exercise in empirically-informed philosophy of mind. I want to explore the strengths and limitations of human cognition and focus on some familiar and some more unsettling instances of inaccurate or irrational belief, including cases of prejudice and superstition, self-deception, optimism bias, delusion, confabulation, and memory distortion. To do so, I can't rely on philosophical investigation alone, and I'm an avid reader of research in the cognitive sciences. I believe that psychological evidence provides useful constraints for our philosophical theories. Although learning about the pervasiveness of irrational beliefs and behaviour is dispiriting, I've come to the conviction that some manifestations of human irrationality are not all bad. Irrational beliefs are not just an inevitable product of our limitations, but often have some benefit that is hidden from view. In the five-year project I'm currently leading, funded by the European Research Council, I focus on the positive side of irrational beliefs. The project is called *Pragmatic and Epistemic Role of Factually Erroneous Cognitions and Thoughts* (acronym PERFECT) and has several objectives, including showing how some beliefs fail to meet norms of accuracy or rationality but bring about some dimension of success; establishing that there is no qualitative gap between the irrationality of those beliefs that are regarded as symptoms of mental health issues and the irrationality of everyday beliefs; and, on the basis of the previous two objectives, undermining the stigma commonly associated with mental health issues. There are not many things I'm genuinely proud of, but one is having founded a blog, [Imperfect Cognitions](#), where academic experts at all career stages and experts by experience discuss belief, emotion, rationality, mental health, and other related topics. The blog reflects my research interests, my commitment to interdisciplinary research, and my belief that the quality of the contributions is enhanced in an inclusive environment. But nowadays it is a real team effort, and post-docs and PhD students working for PERFECT manage it, commissioning, editing, scheduling posts and promoting new content on social media. Please check it out, you'll love it! I wrote two books, [Delusions and Other Irrational Beliefs](#) (OUP 2009), which was awarded the American Philosophical Association Book Prize in 2011, and [Irrationality](#) (Polity 2014). I have several papers on irrationality and belief, and the most recent ones are

open access, so you can read them [here](#). Shorter and more accessible versions of the arguments I present in the papers are often available as blog posts. For instance, you can read about [the benefits of optimism](#), and the perks of [Reverse Othello syndrome](#).

Some Recent Links of Interest:

[Are We Biased About Love?](#) - Philosophy247 podcast

["Agency Without Rationality"](#) - Inaugural Lecture, University of Birmingham, 9 May 2016

["Us and Them" no longer: mental health concerns us all](#) - blog post

[Philosophy Bites podcast on irrationality](#)

[The Upside of Delusional Beliefs](#)

[READ REVIEWS](#)

[WRITE A REVIEW](#)

CORRESPONDENCE:

DATE RECEIVED:
March 09, 2017

DOI:
10.15200/winn.148898.88266

ARCHIVED:
March 08, 2017

CITATION:
LisaBortolotti , r/Science , I am
philosopher Lisa Bortolotti -
AMA anything about rationality
and the philosophy of mind!,
The Winnower
4:e148898.88266 , 2017 , DOI:
[10.15200/winn.148898.88266](https://doi.org/10.15200/winn.148898.88266)

© et al. This article is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and redistribution in any medium, provided that the original author and source are credited.



Hi Professor Bortolotti - thanks for joining us, it's great to have you here!

Could you tell us a bit about what you think the role of philosophy in investigations to phenomena like delusions is? That is, how do you see your work as interacting with the empirical/cognitive sciences? Do you see yourself as carving up conceptual space, making conceptual distinctions, and so on? Or does philosophy have a number of different roles to play here?

Thanks again!

[ADefiniteDescription](#)

Hello ADefiniteDescription! What a lovely question... Well, I am fairly ambitious about the role that philosophy can play in the investigation of real life phenomena such as delusions. I am convinced that philosophical theories about such phenomena need to be constrained by knowledge that comes from the empirical studies: we cannot just ignore what the cognitive sciences and psychiatry tell us! We need to take that into account. At the same time, I don't think philosophy just has the role of clarifying concepts: first of all, it is not clear that concepts always need clarification, and second, it would not be such an exciting task on its own! Although conceptual clarity is important, the philosopher has more to offer. I believe that one critical point is this. Experimental psychologists go from one experiment to the next, and only rarely stop to consider the wider implications of their work. The philosopher has the luxury of taking time to reflect about the big picture, and link data from different sources, and different research programmes, together. The concern is of course that philosophers might miss some of the important details, for instance, some methodological issues that require significant training and experience. That is why, as a norm, I work with collaborators who come from other disciplines and we can help each other fill the gaps. Coming back to your question, philosophers can have a lot to say about delusions: they can discuss what they are (there is no consensus as to whether they are beliefs, imaginings, experiences, or something else altogether) and they can think about how they are formed (again, in psychology and neuroscience there are several competing theories of delusion formation). With arguments they can support one side or the other, or find interesting (previously unseen) connections between the competing theories. This way, the debate advances.

Irrational beliefs are not just an inevitable product of our limitations, but often have some benefit that is hidden from view

Can you give some examples of when our irrational beliefs are beneficial to us?

[Slatersaurus](#)

Hello Slatersaurus! It is very counterintuitive to think that some irrational beliefs may have benefits, but I think it does really happen in some contexts. Take what psychologists call the OPTIMISM BIAS. That is the tendency to make rosier predictions about one's own future than is warranted by the evidence. So maybe I have just the same chances as the next person to experience negative events in my life (serious illness or divorce) but I tend to believe that my chances to experience such negative events

are low, and moreover, lower than average. My belief is probably unwarranted by the evidence available to me (statistical evidence about occurrence of certain events in a person's life), but it may have really positive effects on my personal wellbeing. I may feel more optimistic and confident about the future, and this makes me a more pleasant person to be with and gives me the motivation to pursue my goals in the face of setbacks. The optimism bias is strongly correlated with criteria for mental health. On the basis of this, some have argued that some irrationality is good for you: you may not be representing reality accurately or reflect the evidence available to you, but you may be better equipped to fulfil your goals as a result. People with depressive symptoms such as low mood are less vulnerable to optimism biases, and their personal wellbeing is generally lower. Does this example work for you?

Would you be able to define rationality? That feels like a good starting point. Also, if you have the time, define mind.

