

AMA Announcement: Monday 2/5 12PM ET - Anna Alexandrova on the philosophy of science and well-being

BernardJOrtcutt¹ and r/Science AMAs¹

¹Affiliation not available

April 17, 2023

Abstract

The mods of /r/philosophy are pleased to announce an upcoming AMA by Dr Anna Alexandrova, Senior Lecturer in Philosophy of Science at University of Cambridge and a Fellow of King's College. This AMA is the third in our Spring 2018 AMA Series; you can find more details on all of this semester's AMAs with philosophers by going to the AMA Hub Post. You can find all of our previous AMAs over the years by going to the AMA wiki. Doctor Alexandrova will be joining us on Monday February 5th at 12PM ET to discuss issues in the philosophy of science, well-being, social sciences and more. Hear it from her: Anna Alexandrova I am Anna Alexandrova, currently a Senior Lecturer in Philosophy of Science at University of Cambridge and a Fellow of King's College. Born and bred in Russia (a city of Krasnodar in the northern Caucasus) I came of age with the collapse of USSR, a time of hope and excitement but also fear, confusion, and anxiety. The teenage uncertainty of not knowing what it means to be kind, cool, feminine, coincided with genuine social and cultural upheavals – none of the adults around me had answers to these questions either. I spent the 1990s testing different ways to be in different places but the pull of intellectual life was always there even though it was not valued in my environment. I finally tasted that world at the London School of Economics where I did a master's in Philosophy of Social Science. Although I had no idea what this field was initially, I fell for it almost immediately – the idea of asking whether there could be a genuine science of people and their communities fitted right into the very questions that made the 1990s so painful and so fascinating for me. I learned a lot from the course but the best part was meeting (my now husband) Robert Northcott. Among other good things together we concocted a fateful application for funding at the Open Society Institute and this is what enabled me to start PhD program in Philosophy and Science Studies at the University of California San Diego. At UCSD I got the thorough and deep education that I longed for and from some wonderful teachers. Perhaps the most influential among them was Nancy Cartwright who encouraged me to stick to my guns (the guns being philosophy of social science) even as I felt professional pressure to do 'core' philosophy. Nancy taught me to immerse myself into a science so deeply as to be able to see philosophical problems from the inside. I remember spending a lot of time in the departments of economics and political science and overhearing condescending jokes about sociologists. This was a crucial moment that gave me a better understanding of why rational choice models were so important to economists and political scientists. They justified their feelings of superiority. My dissertation argued that although game theorists got the credit for successes in mechanism design, it was in fact the experimental economists that deserve this credit at least equally. Out of a case study on design of spectrum auctions arose a general philosophical account of the nature and role of formal models in empirical research. I believe that for too long philosophers of science have gone out of their way to show that despite their very many weaknesses idealized deductive models are nevertheless very powerful in such and such ways. It's high time to recognise that these models play only a limited heuristic role when it comes to real epistemic goods such as explanation and stop spending our smarts on trying to justify practices that scientists often hold on to largely for reasons of power and so that they could poke fun of sociologists who don't build models. Towards the end of my dissertation time Nancy pointed me toward a fascinating debate about measurement of happiness and well-being. Although after graduating from UCSD I was mostly publishing on economic models, the former quickly took over as my main research interest. My first teaching job was in University of Missouri St Louis, where I had generous and brilliant colleagues all around the city and where I learned most of what I know about the science of well-being. Dan Haybron of SLU, whose work on happiness I admire the most, was a big influence. I brought my philosophy of science temperament to this topic and in my recent book *A Philosophy for the Science of*

Well-being (which I wrote after moving to Cambridge England in 2011) is not about what well-being or happiness really are, but rather about what sort of scientific knowledge it is possible to have about them. This book has both optimistic and pessimistic streaks. It is optimistic against the critics for whom well-being is too personal, too mysterious, and too complex to be an object of science. Such arguments are common throughout history of science and should be treated with suspicion. But equally – and that’s the pessimistic bit – when well-being becomes an object of science it is redefined and this redefinition makes scientific claims about it far less applicable to individual deliberation about how to live than positive psychologists would have us believe. Links of Interest: Series of posts on the science of well-being at Brains Blog “Does anyone know what mental health is?” OUP Blog “The Meaning of It All (with Anna Alexandrova)” Black Goat podcast Quick review note of A Philosophy for the Science of Well-being “Who is the expert on your well-being?” OUP Blog “Towards a Theory of Child Well-being: Podcast Interview with Anna Alexandrova” “Value-Added Science: Anna Alexandrova on value judgments and measurement of well-being” AMA Please feel free to post questions for Doctor Alexandrova here. She will look at this thread before she starts and begin with some questions from here while the initial questions in the new thread come in. Please join me in welcoming Doctor Anna Alexandrova to our community!

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BERNARDJORTCUTT [R/SCIENCE](#)

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I brought my philosophy of science temperament to this topic and in my recent book [A Philosophy for the Science of Well-being](#) (which I wrote after moving to Cambridge England in 2011) is not about what well-being or happiness really are, but rather about what sort of scientific knowledge it is possible to have about them. This book has both optimistic and pessimistic streaks. It is optimistic against the critics for whom well-being is too personal, too mysterious, and too complex to be an object of science. Such arguments are common throughout history of science and should be treated with suspicion. But equally – and that's the pessimistic bit – when well-being becomes an object of science it is redefined and this redefinition makes scientific claims about it far less applicable to individual deliberation about how to live than positive psychologists would have us believe

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