

## **PHILOSOPHY OF ACTION**

Philosophy 481, Spring 2012

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### **DESCRIPTION:**

We will focus on a topic in action theory variously called “personal autonomy” and “free agency.” The core questions this topic raises include: (1) What is required for a person’s conduct to be genuinely her/his own? (2) What is involved in having control over your life? These are important issues in everyday life and are of special relevance to the concept of informed consent in bioethics and to human rights inasmuch as violations of human rights encroach on autonomy and realized rights protect autonomy.

In the first weeks of the semester, we study Harry Frankfurt’s now classic theory of the authentic self – his account of identifying with desires together with his recent clarifications (and/or revisions) of his earlier views. Then we take up assorted well-known alternatives to Frankfurt’s approach. Following on Frankfurt, we discuss J. David Velleman’s synthesis of experimental psychology and action theory. In the second half of the semester, the readings take into account the unjust social and political contexts in which selves are formed and agency is exercised. Readings include Natalie Stoljar’s and Susan Babbitt’s arguments for a value-saturated account of autonomy, my own proposal for a value-neutral competency-based theory, Andrea Westlund’s defense of value-neutrality, Paul Benson’s proposal for an intermediate position, John Christman’s arguments for a historical, value-neutral account, and Catriona Mackenzie’s account of self-transformation. All of these theories aim to counteract oppressive social contexts. In the final weeks, we focus on relations between embodiment and autonomy. We consider Shaun Gallagher’s work on narration, embodiment, and autonomy, and we finish up with Charles Taylor’s work on embodied rule following along with Jean Grimshaw’s account of how gym workouts can be liberatory for women.

Graduate students can use this seminar to satisfy the ethics/social-political requirement and the Anglo-American requirement. Readings in the second half of the semester will be particularly pertinent to my Poverty, Coercion, and Human Rights Conference (April 13-15, 2012).

**READINGS:** Electronic copies of all readings are available on Blackboard.

### **REQUIREMENTS:**

#### **Paper or Exams:**

Since Incompletes can be a serious problem, I give students a choice about the major course requirement. You may either take a midterm and a final exam (each exam will be 2 and a half hours long and closed book/notes), or you may write a term paper on a topic worked out in consultation with me (approximately 8000 words). The exam option is intended for students who would like to gain familiarity with the field of philosophy of action but who do not expect to use this material in their future scholarship. No reading or research beyond the course assignments is required for the exams. The term paper option is intended for students whose principal scholarship is in moral, social, and/or political philosophy and who anticipate that the action theory literature might figure in their future scholarship. Considerable research beyond the course readings is required for term

papers. Additional information on the term paper option (together with suggestions for writing good presentation and term papers) is posted in the Assignments section of the website.

I'll ask you to choose between these options early in the term. You will not be permitted to change your decision after the midterm. No midterm makeup will be given. If you miss the midterm for any reason, you've opted to write a term paper. A makeup final will be given only in the event of severe and documented illness or injury. This really is the no-incomplete option. If you decide to write a term paper, you must consult me about your project before no later than week 8. The average of your exam grades or your grade on your term paper will constitute 50% of your course grade.

### **Short Papers and Class Presentations:**

You will be required to write two short papers and to present one of them in class (each no more than 5 double-spaced typed pages). These papers should be critical analyses of assigned readings. Details of this assignment are posted under Assignments on the Blackboard website for this course. The average of your grades on your two short papers will constitute 25% of your course grade. During weeks 2-7, I'll require students to revise and resubmit their papers based on comments they receive. Your revised paper is due at the beginning of class one week after I return it to you. We will work out the scheduling of these presentations at the end of the first class session. You should plan to write one paper in the first half of the course – that is, before the midterm – and one in the second half of the course. In order to make ample time for discussion and lecture material, I will schedule in-class presentations throughout the semester and try to have only one presentation per class session. You might want to make use of your papers to help you develop a term paper topic.

### **Class Participation:**

Since this is a seminar, class participation is expected and will constitute 25% of your course grade. It is crucial that you demonstrate your in-depth understanding of and ability to critically comment on the assigned readings through regular contributions to class discussion.

### **ASSIGNMENT SCHEDULE:**

**Week 1 – Jan. 17** – Introduction to Requirements and Topic

#### **Optional Readings:**

Neither of these encyclopedia articles seems altogether satisfactory to me. But each presents an interesting overview of the field of philosophy of action. So if you would like to see how a couple of important contributors to this field view the project, go ahead and read these articles.

