

Syllabus

UNDERSTANDING AND EXPLANATION

(with an “Explore your Field” Part)

Names and office hours: Maria Kronfeldner (Tue & Wed 11-1),

David Weberman (Tue 12:30-3:30, Wed 12:30—1:30)

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Credits: 4cp

Time: Wed 1:30-3:10; 3:30-5:10; Room: N13/302

Term: Winter 2018/19

Topic of the course

What is understanding and what is explanation? How are the two related and how do they relate to knowledge and truth? Do explanation and understanding mark the boundary between natural sciences on the one hand and social sciences and humanities on the other hand? Can there be explanation without understanding (as it has been claimed with respect to contemporary modeling practice in sciences) and can there be understanding without explanation (as it has been claimed with respect to cases where causal inferences of the usual sort are not required)? Can there be understanding that does not require knowledge (if indeed understanding lies deeper than knowledge) and can there be explanation that refers to what is possible rather than what is actually the case? How do explanation and understanding differ from prediction and description? When are understanding and explanation epistemically valuable, i.e., what are the epistemic values that guide us in having understanding and giving explanation? By focusing on these and similar questions, the course will connect history of philosophy, epistemology as well as philosophy of science, also bridging the conventional divide between analytic and continental approaches.

Structure of the course

After an introduction, we will discuss classic and contemporary works on the above-mentioned questions in Part I of the course (Wk 1-5). Part II (Wk 6-8) will be dominated by a more explorative course method. Students will get an “Explore your Field” research training, as part of which they learn to find their way in a field, given a specific research question. This includes training on how to organize references, on how to not lose track and stay focused, on how to summarize and select material for a research paper, and on how to adapt your question depending on what material you find. As a result students will have to produce a 1-page literature report and select one reference as the best work they found for making progress regarding their research question. After approval from faculty, the chosen papers will be distributed to everyone and will be the basis for class discussion in Part III of the course (Wk 9-11). Part IV (Wk 12) is devoted to the first drafts of the term papers (4000 words without references, which can reuse in revised form parts of the literature report). The drafts will be discussed as part of triadic peer-feedback groups, which trains students in giving and taking critique.

Participation

In part I, students have to actively participate and maybe produce some shorter contributions in class, depending on the composition of the group. In part II, students have to participate in

the workshops and have to produce a literature report. In part III, students have to do a short presentation. For more details and general rules of participation, see attachment to this syllabus.

Grading

Grading derives from the following:

- Final paper (4000 words, excluding references): 60% of the grade
- Literature report: 20%
- In class participation: 20%

Schedule

Introduction

- Week 1, Jan 9 W: Introduction. Reading: Baumberger et. al. "What is Understanding" in Grimm et. al. 2017.

Part I: Classic and contemporary works on understanding and explanation

- Week 2, Jan 16 W: Understanding in German philosophy. Reading: Heidegger (excerpt) 1962; Martin (excerpt) 2000.
- Week 3, Jan 23 W: Classics and contemporary accounts on explanation. Reading: Hempel (excerpt) 1965; De Regt & Dieks 2005.
- Week 4, Jan 30 W: Understanding in recent analytic philosophy. Reading: Grimm 2006; Hills 2016.
- Week 5, Feb 6 W: Contemporary work on the intersection or comparison between understanding and explanation. Reading: Kvanvig 2009; Strevens 2013.

Part II: Explore your Field research training

- Week 6, Feb 13 W: More discussion on contemporary issues about understanding and explanation. Goal: Learn to structure the field, in particular the sub-debates; packaging of topics as a difficult task.
- Week 7, Feb 20 W: Training in the library.
- Week 8, Feb 27 W: Training in the library.

As a result of Part II, students have to submit their literature report. A model literature report will be provided.

Part III: Special topics

- Week 9, Mar 6 W: Feedback on first drafts of the literature report; discussions in groups; Special topics 1 and 2, to be determined together with students.
- Week 10, Mar 13 W: Special topics 3 and 4, to be determined together with students
- Week 11, Mar 20 W: Special topics 5 and 6, to be determined together with students

Part IV: Triadic Feedback Groups on your first term paper drafts

- Week 12, Mar 27 W: Triadic feedback groups

REFERENCES

History of the debates

- Feest, U. (ed.) 2010. *Historical Perspectives on Erklären and Verstehen*. Springer Netherlands.
- Martin, M. 2000. *Verstehen: The Uses of Understanding in the Social Sciences*. Abingdon: Transaction.
- Ruben, D. H. 1990. *Explaining Explanation*. London: Routledge.
- Salmon, W. 1989. Four Decades of Scientific Explanation. In: Kitcher, P. & Salmon, W. (eds.) (1989), *Scientific Explanation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Core Collections of Papers,

- Grimm, S. et al. (eds.) 2017. *Explaining Understanding: New Perspectives from Epistemology and Philosophy of Science*. New York: Routledge.
- Pitt, J. (ed.) 1988. *Theories of Explanation*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Ruben, D. H. (ed.) 1993. *Explanation*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Saatsi, J., Reutlinger, A. (eds.) 2018. *Explanation Beyond Causation: Philosophical Perspectives on Non-causal Explanations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Classical and contemporary accounts (including those mentioned above)