[Ebbwinn](#)

Wow, these are really tough questions. So let's start with rationality. I was asked to write a key concept book on irrationality for Polity Press: that is usually a short, accessible book explaining the importance of a specific concept within a discipline. There, I start with the claim that rationality means different things to different people: not only do psychologists and economists have different conceptions of rationality from philosophers, but also within philosophy definitions can vary widely. It's what is called a value concept, which means that when you say that something is rational (in most contexts, not all) you are actually praising that thing (and when you say that something is irrational, you are usually condemning it). But the reasons for the evaluations are multiple. Some times, an action or a person is called irrational simply because it is unpredictable, does not follow rules or expectations. Other times, irrationality is about a specific violation of a norm. So if I make a reasoning mistake I can be described as being irrational or doing something irrational. Then we use irrationality to describe the choices we make, and traditionally choices made impulsively, without following reason, have been deemed as irrational. But I am interested in EPISTEMIC IRRATIONALITY. That usually applies to our BELIEFS. I am interested in the relationship between the belief and the evidence. A belief is epistemically irrational when it is not supported by evidence, or is not responsive to evidence.

If I can ask a second, very different question: do you have any views about whether non-human animals have anything resembling rationality or proto-rationality?

[ADefiniteDescription](#)

Hello again! I believe many nonhuman animals are capable of having representations of the world and being guided in their behaviour by such representations, so why not? One can ask whether they form accurate representations and whether their behaviour is an effective means to achieve their goals given their representations. Some of these questions are similar to the questions we ask when we evaluate the rationality of humans.

How can we as a society get more people to engage in rational thought with all of the misinformation and miseducation in the world? How can we as a whole improve overall rational thinking amongst the masses? Does it start at home and with early education with school? And if so how do we promote teaching it? I hope this question isn't confusing and wasn't silly.

[13pts35sec](#)

Hello 13pts35sec! This is an issue I have been thinking about myself. How do we improve the way

people gather and assess information? How can we become more critical about the information we are given and pay increasing attention to the quality of the arguments presented to us? As you also say, it needs to start early and systematically, so it needs to start in school. Children have to be trained to ask the right questions, to look for consistency and clarity in the answers they are given, and to believe what there is evidence for. One simple measure that could be taken is to ensure that children are taught about the many biases that can affect our reasoning, our decision making, and our problem solving, and are offered some strategies to avoid those biases, or at least recognise them in themselves and others.

What philosophical question is your favorite to think about?

[UniqueAndWittyName](#)

Another lovely question, thank you UniqueAndWittyName! I like thinking about the mind. To me it is astonishing that as limited beings we have such amazing powers and I want to know more both about the strengths and the limitations of our cognitive abilities, and their interactions with affect, emotion, and action.

Hello Professor Bortolotti. Congratulations on all your work and success. Question: how would you advise individuals to approach matters of consequence with loved ones who might be fundamentally (if not irrationally) opposed to them. For example, revealing one's sexuality to a parent whose beliefs are firmly opposed to it, or discussing your beliefs with someone who has strong opinions to the contrary. Thanks:)

[monte_ng](#)

This is such an interesting and important question! Actually, it is at the core of a philosopher's job. When we present our ideas to an audience, we often encounter objections. Some of the people formulating the objections share many assumptions with us, and so we have a common basis we can start with. There is disagreement, but there is also something shared we can both fall back on. Other people have such a radically different view of things that even identifying the disagreement becomes a difficult task. When the subject matter is of great personal and emotional importance (e.g., it concerns one's religious and political viewpoint) the situation becomes even more delicate because a disagreement may be seen as a personal rejection. I have no specific advice to offer. Some battles are worth fighting and other battles are not. I am a very stubborn and argumentative person but I never discussed politics with my grandmother! Our experiences and viewpoints were so different that I knew we could not reach any substantial agreement.

What is the day-to-day as a philosopher?

[palladists](#)

Hello Palladists! Not one day is the same to be honest. Several days a month are dedicated to supervising PhD students. I read their work, make some comments, and give them suggestions about how to improve their writing. It is always very exciting to have a dialogue with smart people who are so enthusiastic about their dissertation topic! Other days I travel to give talks. Most often, to Philosophy departments or Philosophy conferences, in the UK and abroad, but occasionally I present my work in the context of public engagement events, and reach out to schoolchildren, clinicians and professionals. Again, the feedback from different types of audiences is really important to shape my future work. On quiet days, I just read, write, answer emails, and manage the project I am currently leading, chatting with my team, organising events, writing reports for the funders, editing the blog, etc. Does this answer

your question? Thanks for participating!

Hi, thank you for doing this AMA.

I'm an undergrad in the UK hoping to one day pursue a PhD in philosophy (I am especially interested in logic and the philosophy of logic). My question is: is there anything in particular that I should be aware of in this endeavour? I want to have an idea of what to expect. Given that you have 10 students working under you I imagine you have a wealth of knowledge in this area.

[Intellectually786](#)

Dear Intellectually786, if you love Philosophy and have a good topic you feel passionate about, I strongly recommend doing a PhD. You need to be independent and organised, have good time management, and be prepared to read and write all the time. But it is a rewarding experience and a good advisor can really help you get results. Give it a try! It is important to do some research about where to study and with whom. A good fit between student and advisor is crucial.

Hi Dr. Bortolotti. I have several questions.

1. Correct me if I'm wrong, but it seems like most of the work you've done on irrationality/delusion has had to do with people who have clear mental disorders. What has been shown regarding benefits of irrationality for ordinary people who fail at cognition in smaller ways?
2. On a similar note to controversy in [behavioral economics](#), there's a difference between illustrating cases where people's irrationality can have unexpected benefits, and having a general framework which provides useful predictions of when irrationality will be beneficial. To what extent are the possible benefits of irrationality, especially the more mundane kind described above, something that can be compactly described and predicted in such a manner?
3. You seem to be focusing your description of the effects of cognition to the individual. Are there any unusual consequences of irrationality when it comes to interpersonal relations, and when it comes to impersonal decision making?

Thanks for doing the AmA.

[UmamiSalami](#)

Dear UmamiSalami, thank you for your questions. 1. I have worked on whether optimistically biased beliefs and confabulations in the non-clinical population can be beneficial. There is a podcast here on how excessively positive views of your partner can improve the relationship: <http://www.philosophy247.org/podcasts/biased-about-love/biased-about-love/> 2. You are right that it is difficult to come up with a general framework and so far my claim is that the benefits of irrational beliefs depend on the context (the type of belief, the situation of the agent, the other beliefs available, etc.) 3. Very good question. You are right that I focused on the individual agent so far, but with post-doc Kathy Puddifoot we are working on a paper on the benefits of memory mechanisms that deliver distorted memories and if our argument works, then it would probably apply not to individual agents but to humans in general. We need to think more about this.

