

Philosophy Department

Graduate Courses Spring 2011

G83.1000

Pro-Seminar

Thursday 4-7

Thomas Nagel/Crispin Wright

This course is for first year PhD students in the Philosophy Department only.

G83.1177

Philosophy of Biology

Monday 6-8

Laura Franklin-Hall

This course will be divided into two parts, the first of which will address the nature of ‘levels’ in the natural world, and the second the contingency of biological evolution. Over the course of these two units we will have the opportunity to explore many of the central issues in the philosophy of biology, such as the levels of selection, adaptationism, reductionism, biological explanation, and natural kinds.

Part I:

It is customary to conceive of the natural world as ‘leveled’; there are multiple ‘levels’ at which natural selection is said to act (the genic, the individual, the group); there are many ‘levels of organization’ which determine the physiological functioning of the organism (the molecular, the cellular, the organismal). Yet this talk of levels can be as obscure as it is ubiquitous. In the first unit, we will explore the various respects in which the natural world might be understood as ‘leveled’. Questions to be addressed: What would it take for ‘levels’ to be metaphysically real? Is there any objective respect in which the natural world is leveled, or do all claims about levels depend on perspective? If the latter is the case, is there a large range of perspectives that would lead us to the *same* levels? Are claims about levels dependent on particular theories of scientific explanation? How are debates about ‘real’ levels related to the structurally similar debate about the existence of ‘natural kinds’ or ‘natural joints’?

Part II:

Many have claimed that the fundamental difference between biology and the rest of the natural sciences concerns the role of history. Living things--cells, organisms, species, and ecosystems--were shaped by a long, circuitous and possibly fragile historical process. To explain the features of living systems, most believe that we must attend to that history; had things gone just a little differently, the characteristics of living things would have been very different. In contrast, both ‘structuralist’ and ‘adaptationist’ explanations ignore (deep) history. Structuralists claim that living things can only take a restricted set of forms due to constraints from physics. Adaptationists claim that natural selection is so ‘powerful’ that it can shape living things to their immediate environment in a way which makes history irrelevant. In this unit, we will consider both empirical and conceptual questions about the role of physically contingent historical events in explaining features of the living world. To what degree and in what respects are the

characteristics of living things dependent on history? Does such dependence make the biological sciences dramatically different from chemistry and physics? How does, or should, the contingency of living systems affect inductive and explanatory practices in biology, in contrast to those found in other natural sciences?

G83.2222/G84.2222

Clinical Ethics

Monday 6-8:30

William Ruddick

Snow Dining Room, School of Medicine (1st Ave. & 30th St.)

(There is regular NYU bus service between the Square and the Medical Center)

Physicians and nurses will present for discussion and theoretical analysis the ethical issues that they encounter in their Medical Center work. Reading will be drawn from medical and philosophy literature. Students will write weekly commentaries and two essays.

G83.2227

Ancient Philosophy

Monday/Tuesday 4-6

Ursula Coope

(Course will meet the second half on the Spring Semester: March 21st-May 3rd)

This seminar will be on Aristotle's philosophy of action, looking in particular at his account of the voluntary, his distinction between action (praxis) and production (poiesis), and his concept of decision or preferential choice (prohairesis). There will be a series of visiting speakers. In the Tuesday meetings, we shall discuss a paper by a visiting speaker. The Monday meetings will prepare the ground for Tuesday's discussion (e.g. by looking in detail at relevant passages of text and/or other relevant papers). The main works of Aristotle we shall discuss will be the *Nicomachean* and *Eudemian Ethics*.

G83.2280/ L06.3591 (Law School)

Equality and Egalitarianism

Wednesday 4-5:50

Samuel Scheffler

The focus on this seminar will be on the nature of equality as a moral and political value. We will pay special attention to the relation between equality and justice and to the relation between equality and responsibility. We will also consider the status of equality as an ideal of social and political relations. Readings will include selections from some or all of the following authors, among others: Elizabeth Anderson, G.A. Cohen, Ronald Dworkin, Harry Frankfurt, Thomas Nagel, Derek Parfit, Thomas Scanlon, Seana Shiffrin, and Jeremy Waldron. Although there are no formal prerequisites for the seminar, some prior coursework in philosophy would be helpful.

<https://its.law.nyu.edu/courses/description.cfm?id=8036>

G83.2320

History of Philosophy: Hume's Treatise of Human Nature

Tuesday 1:30-3:30

Don Garrett

David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* has a very strong claim to be the most important work of philosophy ever written in English. It is the source of many of philosophy's best known and most influential arguments, including arguments about belief, induction, causal necessity, knowledge of the external world, free will, the role of reason and feeling in both motivation and morality, the nature of moral obligation, and the conventional basis of such virtues as respect for property and fidelity to promises. It has inspired approaches widely called "Humean" to such disparate topics as causation, the self, the passions, motivation, and moral evaluation. It constitutes a compelling articulation and development of at least three basic philosophical orientations: empiricism, skepticism, and naturalism. It is an early exemplar of the powerful idea that cognitive and conative psychology can shed important and even transformative light on philosophical issues. Stylistically, it is a delight to read.

