

Center for Cognitive Science

University at Buffalo, State University of New York

Wednesday, October 26, 2005

280 Park Hall
North Campus
2:00 pm –4:00 pm

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(Sponsored by the Department of Philosophy, UB)

"Normativity and the Mental"

What we call mental event, Descartes calls thought. This is how he defines it:

By the term 'thought', I understand everything that happens in us of which we are conscious, insofar as we are conscious of it.

Descartes tells us that events that happen in us are thoughts insofar as they are the object of our consciousness. What is consciousness? It seems to be a certain way of perceiving something that happens in us. However, the problem with such an account is that perceiving something would itself be a kind of thought. This would mean that Descartes circularly defines thought as the object of a special kind of thought.

I will maintain that consciousness as it appears in this definition is not a further mental event but a general normative stance. Events that happen in us are thus mental events by virtue of being subject to certain norms. That they are subject to these norms means that they may be, but not necessarily that they are evaluated according to them. The normative stance need not be actually taken by anyone. Hence, consciousness need not happen in us. If this is correct, then consciousness is not a mental event.

Refreshments will be available; Open to the public!

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