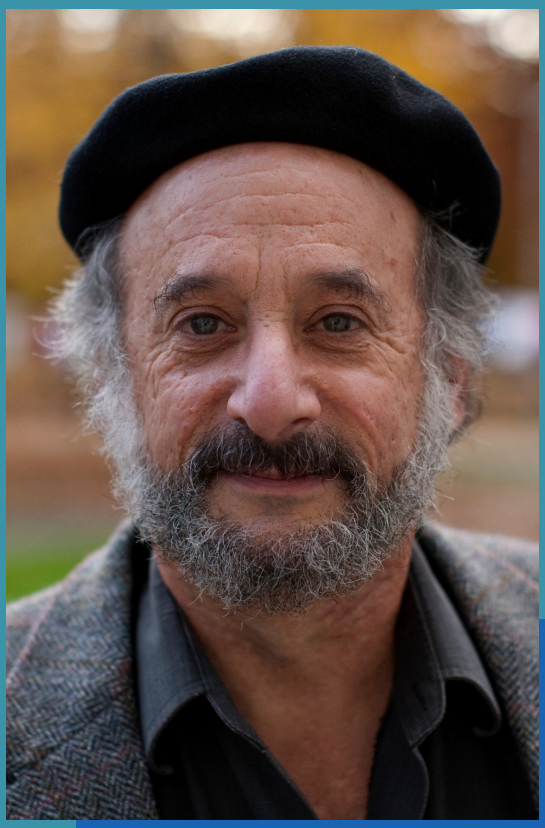
The Department of Philosophy Presents:

Nature and Norms: A Humean Account of the Sources of Normativity

With Philosopher

Jay L. Garfield



Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies
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3:30 PM – 5:00 PM

*Reception will follow in the Philosophy Department Common Area from 5-6

I am going to speak of normativity and its origins. To speak of normativity is to speak of what it is to be human. This is because Homo sapiens sapiens is first and foremost not the intelligent ape our name might suggest, but the rule-constituting, rule-following ape. Our intelligence, our happiness, our self-understanding, our success and our failure as a species are not only grounded in the fact that we are social organisms—though we are that—but also in the fact that our sociality transcends that of other social animals. That specifically human sociality, embodied by the constitution of norms that govern—and not merely describe—our behavior, has led us to language, to reflective thought, and thence to ethics, the law, and to self-understanding. To know ourselves and our origins is hence to know normativity and its origins. I will show that the Humean account of the origins and authority of norms—including moral as well as intellectual, linguistic, and legal norms—is superior to the Kantian account that has superseded it in the contemporary philosophical world. That is, Humean skeptical naturalism—a commitment to a scientific understanding of humanity that dethrones reason and places custom at the center of the explanation of human institutions— provides a better explanation both of the source and of the authority of norms than can a Kantian transcendentalist alternative. I will ask both the genetic question about what brings norms into being and to ask the justificatory question about why those norms are binding on us and I will argue that Hume offers better answers than does Kant to both questions.