I hope I'm not too late to ask this and that the question isn't too long but I wanted to ask you whether you think we are maybe more prone to a kind of irrationality than we used to be. That is to say I sometimes think that there's a steady trend towards a sort of naïve realism and a misplaced confidence in our senses and our abilities to be rational. I'm sure this is a difficult thing to make historical

comparisons about but I sometimes wonder if technology is culturally shifting the ways in which we think (and/or the ways in which we think we think). Just as the camera and film may have increased the extent to which we trust our own eyes and visual memories, maybe the develop of thinking machines have increased our own confidence in our decision-making processes. I'm generally very interested in the ways technology shapes our ideas of what it is to be a mind and that that is a two-way process: that we project our idea of how we think onto other minds, machines, inanimate objects, abstract ideas and chaotic processes and that some of those things are also then reflected in our subjective experience of "consciousness".

So I guess it's a two-prong question: Do you also see a rise in this sort of irrationality and / or in what ways is technology influencing the ways we think and the ways we think we think?

Edit: wifi trouble and save hit early...

[cr_ziller](#)

Hello cr_ziller! To be honest, I never thought about rationality increasing or decreasing through time, though I have thought about one fascinating philosophical question: is there moral progress? I guess you could ask a similar thing about rationality. Do we become progressively more epistemically rational? Despite all the pessimism around alternative facts and pseudo realities, my unshakeable optimism suggests that we are getting better and the reason lie in an answer I wrote at the start of the AMA session to another participant's question. We know more and more about our biases and limitations and this allows us to avoid the biases and work around the limitations to improve ourselves. I wish I had my two post-docs Kathy Puddifoot and Sophie Stammers next to me, as they are the real 'implicit bias' experts, but if they were here they would probably tell you that we can modify behaviour affected by biases even when these are unconscious, if we are aware that we may be vulnerable to them and plan accordingly. This is just an example, but I think we can take it as a source of optimism.

Do you ever go "idea mining" in antique or medieval philosophy, and if so, which philosopher(s) do you find yourself agreeing with the most?

[ShamanSTK](#)

Hello ShamanSTK -- I love Ancient Philosophy but I don't go there for inspiration nowadays. Sometimes it is fiction that inspires me, most often real life! Who are your favourite Ancient / Medieval philosophers?

Good for you, happy women's day!

[popcornsodapop](#)

Thank you!

Is it possible to train to be completely rational and logical (like Spock) or will there be unalterable instincts (like fight or flight response)?

[False1512](#)

Hi False1512! Spock is not so good at making wise decisions, is it? It is fortunate that we have reason and emotion to base our own choices on. Even if it were possible to be completely logical, it would not necessarily lead to a good life.

Hey there, I study anthropology and I am glad I can ask you anything. In a way my question may not be connected to the topic, but nevermind. Is it worth it to study humanitarian (liberal arts) things when we know how the job market is at the moment? Is there future for us? I have an existential crisis as you may notice at the moment, I love anthropology but the fact it will be so hard to have a job is annoying. Sorry for "bad mood" post. Have a lovely evening <3

[ringelgold](#)

Hello ringelgold! I like your "bad mood" post! I did have a crisis in the second year of my PhD. Does this matter at all? Am I a parasite of society, using up all these amazing resources just to answer my curiosity about the world? Periodically, I still ask myself similar questions. The way I resolved my crisis was to commit myself to working on issues that I perceived as important not just for myself or my fellow academics, but for society at large, and to attempt to make a difference with my research. I am not sure whether I will succeed but I am trying...

I'm researching for an essay on genetic engineering at the moment, specifically the idea of dis-enhancing (by decerebration) an animal so as to alleviate any suffering it may experience and essentially have it exist in a vegetative state.

Most people are repulsed by this idea, but the objections that they raise are usually also applicable to contemporary animal husbandry techniques as well.

In your opinion could this be due to inaccurate/irrational beliefs that people hold about animal rights today?

Or put another way, do you think that by looking at the issue of animal rights through the lens of genetic engineering we can more clearly arrive at our true beliefs without the obfuscation of social and cultural conditioning?

[matt151091](#)

Hello matt151091 and thank you for being here and for being patient... (it's raining questions!) Let me start by saying that on this particular topic you are the expert and I defer to you. One thing that I did notice when studying animal ethics is that people have (me included!) inconsistent beliefs about how to treat nonhuman animals humanely and morally. Some of the reactions to dis-enhancing may be due to the presence of these inconsistencies. Another issue may be that we have a strong intuition that morality is not just about the absence of suffering, but it is about flourishing and thriving. If an individual is morally relevant to us, shouldn't we try not just not to make them suffer, but also guarantee to them the opportunity to have a good life (whatever counts as having a good life for them)? Maybe this explains the fact that some people find dis-enhancing repulsive...

Is rationality normative?

And how would you define the reasons related to rationality?

[Snurrig](#)

Dear Snurrig, thanks for participating in this session! Rationality can be used descriptively or normatively depending on the context. As I was saying to another participant not long ago, I am mostly interested in rationality as a normative concept that applies to our beliefs (EPISTEMIC RATIONALITY). So that's how how beliefs respond to evidence that becomes available to us, for instance, whether we are prepared to revise them when counter-evidence presents itself.

What is your favourite philosophy quote? Happy women's day BTW!

[lukaroko2000](#)

Thank you for the wishes, lukaroko2000! It is so lovely to be doing an AMA session on International Women's Day. So I have a soft spot for Socrates (that is, the Socrates Plato has created for us). I like this quote: "Whom do I call educated? First, those who manage well the circumstances they encounter day by day. Next, those who are decent and honourable in their relationships with all others, bearing easily and good naturedly what is offensive in others and being as agreeable and reasonable to their associates as is humanly possible to be. Those who hold their pleasures always under control and are not ultimately overcome by their misfortunes. Those who are not spoiled by their successes, who do not desert their true selves but hold their ground steadfastly as wise and sober-minded people." But being International Women's Day and all, shall we have one by Jane Austen too? "Where so many hours have been spent in convincing myself that I am right, is there not some reason to fear I may be wrong?". It is a question I ask myself a lot...