At the same time, however, it is often supposed that the *Treatise* is more a collection of clever parts than a consistent and coherent whole. (It has been declared, for example, that "Kant is globally clear but locally obscure, while Hume is locally clear but globally obscure.") This seminar will conduct a complete reading of all three Books of the *Treatise* ("Of the Understanding," "Of the Passions," and "Of Morals") with the aim of discerning whatever underlying coherence it may have through close examination of its individual elements and sustained reflection on their relations to one another. In addition to reading the entire *Treatise*, the seminar will examine some of the most important secondary literature of the last few years on Hume's philosophy.

Hume was born on April 26, 1711 under the Julian calendar then in force in Scotland; under the current Gregorian calendar, that date is May 7, 1711. At the penultimate seminar meeting on April 26, 2011, and perhaps again eleven days later, we will celebrate the three hundredth birthday of *le bon David*.

G83.3001-001

Topics in Philosophical Logic: Truth

Thursday 1-3

Hartry Field

One topic, though not the primary one, will be: what sort of notion is truth? Some view it as primarily a logical notion, useful for enabling us to express otherwise inexpressible generalizations, and a notion that when added to theories in standard ways increases their deductive power. (I take that to be the heart of the "deflationist" position.) Others view it as primarily a metaphysical notion, important in debates such as whether disagreements in certain domains outrun all truths. (Examples: disagreements about ethics, or about mathematical axioms, or over vague statements, or over conditional statements with false antecedents ("If Sarah runs she'll win", when she won't run).) Others view it as primarily a semantic notion, important for truth-conditional semantics. I'll defend the first of these viewpoints, but I share many of the concerns of the advocates of the second. But the other topics of the course are important from all three viewpoints.

One of these other topics is the paradoxes of truth and related notions. I have a recent book on this, and there will be overlap with parts of the book, but I want to alter the focus a bit, and to bring up an unsolved problem.

I'll also spend a week or two on the relation between truth and logical validity: there is a puzzle which forces us to give up the straightforward connection that is often posited between these, and the question of what should take its place has implications for the metaphysical issues mentioned below (final paragraph).

I may also include something on paradoxes of validity, and also on doxastic paradoxes, which though not involving truth have some bearing on the relation between truth and validity and hence on the metaphysical issues.

The other main concern will be the status of the kinds of debates about ethics, mathematics, vagueness, conditionals, etc. mentioned above. I'll argue that the "nonfactualist" position in these debates shouldn't be that the disputed claims outrun the truths; but then, what should it be? One alternative is that there is some kind of relativity in the truths. Another alternative is that the claims outrun the *determinate* truths; but then how is the notion of indeterminacy to be explained? There is a way of thinking about indeterminacy that naturally arises in connection with the paradoxes, and the question arises whether it can be put to use in these other domains. I think so, though it takes slightly different forms in the different areas. In the case of mathematics we may require a notion of indeterminacy of ontology, the proper development of which I hope to touch on.

G83.3001-002

Topics in Philosophical Logic: Decision Theory

Wednesday 1:30-3:30

Racheal Briggs

This seminar will serve as an introduction to basic concepts and methods of decision theory, along with their philosophical applications. Topics will include arguments for probabilism, updating rules for desire and belief, the relationship between causal and evidential decision theory, and the theory of two-player multi-player games. The end of the course will address social choice theory and formal methods for resolving disagreement among individuals. Course readings will comprise Michael Resnik's book *Choices*, Richard Jeffrey's book *The Logic of Decision*, and supplementary articles.

G83.3010

Topics in Philosophy of Mind: Consciousness

Tuesday 6-8

Ned Block

The course will concern philosophical issues about the role of attention in perception.

G83.3400

Thesis Seminar

Thursday 4-6

Kit Fine

Bioethics Courses:

G83.1002/G84.1008

Topics in Bioethics: Ethical Issues in Public Health and Environmental Policy

Tuesday 6:45-9:15

Greg Bognar

This course provides an introduction to the ethical issues that underlie public health and environmental policy and examines the connections between these two fields. The course is divided into three sections. The first section is an introduction to theories of distributive justice that have been influential both in public health and in environmental policy. The second section focuses on public health. We discuss public health as a public good, the measurement of the value of health and the burden of disease, priority setting, global health and human rights, and population policy. The third section is on ethical issues in environmental policy. We discuss the role of markets in environmental regulation, the use of cost-benefit analysis and the precautionary principle, our responsibility and obligations with respect to the environment, and ethical issues raised by climate change.

G83.1006/G84.1006

Advanced Introduction to Environmental Ethics

Wednesday 6:45-8:45

Benjamin Sachs

This course will be an extended investigation of the question of man's dominion over nature: To what extent is it morally permissible for us to coerce and remake living things to suit our own purposes?

G84.1008

Topics in Bioethics: Nonconsequentialism

Thursday 6:45-8:45

Matthew Liao

Nonconsequentialism is a type of normative theory according to which the rightness or wrongness of an act is not determined solely by consequences. In particular, it holds that even when the consequences of two acts are the same, one might be wrong and the other right. In this course, we shall examine factors (prerogatives) that permit an agent to act in ways that do not maximize the good, and factors (constraints) that limit what an agent may do in pursuit of the good. We shall discuss topics such as the moral difference between harming and not-aiding; intending and foreseeing harm, i.e., the Doctrine of Double Effect; whether constraints are absolute; and how nonconsequentialists should address issues such as aggregation and the so-called paradox of deontology. We shall also investigate how one might be able to provide a plausible, theoretical foundation for nonconsequentialism.