- De Regt, H.W. & D. Dieks. 2005. A Contextual Approach to Scientific Understanding. *Synthese* 144: 137–70.
- De Regt, H.W. et al (eds). 2009. *Scientific Understanding: Philosophical Perspectives*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Grimm, S. 2006. Is Understanding a Species of Knowledge? *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 57: 515-535.
- Heidegger, M. 1962. *Being and Time*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Hempel, C. 1965. *Aspects of Scientific Explanation, and Other Essays in the Philosophy of Science*. New York: Free Press.
- Hills, A. 2016. Understanding Why. *Nous* 49: 661-668.
- Khalifa, K. 2017. *Understanding, Explanation, and Scientific Knowledge*. New York: Cambridge UP.
- Kvanvig, J. 2003. *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Kvanvig, J. 2009. The Value of Understanding. In Pritchard, D. et al (eds.) *Epistemic Value*, pp. 95–112. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Riggs, W. 2003. Understanding Virtue and the Virtue of Understanding. in DePaul, M. & L. Zagzebski (eds.). *Intellectual Virtue*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Strevens, M. 2008. *Depth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.
- Strevens, M. 2013. No Understanding without Explanation. *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A* 44: 510–15.
- Stueber, K. R. 2006. *Rediscovering Empathy: Agency, Folk Psychology, and the Human Sciences*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Woodward, J. 2003. *Making Things Happen: A Theory of Causal Explanation*. New York: Oxford UP.
- Wright, G.H. von. 1971. *Explanation and Understanding*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Zagzebski, L. 2001. Recovering Understanding. In Steup, M. (ed.), *Knowledge, Truth and Duty*. New York: Oxford University Press.

GENERAL RULES: PARTICIPATION, PRESENTATIONS, WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS

Maria Kronfeldner & David Weberman

Interaction in class should be based on mutual reliability and mutual respect and should result in a fair and open intellectual exchange.

Participation

- Students are required to **attend classes regularly**.
- Students should **participate actively in seminar discussions**.
- Students have to **prepare the required reading** for the course.
- They have to **be able to ask questions** and **make comments on the required reading** and
- **respond to the presentations** of other students.

Presentations should

- include the **reconstruction of the main arguments of the text** and
- **interpretative remarks** or
- **substantial research questions** for discussion.
- If asked, students also have to **exhibit research skills** (e.g. referring to further literature regarding the topic).
- Students are expected to **prepare and distribute a one-page handout** (strict limit!) that they distribute before their presentation. A multimedia presentation (e.g. powerpoint) is possible but does not replace the handout. The tendency in recent years is to simply accumulate things, especially via powerpoint presentations. Yet, the art of thinking also consists in selecting the relevant from the irrelevant. This is why the handout is not allowed to be longer than 1 page!

Written assignments

Format and length of the written assignments varies. See course syllabus or specification on the e-learning site for this. If a longer term paper is assigned as an argumentative piece, this can be:

- either a careful **critique** of a particular and important argument for a position,
- a **comparison** between competing arguments about alternative solutions to a problem,
- or a **defense** of some particular position/argument against some relevant criticism.

In all these cases, your own argumentation, your critical voice, should be a significant part of the paper. Rule of thumb for the ideal: 20/80 (20% retelling of what others said; 80% your own way of organizing and defending things).

We will **evaluate assignments** according to the criteria in the STUDENT RECORD MANUAL

CEU GRADING SYSTEM				EUROPEAN CREDIT TRANSFER SYSTEM GRADING SCALE			
GRADE	NAME	POINT	CREDIT	GRADE	STUDENTS*	DEFINITION	AT CEU
A	Outstanding	4.00	yes	A	10%	Outstanding performance with minor errors	A
A-	Excellent	3.67	yes	B	25%	Above the average standard but with some errors	A-/B+
B+	Good	3.33	yes	C	30%	Generally sound work with a number of notable errors	B+/B
B	Fair	3.00	yes	D	25%	Fair but with significant shortcomings	B/B-
B-	Satisfactory	2.67	yes	E	10%	Performance meets the minimum criteria	C+
C+	Minimum Pass	2.33	yes	FX	-	Some more work required before the credit can be awarded	INC
F	Fail	0.00	no	F	-	Considerable further work is required	F

* Percentage of successful students normally achieving the grade

Feedback: We will not comment on the content of student presentations during class, but in case students would like more feedback on their class performance, they can see us during office hours or after class. In response to written term paper work, students will receive a feedback sheet, which will translate the CEU grading system into philosophy specific criteria. See next page.

To stay up-to-date students need to regularly check the e-learning site of the course!

FEEDBACK-SHEET

Maria Kronfeldner

Seminar:
Piece:
Student ID/Name:

1. General evaluation

Grade (tendency):
(not necessarily the final grade)

2. Comparison to previous pieces (if applicable)

3. What you could improve

4. Further remarks
See also comments in your text.

SPECIFIC CRITERIA (Grade will result from scores on all criteria and also whether one is at the top or low end of a grade with respect to a specific criterion, which is not possible to represent in the grid, though)

A =4.00-3.68, A- =3.67-3.34; B+ =3.33-3.01; B =3.00-2.68; B- =2.67-2.34; C+= 2.33 (Minimum pass)

Research topic, argumentation and research skills	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C
I. Does the paper have a precise, manageable, meaningful, independent and relevant substantial question, given its topic? Does it have a clear structure and upshot?							
II. Are the arguments precise, coherent and exhibiting argumentative depth?							
III. Are important concepts explicated?							
IV. Does the paper critically engage with the literature in an original way (e.g. anticipating counterarguments, developing an original organization of the material and/or argumentation)?							
V. Is there an indication for adequate comprehension of the relevant literature (incl. are the interpretations charitable)?							
VI. Is the paper mentioning relevant references, and is it clear who speaks (authorial voice)? Is there an indication of mastery of research techniques (e.g. have independently found sources been used)?							
Form and Presentation							
VII. Does the paper conform to the standards of academic writing? (quotations, layout, spelling, grammar, punctuation, word count mentioned, academic writing style, labeling of tables and figures, bibliography properly formatted and complete)							