Hello Professor Bortolotti, I earned a degree in Philosophy at Boston College in 1976 where the focus was on the history of Continental Philosophy beginning with the pre-Socratics. As I had a career that didn't much involve Philosophy, I haven't kept up with developments in the discipline. My question is: what is the current status of Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason" among philosophers of mind? It is seen as antiquated and irrelevant, or has the logic of his argument stood the test of time?

Also curious (given your academic work) what you think of Nietzsche as a psychologist.

[LuciusMichael](#)

Hello LuciusMichael! I love Kant. He is still much studied and talked about, even in philosophy of psychology! I don't really know Nietzsche's philosophy well, so I think I will skip your second question...

Hello Professor,

For my senior seminar I recently studied Anthony Laden's "Reasoning: A Social Picture," where he separates reasoning into the standard and the social model.

The standard model of reasoning is used most when under the impression we are reasoning towards a clear answer; there is a right and wrong so the wrong can be dismissed, there is a finite conclusion that cannot (in some cases must not) be wavered from, and it is often thought of as a faculty or a deliverance of reasons. Laden believes that negative consequences accompany the standard model. "The impression that our choice is between arrogance of reason and the rejection of reason is also a consequence of having only the standard picture in mind when we think about reasoning."

Whereas, the social model of reasoning is described as " an activity or practice that is social, and ongoing and largely consists of the issuing of invitations to take what we say as speaking for our interlocutors as well." This model is interactive and has no end. It cannot be taken upon oneself to come to conclusions, instead of denying criticism it invites it, and attempts to comprehend all sides during the process.

It seems that rationality is sometimes defined as a persons capability of reasoning. Based on your examination of rationality and Laden's two models of reasoning, how should we apply the value "rational" moving forward?

[pizza_in_the_broiler](#)

Excellent question, [pizza_in_the_broiler](#)! In my own work I have mostly focused on rationality as an attribute of a belief or an action in an individual agent, but the social dimension is extremely important: giving reasons for our beliefs or decisions is a social practice with many benefits. This becomes clear when we consider people who experience beliefs that are considered symptomatic of a mental disorder. Often the unusual belief becomes rigid (not sensitive to counter-evidence) partly because the person is isolated receives no challenges: as a result, the unusual belief can become ingrained.

Hello. I'd like to ask you to please share your views on Lacanian school and Žižek in particular? Do you believe they do have something of substance to add to the discourse? Because we don't really study their philosophy nor can we take psychoanalysis classes on my university. They are mostly viewed as unimportant outside the linguistic department. Thank you very much!

[grominblx](#)

I don't know them sorry! They are popular though, so it's just me focusing on my own area of research and not an indication of their influence!

Have you checked out *Love Voltaire us Apart* by Julia Edelman? I would love to know what you think about it! It is not a serious work, more so a satirical/comical presentation of different philosophies.

[phawtnawsty](#)

Sounds very interesting but I haven't come across it yet! I'll look it up, promise. Thank you for the suggestion.

Hi, thanks for taking the time for this AMA. You say...

I believe that psychological evidence provides useful constraints for our philosophical theories

This is a subject I have pondered myself, and I can see how epistemological theories may have to take account of human psychology, but how, in your view, would psychological evidence effect metaphysical or ontological theories?

[ajmarriott](#)

Good question [ajmarriott](#)! Take a subject close to my heart: delusions. Now, I may want to know what delusions are. Suppose I am inclined to think that they are beliefs. If so, then they should have the features we usually attribute to beliefs. What do beliefs usually do? Well, if we believe that the cat is on the roof we tend to assert that the cat is on the roof in the right circumstances, and act on that belief too (suppose I want the cat to come back inside, I won't go and look for him in the street if I believe it is on the roof). Do delusions behave like beliefs? Only someone with empirical experience of delusions (a person with delusions, a mental health professional dealing with people who have delusions, a cognitive neuropsychologist studying delusions) can tell me that. I need to gather all the evidence and see where it leads me...

Hello, and thanks for doing this AMA!

I see today that the word 'rational' is used in a variety of ways. For example, describing people, animal species, habits, beliefs, systems of classification, etc.. I'd like to hear your thoughts on what sort of stuff can be properly called rational and what can be called rational but only in a derived sense.

[waldorfwitoutwalnut](#)

Hello there! I like thinking about beliefs and actions as rational or irrational. I don't like describing people as rational or irrational. First because it can be disparaging and stigmatising, and second because we know very well that some people can be perfectly rational in some areas of their lives, and less rational in others. But this is my preference. I don't mean to be prescriptive!

Going for a more esoteric question that may have no basis in anything you believe...

What are your true and honest thoughts about "will" or "intent" - using your own personal language, as opposed to language that you'd use to effectively communicate your ideas to the general populous?

[glimpee](#)

True and honest: I don't have a clear idea about what the will is. I never had. This is probably just my own limitation, but it is difficult for me to grasp what some philosophers describe as "volition" as independent of other psychological mechanisms. Do you have some true and honest thoughts about "will"? I would love to hear them!

Is object permanence illogical? That's to ask; if we can't observe something at any given moment what logical reason do we have to believe it's still there?

If the answer is 'we have no reason to believe it is there', when in reality we know this is the case, does that make logical thinking unrealistic?

[SelfPromotion101](#)

I guess, SelfPromotion101, that we should not expect logic to help us with knowledge of the permanence of objects. It is our experience we should defer to on that occasion. We can trust our experience of objects as having permanence and can reliably predict when they are "next there".

Hi Dr. Bortolotti. I'm a frequent reader of Imperfect Cognitions, and formerly a grad student in philosophy where I focused on the emotions. My favorite book on the subject is Jenefer Robinson's 'Deeper Than Reason'.

If you can do so without having to recapitulate the whole thing, could you speak more on your diss topic? I find the arguments in favor of the "belief ascription presupposes rationality" thesis to be very compelling (i.e. Davidson, Dennett). You write, "I used several examples to make my point, reflecting on how we successfully ascribe beliefs to non-human animals, young children, and people experiencing psychosis". I can't see prima facie how these examples might undermine the view at issue. For one thing, I am happy to regard my cat as having beliefs, and in ascribing beliefs to her, it seems to me that I am understanding her as rational, i.e. acting on the basis of her beliefs and desires (and this entails predictions about her behavior should I move the food to a different location, and so on). Do you think there's something wrong with this argument?

