

Junior Independent Work Groups (Formerly Called Junior Seminars) Offerings in Recent Years

2022

Effective Altruism

Elizabeth Harman

DESCRIPTION: Effective altruists hold both that we should be doing quite a bit to help others and that there is a very specific way we should be helping others: we should be doing good as efficiently as possible when we do good. How can we make the claims of effective altruists precise? Are their claims plausible? It is often less efficient to help the disabled, the ill, and the oppressed than it is to help the able-bodied, the healthy, and those who are not oppressed – do the claims of effective altruists problematically discriminate? If effective altruism is true, how much should we be doing, and what specifically should we be doing?

READINGS: William MacAskill, “Effective Altruism,” *The Norton Introduction to Ethics*. Peter Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do*, Yale University Press, 2015. Amia Srinivasan, “Effective Altruism and Its Limits,” in *Norton Introduction to Ethics*. Jason Gabriel and Brian McElwee, “Effective Altruism, Global Poverty, and Systemic Change,” in *Effective Altruism*, 2019. Travis Timmerman, “Effective Altruism’s Underspecification Problem,” in *Effective Altruism*, 2019. Andreas Mogensen, “The Callousness Objection,” in *Effective Altruism*, 2019. Larissa McFarquar, selections from *Strangers Drowning*, Penguin Books, 2015

GRADING: 60% final paper. 20% class presentations and participation, 20% short papers

The Weight of the Word

Sarah McGrath

DESCRIPTION: Under what circumstances is it reasonable to rely on the testimony of others? Do you need a special reason to think that someone is reliable in order to trust her, or can you assume that she is reliable unless you have a special reason to doubt her? Does the fact that someone is your friend mean you have a special moral reason to take her word, or are all the reasons to believe people epistemic reasons? If someone who seems just as smart and reasonable as you are tells you that she disagrees with you, should that lower your confidence? Does whether it should lower your confidence depend on whether you are talking about science, religion, ethics, or Netflix? Are there some areas of inquiry in which you can’t defer to others, and ultimately have to make up your mind for yourself? (Is ethics like that? Or religion? Or philosophy itself?)

READINGS: Richard Moran, “Getting told and being believed” C.A.J. Coody, “Pathologies of testimony” Jennifer Lackey, “Knowing from words” Sarah Stroud, “Epistemic Partiality in Friendship” Robert Hopkins, “Google Morals” Richard Feldman, “Reasonable Religious Disagreement” Renee Jorgensen Bolinger, “Varieties of Moral Encroachment”

GRADING: 75% final paper. 25% in-class presentation.

continued below

DESCRIPTION: Humans have a distinctive capacity to share thoughts through language. This capacity is partly due to a specifically linguistic competence—the competence with a grammar of a language that underlies the literal meaning of our expressions. Yet what we communicate often goes beyond what we literally say. We can implicate, insinuate, hint, make indirect requests or offer indirect answers to questions; we can use language figuratively, e.g. through irony, sarcasm, humor, or metaphor. What are the mechanisms required for successful communication of non-literal content? Does every non-literal use of language rely on the same interpretive mechanisms, or are there significant differences between different kinds of non-literal speech? What determines which non-literal content a speaker is committed to? How do the interlocutors identify such commitments, and when can a speaker plausibly deny them? What role does the assumption that the agents are rational and cooperative play in interpretation? The seminar will examine these and related questions through readings in philosophy of language, linguistics and cognitive science.

READINGS: Camp, Elisabeth. “Insinuation, Common Ground and Conversational Record” and “Sarcasm, Pretense, and The Semantics/Pragmatics Distinction”. Grice H.P. “Logic and Conversation” and “Meaning”. Lepore Ernie and Matthew Stone, *Imagination and Convention* (excerpts). Hobbs, Jerry. *Language and Cognition* (excerpts). Pinker, Stephen, Marin A. Nowak, and James J. Lee, “The logic of indirect speech”

GRADING: 75% final paper. 10% class participation and discussion questions. (Note: you will be required to submit a discussion question related to each assigned reading prior to our class.) 15% short paper

2021

Agency and Responsibility

Victoria McGeer

DESCRIPTION: We will focus on philosophy of moral agency and responsibility, blame and punishment. We will examine how human interactions are permeated by evaluative understandings of agency and responsibility, and whether such evaluative understandings are well grounded. We will consider what implications this has for interpersonal relations, as well as for social institutions such as criminal justice. We will approach these issues from a multidisciplinary perspective, examining how philosophical, scientific and institutional considerations can be brought into useful contact with one another.

READINGS: A selection of mainly philosophical papers, though we will look at some empirical work as well. Readings drawn from the work of: P.F. Strawson, R. Chisholm, A.J. Ayer, H. Frankfurt, S. Wolf, G. Watson, A. Smith, J. Greene & J. Cohen S.Morse, C. Fine & J. Kennett, M. Talbert, J.J.C. Smart, J. Feinberg (these will be made available on Blackboard). We will focus on 1-2 reading per week for class discussion, though I will have some extra reading posted for more in depth study. In addition, you will need to do some independent research on your own topic, especially for your final paper.

