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Organization and contact: Prof. Dr. Markus Werning.
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Website: www.rub.de/phil-lang.
Venue: Thursday, November 9, 2017, 16-18, room GA 04/187.
All interested students and scholars are cordially invited to the following talk of the research colloquium:

Prof. Dr. David Spurrett

(UKZN)

The Descent of Preference Reconsidered (or 'What Preferences are For)

More philosophical attention has been devoted to providing evolutionary scenarios accounting for the development of beliefs, or belief-like states, than for desires or preferences. Here I articulate and defend an evolutionary rationale for the development of psychologically real preference states. (Such states token or represent the expected values of perceptual states, available actions, or action-state pairings. Whether they amount to desires depends on your theory of desire, and I'm silent on this question.) The argument is based on a version of the 'environmental complexity thesis' found in Godfrey-Smith and Sterelny, although my conclusions differ from Sterelny's. More specifically, I argue that tokening expected utilities can, under specified general conditions, be a powerful design solution to the problem of allocating the capacities of an agent in an efficient way. Preferences are for efficient action selection, and can be a 'fuel for success' in the sense urged by Godfrey-Smith for true beliefs. They will tend to be favoured by selection when environments are complex in ways that matter to an organism, and when living agents themselves have complex behavioural repertoires with heterogenous returns and costs. The rationale suggested here is conditional, especially on contingencies in what design options are available to selection and on trade-offs associated with the costs of generating and processing various kinds of representations. While the efficiency rationale for preferences on its own indicates that living organisms should represent expected utilities in a consistent way, the fact is that they don't. In the final stages of the paper I consider some of the ways in which design trade-offs compromise the implementation of preferences in animals that have them