[b561248](#)

Hi b561248! Such a lovely question... we could be here for days... but we won't. Short story is that I make a distinction between intentionality and rationality, where the former is a weaker notion that could be cashed out in terms of doing or believing things for reasons, and the latter is more demanding notion requiring conforming to norms that we often violate. Have a look here for a longer story:

<http://www.behavior.org/resources/156.pdf>

What is your opinion on DID? Is it possible to have "different" consciousnesses in the same brain?

With that in mind, how do you feel about the subculture of Tulpas (people who claim of having another sentient personality in their minds)?

[lucidrage](#)

Hello lucidrage! DID is not my area of expertise and although I have read a few things on the topic, I haven't formed a set opinion yet. I like the paper by Humphrey and Dennett:

<http://www.humphrey.org.uk/papers/1989mpd.pdf> Have you seen it?

Hello Dr Bortolotti! I'm currently getting my first taste of mental health on placement and am interested in the uncertain threshold between between extremes of normal personality and mental health conditions.

Therefore I was really interested in one of the objectives you outlined for the PERFECT project, that being *'establishing that there is no qualitative gap between the irrationality of those beliefs that are regarded as symptoms of mental health issues and the irrationality of everyday beliefs'*.

Would you be able to share with us a little bit more about this objective, and how you're going about trying to accomplish it, plus any examples you might have to share with us? When does an irrational everyday belief become a delusion?

Edit:grammar and stuff

[sayeskay](#)

Good, this question is really important to me sayeskay and let me add that often I encounter a lot of resistance from mental health professionals when I talk about delusions being continuous with other irrational beliefs we all have. Let me say straight up that by saying that there is no qualitative difference between the irrationality of psychiatric symptoms and the irrationality of ordinary beliefs I don't mean to trivialise the experience of those who suffer psychological distress. I refer to the quality of the irrationality, not the level of distress. A racist or prejudiced belief can be as resistant to counter-evidence as a delusional belief, and not all delusional beliefs are exotic and un-understandable. All the opposite: some background in the past experiences of a person reporting delusions may help understand the presence and even the function of the delusion. Remarking on the continuity is important to me, because it is a way to undermine the stigma associated with mental health issues. People who experience psychological distress are not so different from people who do not that they should be marginalised or refused the benefit of being taken seriously. My PhD student Rachel Gunn, a psychotherapist as well as a philosopher, often make this point very persuasively. She says: "There is no person with schizophrenia who has ever appeared irrational to me". We discuss some of these issues in this paper, should you be interested in hearing more: goo.gl/msKsfA and in another paper coming out soon in a volume called Cognitive Confusions:

<http://www.mhra.org.uk/legenda/titles/isbn/9781909662995.html> Hope this helps!

Hello Dr. Bortolotti!

How would you introduce a lay person, with no background in philosophy, to the philosophy of mind and/or rationality in a such a way that it would be relatable to things they know/experience in their life already? What would you say to convince someone it's worth knowing about?

What kind of job do you think we do, generally, in teaching people to "think about thinking" and why

that might be important for both decision making and emotional well being?

Cheers!

[ndhl83](#)

Hello ndhl83! The philosophy of mind is a very diverse subject comprising all the questions we might have about the way in which we experience and understand the world around us. I am personally interested in belief and rationality, but other philosophers of mind focus on consciousness or emotions. There is a strong movement now campaigning for philosophy to be taught in schools, to invite children to think about the big questions earlier on. I am not sure whether this would help improve reasoning and decision making, but there is evidence that it has some other benefits. In general, though, all subjects can be taught critically. We don't need to study philosophy as a subject to learn how to think well! We need to develop a critical attitude towards what we read and think, and to have simple strategies to assess the credibility and soundness of the claims we are presented with.

Do you think that because you have a degree in psychology and are an accomplished professor that your subconscious has been molded to enforce your image as a stoic/intelligent person? Or do you still see yourself having the capacity to be silly despite all that? I get the sense that if I were in your position I'd be subconsciously trying to fit the societal image of being a psych professor.

[JimBeamLean](#)

Hello! I am a Philosophy professor and have no formal training in Psychology. I am not the stereotypical Philosophy professor either, but I guess nobody can completely escape societal pressures!

Hello and thank you for taking questions!

Do any of your students have an interest in philosophical counseling? That is, do you all think about the role philosophers could play in our culture were they to have more discussions like this- only at a more personal/intimate level- with clients for the purpose of mitigating anxiety or for developing sense of worldly understanding and/or personal contentment?

[PhIPC](#)

Wow, this is a good point. I see the role of the academic philosopher as different from that of a counsellor. I certainly do not feel I would have the skills required to do a good job at it and I would want additional training. But I must admit I don't know much about philosophical counselling and to my knowledge none of my students engages in it. Thanks for waiting!

Ciao dottor Bortolotti,

A few questions. I'm Italian myself so my first question concerns our shared homeland: What do you think of the state of Italian philosophy? Is any interesting work being done?

Second, you say that "I've come to the conviction that some manifestations of human irrationality are not all bad", this sounds very similar to Nietzsche. Is he an influence on your work?

Final question, Freud was a major figure that was concerned with non-rational thought, and he had a big impact on the Frankfurt school and post-structuralism. His intellectual legacy has come under heavy attack. Do you think he's a thinker worth engaging with or was he charlatan?

Thank you.

[orgyofdolphins](#)

Three excellent questions, thank you orgyofdolphins! I have a few connections with philosophers based in Italy, not many, and I think they are doing very interesting work, especially in the area of the philosophy of the cognitive sciences. As I said earlier, I am no Nietzsche expert but maybe I should start reading him! In my formation I have not studied philosophy of psychoanalysis carefully and only ever attended some lectures on it. Although some of Freud's ideas have come under attack as you say, some psychodynamic explanations are still discussed in psychology and found useful for some purposes. So I would say he is definitely worth engaging with!

Hi there! I'm a college undergrad studying psychology and philosophy because I have interests in both fields and the general area of cognitive science. I'm currently afraid of not being able to do something I love or not being able to find a job and that I might have to settle on a masters in something more general like clinical psychology.

I was curious to know how you got where you are. Did you have similar worries? Do you have any general advice?

I look forward to checking out some of the links you left. Thanks!

