Yasha Sapir

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Areas of Specialization

Epistemology · Inquiry · Decision Theory · Philosophy of Language · Social Philosophy

Areas of Competence

Philosophy, Politics, and Economics · Philosophy of Law · Ethics of Technology

Education

PhD in Philosophy, University of Southern California 2021–2027

Dissertation: *Vague and non-transparent inquiry*

Committee: Jeffrey Russell (chair), Andrew Bacon, Dmitri Gallow, John Hawthorne, Deniz Rudin (external)

MA in Philosophy, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee 2019–2021

BA in Philosophy, Reed College 2015–2018

Publications

Inquiry and deception (with Brian Haas)
Analysis (forthcoming).

Hedging and the ignorance norm on inquiry (with Peter van Elswyk)
Synthese 199 (2021): 5837–5859.

In Progress

How to build a pyramid with vague propositions *R&R, Mind*

When to inquire when you're not sure what you believe *under review*

Silent complicity and the influence constraint *under review*

Ignorant complicity *in preparation*

How to update when you're not sure what you believe *in preparation*

The value of awareness (with June Lee-Rogers) *in preparation*

Selected Presentations

Presentations marked with an asterisk (*) were invited. Unmarked presentations were refereed.

Rational inquiry amidst uncertain priors
Central APA (Symposium) February 2027
Formal Approaches to Rationality and Meaning October 2026

Inquiry and deception (with Brian Haas)
Central APA (Colloquium) February 2026

Silent complicity
Eastern APA (Symposium) January 2026

How to build a pyramid with vague propositions
South by Semantics Workshop* October 2025

Ignorant complicity
Philosophy and Legal Theory Collaborative Workshop May 2025

Vague assertion
Society for Exact Philosophy June 2025
Central APA (Symposium) February 2024

Slurring and complicity
Dortmund Conference on Philosophy and Society October 2024

Words, background understandings, and slurs
The Semantics of Hidden Meanings September 2023
Berkeley Stanford Davis Graduate Conference April 2023

How to understand a question
Inquiry work in progress workshop November 2022

Deliberative inquiry
Eastern APA (Poster) January 2023
Uppsala Epistemology Workshop June 2022
Utrecht Graduate Philosophy Conference May 2022
Notre Dame Northwestern Graduate Epistemology Conference April 2022

On precisifiers (with Adam Woodnutt)
NASSLLI Student Session June 2022
California Universities Semantics and Pragmatics Conference May 2022

Hedging and settled inquiry (with Peter van Elswyk)
Nature of Inquiry Conference March 2020

Comments

Jingzhi Chen, "The Epistemic Rationality of Grit" — April 2026
USC-UCLA Graduate Conference

Haley Schilling Anderson, "Knowledge and Options" — April 2025
Pacific APA

Donald Soles, "Don't Believe and Inquire" — January 2025
Eastern APA

Tomasz Zyglewicz, "What Belief Reports are For?" — March 2024
Pacific APA

Scott Dixon, "Metaphysical Foundherentism" — February 2023
Central APA

Jaakko Hirvelä, "The Structure of Moral Encroachment" — June 2022
Uppsala Epistemology Workshop

Madeleine Levac, "Gaslighting and Fragile Knowledge" — April 2022
Pacific APA

Elise Woodard, "The Ignorance Norm and Paradoxical Assertions" — January 2022
Eastern APA

Fellowships & Awards

General Education Graduate Assistant Teaching Award — 2026
$1,000 prize awarded by USC's general education program.

Graduate School Summer Research and Writing Grant — 2026

Center for Excellence in Teaching Mentored Teaching Fellowship — 2026

Flewelling Fellowship — 2025

Richard Peltz Award for Excellence in Philosophy — 2021
Awarded by UW-Milwaukee for best philosophy paper submission.

Graduate Student Excellence Fellowship — 2020

Ruby-Lankford Grant for Faculty-Student Research — 2017

Teaching Experience

As primary instructor

Science and Rationality — Spring 2027

Reasoning and Argument I: Propositional Logic — Fall 2024

Reasoning and Argument II: Probability and Decision Theory — Fall 2024

Philosophy of Money, Markets, and Property (with A.M. Cleani) — Summer 2024

Philosophy of Money, Markets, and Property (with D. Clark and M. Wiseman) — Summer 2023

As recitation instructor

Law, Society, and Politics	Fall 2026
Ethics, Technology, and Value	Spring 2025
Philosophy of Law	Spring 2023
Early Modern Philosophy, Politics, and Economics	Fall 2022
Elementary Logic	Spring 2021
Elementary Logic	Fall 2020
Elementary Logic	Spring 2020
Elementary Logic	Fall 2019

Pedagogical training

Teaching Seminar (Mark Schroeder)

Future Faculty Teaching Institute (USC Center for Excellence in Teaching)

Advanced Teaching Seminar (Mark Schroeder)

Service

Leadership

Conference organizer, USC-UCLA graduate conference	2024–2025
Philosophy area leader, USC graduate student union	2023–2024
President, USC speculative society	2022–2023
Committee member, USC open house committee	2022

Mentoring

Graduate student mentor, Weiqi Qiu	2026–2027
MAP undergraduate mentor, Conor Sattiraju	2025–2026
Graduate student mentor, George Wade	2025–2026
Graduate student mentor, Nurit Matuk Blaustein	2024–2025
Graduate student mentor, Yuanye Hu	2023–2024

Conceptual Foundations of Conflict Project

Senior graduate fellow	2025–
Chair coordinator	2025–2026
Editor, CFCP blog	2024–2025
Graduate fellow	2023–2025

Chairing

Eastern APA chair for Melissa Fusco's "Conditionals of Deliberation and Update" 2025

Refereeing

Conference referee, USC-UCLA graduate conference

Conference referee, Canadian Philosophical Association meeting

Journal referee, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, *Ergo*, *Erkenntnis*, *Inquiry*, *Synthese*

Graduate Coursework

Courses marked with an asterisk (*) were audited.