John Christman, "Autonomy in Moral and Political Philosophy" In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* – <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/autonomy-moral/> .

Sarah Buss, "Personal Autonomy" In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* – <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/personal-autonomy/> .

**Week 2 – Jan. 24**

Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person" in *The Importance of What We Care About*, Cambridge University Press 1988.

Harry Frankfurt, "Identification and Externality" in *The Importance of What We Care About*, Cambridge University Press 1988.

### **Week 3 – Jan. 31**

Harry Frankfurt, "Identification and Wholeheartedness" in *The Importance of What We Care About*, Cambridge University Press 1988.

Harry Frankfurt, "The Faintest Passion," in *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Harry Frankfurt, pp. 87 (start at #3)-90, 160-162. In *The Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt*. Ed. Sarah Buss and Lee Overton, MIT Press, 2002.

### **Week 4 – Feb. 7**

Harry Frankfurt, "The Importance of What We Care About," In *The Importance of What We Care About*, Cambridge University Press 1988.

Harry Frankfurt, "On the Necessity of Ideals," In *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Harry Frankfurt, "Autonomy, Necessity, and Love," In *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

### **Week 5 – Feb. 14**

Jonathan Lear, "Love's Authority" and Frankfurt's reply, 279-297. In *The Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt*. Ed. Sarah Buss and Lee Overton, MIT Press, 2002.

David Shoemaker, "Caring, Identification, and Agency," *Ethics* 114 (2003): 88-118

### **Week 6 – Feb. 21**

J. David Velleman, *The Possibility of Practical Reason*, Introduction and Chapter 6

J. David Velleman, "Identification and Identity" and Frankfurt's reply in *The Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt*. Ed. Sarah Buss and Lee Overton, MIT Press, 2002.

### **Week 7 – Feb. 28**

J. David Velleman, "From Self Psychology to Moral Philosophy," *Noûs*, Volume 34, Supplement 14, October 2000, pp. 349-377.

DTM, "Who's There? Selfhood, Self-regard, and Social Relations" in *Hypatia* 20 (4), 2005, pp. 200-215.

**(Midterm Exam** – students who elect the exam option will take the midterm this week at a mutually convenient time.

**Term Paper Consultations** – students who elect the term paper option must discuss their tentative plans with me no later than Week 8. Please make an appointment to do so.)

**Week 8 – March 13**

Susan Babbitt, "Feminism and Objective Interests: The Role of Transformation Experiences in Rational Deliberation," In *Feminist Epistemologies*. Ed. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter. Routledge, 1992.

Natalie Stoljar, "Autonomy and the Feminist Intuition," in *Relational Autonomy*. Ed. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar. Oxford University Press, 2000.

**Week 9 – March 20**

DTM, Chapters 1 and 2 of *Gender in the Mirror: Cultural Imagery and Women's Agency*. Oxford University Press, 2002.

**Week 10 – March 27**

John Christman, "The Historical Conception of Autonomy," Chapter 7 in *The Politics of Persons: Individual Autonomy and Socio-historical Selves*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Catriona Mackenzie, "Imagination, Identity, and Self-transformation," in *Practical Identity and Narrative Agency*. Ed. Kim Atkins and Catriona Mackenzie. Routledge, 2008.

**Week 11 – April 3**

Paul Benson, "Feminist Intuitions and the Normative Substance of Autonomy," in *Personal Autonomy*. Ed. James Stacey Taylor. Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Andrea Westlund, "Rethinking Relational Autonomy," *Hypatia* 24:4 (2009) 26-49.

**Week 12 – April 10**

Shaun Gallagher, "Body Schema and Intentionality," in *The Body and the Self*. Ed. José Luis Bermúdez, Anthony J. Marcel, Naomi Eilan. MIT Press, 1995.

DTM, "Corporeal Selfhood, Self-Interpretation, and Narrative Selfhood," ms.

**Week 13 – April 17**

Charles Taylor, "To Follow a Rule," Chapter 9 in *Philosophical Arguments*. Harvard University Press. 1995.

Jean Grimshaw, "Working Out with Merleau-Ponty," Chapter 5 in *Women's Bodies: Discipline and Transgression*. Ed. Jane Arthurs and Jean Grimshaw, Cassell 1999.

**Week 14 – April 24**

Open session with several possible uses: final exam, term paper presentations, or additional readings and discussion.

**(Final Exam** – students who elect the exam option will take the final at a mutually convenient time during exam week.)