[Abarber963](#)

Hello Abarber963! Yes, after completing my PhD, going to interviews and getting no jobs, I was concerned about ever being able to do research again in the areas I was interested in. But it was a long time ago, and although the job market was no walk in the park, it was certainly less competitive than it is now. My advice would be to pursue what you love, at least for a while, and see how it goes. I was lucky in that I received my doctorate in March 2014 and in September 2014 I had a research job, but there are people who struggle because they are forced to accept teaching jobs that leave very little room for research or to move to places where they would not want to live. Doing what one likes is so valuable, I would give it a good try. If things don't work out, then you can think about other solutions. In a previous thread, I mentioned I did some school teaching for a year, and I am sure I would have found other interesting and worthwhile jobs if academic philosophy hadn't worked out. Best of luck!

I recently read David Velleman's paper 'Deciding how to Decide'. If I understood him correctly, his idea is that theories of practical reasoning should be evaluated in terms of whatever it is that is constitutive of all action. Analogously to how theoretical reason is evaluated in terms of what is constitutive of all beliefs- that is, truth. He suggests that what is constitutive of all action is autonomy but doesn't give an argument for this. Do think that autonomy is a good candidate, or would you have something else in mind?

[Zascher13](#)

Hello Zascher13! I haven't thought systematically about practical reasoning or what is constitutive of all action, so I don't have an answer for you. I am usually sceptical of "constitutive things": for instance, I don't think rationality is constitutive of intentionality, as some people think.

Do you agree with this statement by Hume, 'Reason Is a slave to the passions?'

[Krantikaari](#)

Hello Krantikaari and thank you for your question. I agree that no decision is made purely on the basis of rational considerations, and that is probably a good thing too! Sometimes our emotions are a good guide to what makes us happy. Have a look at this (open access) paper of mine on whether rational reflection leads to wise choices... the answer is: sometimes!

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13869795.2011.594962>

Conservation biologist here. Since you wrote it above, to what extent do you think scientific research should be ethically regulated? Also, if that question is too much to write atm, i would like to know your opinion on "intrinsic values" of species/ecosystems. It seems this was early in your career but i hope you can retrieve some of the things you found out. Thank you!

[AtaraxiaBio](#)

Hi AtaraxiaBio! Thank you for your question. I did work for a European project investigating the extent to which scientific research should be ethically regulated. My own view is that any human activity, whether it is research or not, that impacts on people's interests (and the interests of other morally relevant individuals) should be ethically regulated, but ethical regulation should be supportive of science and not seen as a burden but as a means of protecting key interests. What is your view?

Why philosophers use complex language to lecture an idea that can be taught in a simple way? There are some exceptions, I read Nietzsche's the origin of tragedy and understood it, or Camus. But I tried to read other germans or french and just had headaches and couldn't continue. Why you do this god damn it!!!

[Takumo-N](#)

Hello Takumo, I don't! I write very clearly (insert smiley face). Jokes aside it is important for philosophers to be good communicators, and essential to people like me who work together with researchers from other disciplines. Have a look at my public engagement / outreach work and tell me whether I give you a headache... <https://sites.google.com/site/lisabortolottiphilosophy/audio-video>

So, with regards to mental health issues, would you say they are physiological or psychological, also what's your take on mental-health issues like schizophrenia?

My father told me about a friend of his whose parents (parents I think it was) died in a car crash and for some reason he had a lot of guilt because of it and it actually caused him to sometimes hallucinate them being in the room with him, and they'd talk to him and make him feel guilty. Such a case seems psychological or perhaps a mixture of the two? A genetic predisposition in combination with a psychological issue of guilt.

Also, what's your take on Sartre's Being and Nothingness, do you think a human being is at the whim of a combination of external forces? Or do you think there is something else involved, something non-physical? Also with regards to mental-health issues, take for instance a bipolar-person, do you think a person with bipolar can fight their mania and their lows perhaps with neuroplasticity and mind-trading, or their only option is to seek help through the use of lithium and what not?

Thanks for your time :)!

[Mirrrth](#)

Dear Mirrrth, thank you for your question. Deferring to experts here, I believe that it is widely accepted that complex conditions such as schizophrenia have a multiplicity of causes. There may be some

genetic predisposition but, as you show in your example, developmental issues and life experiences are paramount. Richard Bentall has conducted some very interesting studies on persecutory delusions, and you can hear the two of us discuss some of these issues here: <http://www.philosofoa.org/episode-5-is-there-a-clear-line-between-madness-and-sanity/> I am going to skip the Sartre question due to mere ignorance!

How do you think will the principles of quantum mechanics (being both particle and a wave) impact philosophy and our rational thinking in the future? And what are your thoughts about altruism as selfishness on a larger scale?

[cooletyp](#)

OK, cooletyp, I have to be honest here and say that I never thought about the influence of quantum mechanics on rationality. Altruism and selfishness sound good to me, what kind of situation did you have in mind? One in which altruism and selfishness on a larger scale may become detrimental? I'd love to hear more.

Would philosophy of the mind be useful in the development of AI (artificial intelligence)? Or do you believe an AI is not capable of the same philosophical Nature of humans?

[TheRedLayer](#)

Hello TheRedLayer! AI is not my area of expertise, but I have a lay interest in it. I genuinely believe that philosophy of mind and philosophy of psychology can be useful in the development of AI, and I have colleagues in Computer Science who come to Philosophy seminars and make excellent contributions, so there must be a meaningful overlap. There may be some capacities that AI will not be able to have to the same extent as humans, but I believe it is an empirical question, so we'll find out!

In this thread you defined epistemic irrationality as about having beliefs that aren't sensitive to evidence. Do you construe that internally or externally? Is it a matter of having an irrational approach to what seems to you to be relevant evidence or of what is relevant evidence?

[willbell](#)

Finally a very specific question! Thank you willbell. Answer: internally. So you do have the evidence available to you, but you disregard it for whatever reason. Is that what you expected?

I'm currently talking a class on the philosophy of mind, and two subjects I love debating about with my classmates and sometimes even my professor are: 1) To what extent, if any, does the alleged multiple realizability of mental properties damage type-identity theory? And 2) should identity theory and functionalism be seen as rival theories?

I'd love hear your personal opinions on these matters if you have the time. Thank you for doing this AMA!

[Generic_username457](#)

Thank you Generic_username457 for these fantastic questions! Well, these are metaphysical questions that I don't really address in my own research. I kind of see myself as someone sympathetic to functionalism, but I have never thought the details through. My colleague Yujin Nagasawa would be

much better suited to answer you! Look him up.

Hello Professor,

What philosophical literature would you recommend for someone interested but not educated in philosophy?