Value Theory

Blame: A Beginner's Guide (Zoë Johnson King)

Contemporary Philosophical Literature on Value (Ralph Wedgwood)

Mental Ethics (Mark Schroeder)

Value in a Vast and Uncertain World* (Jeffrey Russell)

Third Year Tutorial (Area Exam) Topics

Conditionals (Andrew Bacon)

Formal Epistemology (Jeffrey Russell)

Pragmatics (John Hawthorne)

Vagueness (Andrew Bacon)

Social and Political Philosophy

Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Love (Robin Jeshion)

Critical Theory* (Karen Ng)

Feminist Epistemology and Identity Politics* (Emily Tilton)

Public Reason and the Pursuit of Justice* (Blain Neufeld)

Metaphysics & Mind

Composition and Metaphysical Explanation (Joshua Spencer)

Intentionality (James Van Cleve)

The Passage of Time (Joshua Spencer)

Bounds of Possibility* (John Hawthorne)

The Metaphysical Toolkit* (Joshua Spencer)

Logic

Modal Logic (Gabriel Uzquiano)

Fundamentals of Formal Logic (Joshua Spencer)

Linguistics

Semantics (Deniz Rudin)

Syntax (Travis Major)

Language

Compositional Degree Semantics (Alexis Wellwood and Roumyana Pancheva)

Language and Meaning (Peter van Elswyk)

Language Proseminar (Scott Soames)

Semantics, Vagueness, and Paradox (Andrew Bacon)

Speech Act Theory (Peter van Elswyk)

Conditionals* (Andrew Bacon and John Hawthorne)

Epistemic Modals* (Deniz Rudin)

Semantics and Pragmatics of Epistemic Vocabulary* (Peter van Elswyk)

Slurs* (Robin Jeshion)

Speech Acts* (Robin Jeshion)

History of Philosophy

Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit (William Bristow)

Kant's Critique of Pure Reason: Self and World (Nataliya Palatnik)

Kant's and Kantian Practical Thought (Nataliya Palatnik)

Schopenhauer and Nietzsche (William Bristow)

Epistemology

The Social Epistemology of Inquiry (Peter van Elswyk)

Epistemic Normativity* (Ralph Wedgwood, John Hawthorne, Maria Lasonen-Aarnio)

Formal Epistemology* (Dmitri Gallow)

Topics in Epistemology* (John Hawthorne)

Uses and Abuses of Truth in Society* (Eleanor Gordon-Smith)

Dissertation Summary

How should you change your beliefs when you learn something new? According to Bayesian orthodoxy, your new beliefs ought to be a function of (i) what you just learned and (ii) what your beliefs were prior to the learning event. But what if what you just learned is vague? And what if it's not transparent to you what your prior beliefs were?

Chapter one tackles the issue of vagueness by introducing a data point that I call the shape intuition. Often, when you learn something vague, your posteriors will look like a pyramid when plotted. So, for example, if you learn that the minute hand of a clock has been positioned to roughly minute mark 10, you'll be more confident the minute hand is at mark 10 than mark 9, and more confident that it's at mark 9 than mark 8. Meanwhile, you'll be more confident the minute hand is at mark 10 than mark 11, and more confident that it's at mark 11 than mark 12. In short, your posteriors will be pyramid-shaped, with a peak at mark 10. I argue that to explain this, Bayesians must posit that propositions can be vague. And I show how this suggestion can be squared with the thought that reality is precise (or at least not vague). In particular, on the picture I put forward, Bayesians should regard propositions, not as states of affairs, but as items that represent states of affairs. The chapter concludes with an explanation of the shape intuition that leverages this picture.

The phenomenon of vague learning should thus push Bayesians to accept that propositions can be vague. But even if what's been learned is precise, it might not be transparent to you what your priors were. What then?

Chapters two and three show that this second complicating factor ought to cause Bayesians more concern than is currently appreciated. First, according to Bayesian orthodoxy, it's always better in expectation to gather more information before making a decision, at least if you can gather that information for free. But in chapter two, I show that this orthodox claim is false in settings where agents are uncertain of what they believe. In fact, I go one step further. I prove that the only condition on new information that guarantees the practical rationality of gathering it for free is the condition of it being certain that the new information teaches you either absolutely nothing or absolutely everything.

Next, in chapter three, I show that if it's possible for agents to be unsure of their priors, then this also complicates a standard justification of *conditionalization*, the operation that Bayesians believe agents should perform when they change their beliefs. A popular justification of conditionalization is that agents should conditionalize because it is the operation that, in expectation, makes the agent's beliefs as close to the truth as possible, i.e., as accurate as possible. But I show that, so long as an agent's beliefs are not fully transparent, conditionalization is not in expectation the most accurate update rule. I then show that this problem is extensive, and impacts arguments for non-standard update rules as well.

Finally, in chapter four, I show that the issues addressed in chapters two and three are in fact deeply related. In particular, I show that the kind of value at issue in claims concerning when it is rational to gather information – practical value – is structurally analogous to the kind of value at issue in claims concerning which update rule is optimal – namely, accuracy. Consequently, claims about when it is practically rational to gather more information for free can be recast as consequences of claims about which update rule is accuracy-maximizing. It is thus no surprise that a common factor – that agents needn't be certain of what they believe – causes trouble in both domains.

References

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