

Syllabus

Name of the course: The Nature of Thought and Free Action

Semester: 2018 Fall, Wednesday 15.30–17.10

Instructor: Howard Robinson and Ferenc Huoranszki

Number of credits: 2

Area: Metaphysics

Course level: MA, elective course

Teaching format: Seminar

Course description: The purpose of this course is to investigate questions about those mental capacities which ground, or are the ultimate sources of, our (metaphysical) freedom. Some such capacities are cognitive, as our capacity to recognize reasons; others are volitional, as the capacity to make choices; and some are 'executive' as the capacity to act on such choices. In this course, we shall discuss several different interpretations of such capacities as well as the issue what sort of metaphysics about the mind, if any, is compatible with them. The course will begin by considering a strategy for the defence of a libertarian doctrine of free will and develop from there.

Goals of the course: Students attending this course are expected to familiarize themselves with the most important issues concerning the problem of free action and the nature of mental properties which enable agents to act freely.

Learning outcomes: Students are expected to acquire the ability to reconstruct and analyze philosophical arguments or positions. These involve the understanding of validity and soundness of the arguments, the ability to identify background principles and assumptions as well as the ability to draw out the consequences of certain philosophical commitments. They are also expected to acquire certain oral communication skills such as the ability to formulate arguments concisely and accessibly in words and to give short critical comments. They should also learn how to identify and execute an appropriate writing project. Finally, they should be familiarized with the main contemporary debates about the possibility of free actions. Learning outcomes shall be measured by term papers and oral presentations on the relevant topics.

Assessment: Students' performance shall be evaluated on the following grounds. First, students are required to attend classes regularly and to participate actively in seminar discussions. They should be able to make comments on the texts they have read and respond to the presentations of other student. 30 % of their final grade shall be given on the basis of this in-class activity. Second, students are required to give one or two short presentations of some chosen topic(s) which must include the logical reconstruction of the main arguments of the text and, possibly, interpretative remarks or questions for discussion. They are also expected to prepare a maximum two-page long hand-out that they distribute before their presentation. The choice of topic is optional, but overlap should be avoided. This will make up another 30 % of their final grade. Thirdly, students are required to submit a max. 2000-word long term-paper. The topic of the paper can be either a careful critical reconstruction of a particular and important argument for some position discussed in the course; or a comparison between competing arguments about alternative solutions to a problem; or a defense of some particular position/argument against some relevant criticism. The chosen topic should be approved by the instructor and presented in the last class of the course. References can, but need

not, go beyond the material included into the compulsory readings. The term paper's contribution to the final assessment of students' performance is 40 %.

Deadline for submitting term-papers: 2019, January 2.

Topics and reading:

I. *Reasons explanation of action and determinism:*

1. Introduction: explanation of actions and deterministic processes
2. R. Kane 'Responsibility, Luck, and Chance: Reflections on Free Will and Indeterminism'. *Journal of Philosophy* 96, 1999: 217–240; P. van Inwagen 'Free Will Remains a Mystery, Part II', *Philosophical Perspective* 14 (2000): 10-19.
3. C. Ginet 'Reasons Explanation of Action: An Incompatibilist Account', *Philosophical Perspectives* 3 (1989) 17–46.
4. McCann, H. 'Agency, Control, and Causation', in his *The Works of Agency*, Cornell University Press, 1998: 170-191.

II. *Freedom, deliberation and self-knowledge:*

5. H. G. Frankfurt 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person', in *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays*, CUP, 1988: 11-25; G. G. Watson 'Free Agency', in *Agency and Answerability: Selected Essays*, OUP, 2004: 13-32.
6. Pettit, P – Smith, M. 'Freedom in Belief and Desires', *Journal of Philosophy* 93, 1996: 429-449.
7. Velleman, D. 'Epistemic Freedom', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 70, 1989: 73-97.
8. O'Brian, L. 'On Knowing One's Own Actions' in *Self-Knowing Agents*, OUP, 2007: 156–190.

III. *Free will, neuroscience, and epiphenomenalism:*

9. Haggard, P. 'Does Brain Science Change our View of Free Will?', in R. Swinburn (ed.) *Free Will and Modern Science*, OUP, 2011: 7-24.
10. Mele, A. 'Neuroscience and Free Will', in *Effective Intentions*, OUP, 2009: 67-90.
11. Gallagher, S. 'Where is the Action? Epiphenomenalism and the Problem of Free Will', in S. Pocket et al. (eds.) *Does Consciousness Explain Behavior?*, MIT Press, 2009: 109-124.
12. Wegner, D. – Wheatley, T. 'Apparent Mental Causation', *American Psychologist* 54, 1999: 480-491; Wegner, D. 'The mind's best trick', *Trends in Cognitive Science* 7/2, 2003: 65-69; Bayne, T. 'Phenomenology and the Feeling of Doing', in S. Pocket et al. (eds.) *Does Consciousness Explain Behavior?*, MIT Press, 2009: 169-185.