A second question, if I may: Usually during heated debates there is the notion that in order to have a rational one, people should avoid emotions since the two are often perceived as opposites. Do you think that emotion and rationality can coexist in such a way or should emotion be dismissed in favour of rationality?

Thank you for the AMA!

[PM_HUGS_4_HUGS](#)

Thank you for the question [PM_HUGS_4_HUGS](#)! As I was saying while answering another participant's question, emotions can "cloud judgement" as is often said, but they can also play an important role in guiding us when we make important decisions. So it would be a mistake to dismiss them altogether! I write about this in my book on Irrationality, which is a key concept book. Sometimes, key concept books are a good way into a specific topic, because they are not written for the specialist. Lately, excellent philosophy blogs have also become available, and reading posts on them can be a very good, easy introduction to the hottest debates. Have you ever read Imperfect Cognitions? Every Tuesday we have a researcher talking about their most recent work in an accessible way. Give it a try!

I was wondering the importance of "rationality" as a phenomenon or conceptual tool. Is it indispensable to our theories of mind and behavior?

[brokage](#)

Hello brokage (doing my best here with very sore fingers from manic typing)! I am not sure whether rationality is indispensable. I find it an interesting concept because it bridges common talk (folk psychology if you wish), philosophy, and scientific psychology, plus it is also used in other social sciences, but I guess many of the things I want to say could be expressed without using the concept if needed be. One shortcoming of talking about rationality is that people already have their own preconceptions about what it is and whether it is a good/desirable thing. But it is also a challenge to try and illuminate a concept so embedded in our language, history, and understanding of human nature! Do you have a view on this?

Hi Lisa, thank you for your time.

What is your life motto?

[krneki12](#)

Such a sweet question, thank you [krneki12](#)! I am going to steal the University of Birmingham one (I know it's cheesy, but...) "Per ardua ad alta" which means "Through hard work to great things". What's yours?

Buongiorno dottoressa Bortolotti, e grazie per l'AMA!

I would love to hear your point of view about artificial intelligence: do you believe we will be able to

create an artificial "sentient mind"? Or do you believe the concept of mind is too linked to biological proprieties of central nervous systems to be replicated in an electronical device?

I am sure I'm not using words correctly here, I'm not a philosopher, but I hope my question is clear anyway: what is the property or the properties that define "mind"? Are they purely biological properties or can they be found in non-biological entities?

Thank you again for your time!

[Enoma-27](#)

Buongiorno! (Buonasera qui) can you see my earlier reply to TheRedLayer? I'm not an expert in AI but I do not rule out that we can create a sentient mind! Thank you for your question and your patience.

Hey there! I'm a philosophy undergrad at Exeter. Just going to throw my question out there: what do you think of the agency of non-animal things like plants, buildings and even the weather? Is it completely crazy to ascribe agency to them?

Edit: thanks for taking the time! I'm super excited to hear what you think 😊

[superstripsox](#)

Hello superstripsox! I don't think it's crazy at all to ascribe agency to inanimate objects, and didn't Dennett suggest that we could use the intentional stance to describe the behaviour of things very different from us if convenient? But now I am curious. What would you see as the main advantages of ascribing agency to plants, buildings and the weather? I'm sure you have got something in mind there!

Hello Professor Bortolotti! Your research area is fascinating to me and I am planning to go into a PhD in the area, so it's always great to hear of the great philosophy being done in the area.

My question was based on the work of Quassim Cassam at the University of Warwick, who is working on research similar to your own. His argument is that contemporary philosophy of mind is too focused on what he defined as homo philosophicus - the logically perfect human being.

This fails to account for the irrationality of the human as they actually are, and so he argues that accounting for intellectual virtues and vices would produce more substantial answers for questions of self-knowledge. Did you have anything to weigh in on this?

[Paddin](#)

Dear Paddin thank you for your question! I have recently heard professor Cassam talk about the importance of focusing on intellectual vices (we were at the same conference) and I really liked his approach. He also wrote a blog post for us (at Imperfect Cognitions) summarising his recent work on the topic. I guess you could say that despite his focus on virtues and my focus on belief, we have a similar approach as we are interested in what happens when things don't go to well, and we reject any idealisation of human agency. Good luck with your PhD!

Have you explored DMT? I'm fascinated by the insights abnormal psych and altered states of consciousness provide into the construction of our personalities.

Until recently (I'm 30), I presumed the Phineus Gage story encapsulated the most interesting sort of discovery in neurobiology. However, after recent experiments, the effects of DMT have completely captured my interest. It's impossible to quantify my experience with existing language; I liken feeling

"expanded consciousness" to seeing for the first time.

Needless to say, I believe DMT's interaction with the mind has significant clinical implications.

If you're still reading this please check out my simplistic analogy:

https://www.reddit.com/r/DMT/comments/5xvhx1/i_use_waffles_to_describe_my_dmt_experience/?st=j0181aso&sh=0c78d963

Thanks!

[hitchensdisciple](#)

I will read up thanks! Sounds very interesting.

How would you define empathy and Do you think it's possible to truly empathize with another person?

[sorry_bouts_it](#)

Hi [sorry_bouts_it](#)! I have not written on empathy myself but it is a topic extremely popular with my PhD students. The very capable and brilliant Isaura Peddis is completing a thesis arguing that empathy is an emotion. She is very convincing! She tells me that some people prefer to conceptualise empathy as a skill instead. That also sounds plausible. In common talk and for my unsophisticated purposes, it is the capacity to feel what others are feeling. Another of my PhD students, Magdalena Antrobus, is currently investigating whether people suffering from depression are more empathetic. I find her work very intriguing, especially as she explores the relationship between feeling empathy and acting altruistically. What would you say, is it possible to empathise with another?

does rational philosophy allow for the existence of religion or religious belief rather?

[Coachkfan1](#)

Dear Coachkfan, this is a really big issue. Short answer: I think so. A more detailed answer would need to take into account the religious beliefs in question: are they consistent with one another? are they responsive to evidence if there is evidence relevant to them? and so on. Hope this helps! Thanks for checking in!

I have several questions very dissimilar to one another. First is why exactly is a PhD called PhD. I'm a PhD in Physics, and philosophy is something I wonder and read about in my personal time, but my work is mainly to attack a problem in a scientific way, design an experiment, make assumptions and test them to be true or untrue. How does philosophy come in to play?

[Manojative](#)

Thank you Manojative! This must have something to do with the old meaning of philosophy, not as a discipline herself but as love of knowledge! Seriously though, philosophers are not so different from scientists. We attack a problem looking at evidence, read about experiments that have been made in the area and compare their results, make assumptions and test them to be true or false, maybe not always empirically but with arguments and thought experiments. Even the most die-hard experimental scientist is a philosopher in that she uses arguments! Philosophy is everywhere...

I've heard somewhere (Reddit I think) that stoicism is not enough of a philosophy to guide one's

actions and is just a building block. Do you agree/disagree? If you agree what are some more developed philosophies that would be in the same vein as stoicism?

[Chainwreck](#)

Hello Chainwreck! I am not a stoicism expert, but after three hours of this let me go and say that no philosophy is probably enough to guide one's actions because no school of thought has answers to everything: all philosophies are just building blocks. This is true of how I relate to philosophical theories: very rarely there is nothing I learn from a theory. Even if I disagree there is a lesson for me to be learnt, something that changes the way I think about things. How does this sound?

My undergrad is in social work, with its own microcosm of philosophy regarding ethics. What you said about irrational beliefs really resonated – a mentally ill person may be irrational, sure. But so is everyone else. It really depends on what kind of irrationally is sanctioned, and where.

I travelled to India to learn about Buddhism, left confused, and returned a few years later to learn more. It seems that Eastern philosophy isn't particularly fashionable in many graduate programs – teetering along the line of religion. Perhaps the Buddhists agree... a monk once remarked that Buddhism is not found in books.

Maybe it isn't. But on the experiential rather than dogmatic or ritualized quality of "spiritual" or transcendental states – what differentiates such experiences from a diagnosis of delusion?

Is it ethical to have such nebulous definitions of mental health?

Do you have any insight for folks who want to get into graduate school for Philosophy without any formal undergraduate training (Hi there!)? What about for those with a mediocre gpa from an average school, who had no plans to attend grad school during their undergrad?

I'm sure many philosophy grad students might snicker, here... but the strict entry requirements for these programs seem counterintuitive to the spirit of philosophy/inquiry. Philosophies emerge from living and learning in any number of ways...

[betweenbinary](#)

In many programmes they take into account work experience as well as academic qualifications! Don't give up!

Thank you for being here! I have 2 of your books that I'm working on reading right now actually! :) How do you think that your work, specifically on beliefs and irrationality, fit in with the contemporary philosophy of mind discussion surrounding consciousness? Do you think your work supports or argues against any certain theories of consciousness? How might your work be best incorporated in helping other philosophers think about consciousness and what it is?

[RevengerSC2](#)

Hi RevengerSC2 -- I intentionally avoid consciousness... maybe because as an undergraduate the topic dominated the philosophy of mind syllabus and always preferred other topics to it! But I tend to think it is not a big mystery, just another amazing thing our brain can do!

On a personal level, what are a few of your favorite films?

[samwise0912](#)

I needed a lighter question, thank you! I like "In the Mood for Love". It's old, but then I had kids and now I don't go to the cinema anymore. Only animation... Mind you, I love studio Ghibli! :) What are yours, samwise0912?

Where do you place yourself on the political spectrum?

[supahotwata](#)

Leftish...

Hi Lisa, thanks for the most interesting AMA I've ever seen. I'm extremely interested in philosophy but come from a complete beginner back ground to it. Can you recommend any literature or videos that can get me started on the bare bones basics. Only, there's a lot of words getting no thrown about here that even at 35 I've never heard in my life.

Thanks again.

[jonesyc894](#)

Thank you for the compliment! Have you tried Philosophy Bites? An excellent series of accessible podcasts by experts, free! I have done the one on Irrationality...

Do you think the root problem to everyone's problem is the fact that they don't take responsibility for their own life?

[juicyjuicy66](#)

Hello! I don't think there is one root problem to everyone's problem. What is everyone's problem anyway?

Hello Professor!

I've finished reading Atlas Shrugged a few weeks ago, and I was wondering your thoughts on Ms.Ayn Rand's philosophy of Objectivism?

Thank you very much.

[IcEWagner98](#)

Sorry, must be so disappointing for you, but I know nothing about it!

Hello... I have a few questions! I was wondering if you think human beings can be rational? I find myself probably more on the side of Hume who said that reason is a slave of the passions, and I was wondering if there's anything you could say to convince me otherwise? Thank you so much for doing this AMA!

[noahhw](#)

Hello! I don't want to convince you otherwise. I will say that humans are not always rational but that's OK. Rationality is a great value, and we should strive to be rational when we can. But sometimes it is

because we are a bit irrational that we can be happy and successful!

I have no clue if your still active on this but what is your opinion on modern ethics in our society

[WilierDestroyer](#)

Hello! It's a very general question so I wouldn't know what to say to it. Our society is not perfect but I think we are experiencing moral progress overall and attempting to improve our practices gradually.

What do you think of Noam Chomsky?

[MsStarstruck](#)

Hello! I don't know his work enough to have an opinion, sorry!

Do you think humanity as a whole is generally becoming more or less intelligent? Do you believe we are allocating our collective mental energy and resources in the proper direction?

[st1gzy](#)

Hello st1gzy! See what I said in reply to cr_ziller. It is hard to say whether we are becoming more intelligent, but we are extending our knowledge and that for sure helps!

I've noticed that human consciousness is changing rapidly from, say 20 years ago, to now; why do you think the younger generations, especially in america, are becoming less creative, more dependent on other people, less curious, more focused on narcissistic behaviors and social media?

[robjrsgrampa](#)

Hello! I am not competent to answer questions about society in America as I have never lived there, but are you sure that younger generations are becoming less creative and less curious? That is not my experience.

can we ever have a complete understanding of the mind? or will any understanding, which exists inside of the mind, fail to encompass the whole thing? (in your opinion)

[MuteSecurityO](#)

Hello MuteSecurityO! I think we will be able to get a very good understanding of the mind in time and with patience. I am not sure whether to get a complete understanding of the mind one would have to use something else rather than a mind... at the moment I don't see any reason to think so but maybe you can persuade me otherwise...

What is your opinion on Tough Drug Laws?

[in_me_bum_mum](#)

Don't know what they are sorry!

Dr. Bortolotti, I only have a casual interest in philosophy, so a lot of the finer details of the AMA are lost on me.

Bolognese sauce is famous and widely known. What is a lesser known dish from your childhood that we should research and try to create?

Salud!

[zverkalt](#)

Life is not meaningful without tortellini.