GRADING: 70% final paper. 30% seminar participation and shorter writing assignments (2 short papers plus discussion questions on weekly readings).

Truth and the Limits of Knowledge

Sarah McGrath

DESCRIPTION: In some domains of inquiry it seems reasonable to think that there are gaps between what is true and what we are in a position to know: even our best attempts at uncovering the truth might fail to deliver it. Presumably there are truths about the distant past that we will never know because our evidence is too meager; number theorists assume that there is an answer to the question of whether Goldbach's Conjecture is true, even though they possess neither counterexample nor proof. But in other domains it seems plausible to think that truth is constrained by our sensibilities or cognitive capacities. For example: it seems hard to believe that the truth about whether rotten food is disgusting, whether minor keys are sad, or whether eating meat is wrong could be deeply hidden from us. Drawing from both historical and contemporary readings, we will explore questions about the extent to which truth might outstrip our capacities for knowledge, about where and why our capacities for knowledge might constrain truth, and about what the possibility of error reveals about the nature of a given domain.

READINGS: Sample Readings: Bertrand Russell, "Appearance and Reality," George Berkeley, "Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous," Sharon Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Conceptions of Value," Timothy Williamson, selections from *Knowledge and its Limits*, Roy Sorensen, selections from *Blindspots*, Miriam Schoenfeld, "Moral Vagueness is Ontic Vagueness," Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer, "Secrecy in Consequentialism: a Defense of Esoteric Morality." Students will take turns giving short presentations and leading class discussion, and present JP drafts for critical feedback from the class at the end of the semester.

GRADING: 70% final paper. 30% seminar participation and presentations.

Æsthetics and Film

Michael Smith

DESCRIPTION: The seminar will examine some general topics in aesthetics (the difference between aesthetics and morality, the nature of aesthetic experience, the differences between aesthetic objects and art objects, what it is about art objects that allows us to come up with interpretations of them), plus some more specific issues in the philosophy of film (point of view, narrative, emotions, morality).

READINGS: A selection of papers by Greg Currie, Cynthia Freeland, Alexander Nehamas, Carl Plantinga, Natalie Stoljar, Murray Smith, and George Wilson. Students will be supplied with PDFs.

GRADING: 70% final paper, 30% seminar participation and shorter writing assignments.

**Skepticism, Reason, and Faith:
Montaigne, Descartes, and Pascal**

Daniel Garber

DESCRIPTION: The seminar will explore three interconnected philosophical issues and three very different styles of doing philosophy, using three classic texts in the history of philosophy. In Montaigne we will explore the case for skepticism as presented in his essay, "Apology for Raymond Sebond." In Descartes we will follow his *Meditations*, where he begins in skepticism but moves toward an ultimate validation of reason. And in Pascal's *Pensées* we will examine a project that uses rational argument to induce the reader to set reason aside and follow a life of faith.

READINGS: Montaigne, "Apology for Raymond Sebond," Descartes, *Meditations*, and Pascal, *Pensées*, all available for purchase at Labyrinth.

GRADING: 70% final paper, 30% seminar participation and shorter writing assignments.

Emotion

Victoria McGeer

Description: We are emotional animals. We regularly feel happy, angry, frustrated, guilty, fearful, sad, anxious, indignant, etc. But what are emotions and why do we have them? This seminar will consider questions under three main headings: (1) **the nature of emotions**: are they a combination of other mental states, such as beliefs and desires? Are they perceptions? Or something else? How do they differ from moods and other affective states?; (2) **the rationality of emotions**: are emotions epistemically valuable? Can they be rational, justified, good? Should we trust them? How do we know whether to trust them?; (3) **morality and the emotions**: what role should emotions play in our moral judgments? When is it morally right or wrong to feel an emotion? What makes an emotion authentic? In this seminar, we will look at the main theories of the emotions, both in philosophy and the sciences of the mind.

Readings: A selection of papers (possible authors include: James, Sartre, Solomon, Goldie, Tappolet, Deigh, Teroni, de Sousa, D'Arms and Jacobson, Greenspan, Jones, Roberts, Prinz, Fridja, Helm, Nussbaum). Students will be supplied with PDFs.

Grading: 70% final paper, 30% seminar participation and shorter writing assignments.

Æsthetics and Film

Michael Smith

DESCRIPTION: The seminar will examine some general topics in aesthetics (the difference between aesthetics and morality, the nature of aesthetic experience, the differences between aesthetic objects and art objects, what it is about art objects that allows us to come up with interpretations of them), plus some more specific issues in the philosophy of film (point of view, narrative, emotions, morality).

READINGS: A selection of papers by Greg Currie, Cynthia Freeland, Alexander Nehamas, Carl Plantinga, Natalie Stoljar, Murray Smith, and George Wilson. Students will be supplied with PDFs.

GRADING: 70% final paper, 30% seminar participation and shorter writing assignments.

2019

Mind & Its Place in Nature

Mark Johnston

DESCRIPTION: Can anything in the physical world be numerically identical with you, or are there simply too many equally good candidates, themselves distinct and thus non-identical, to be you, so that the rational thing to conclude is that you cannot be any one of them? We will look at the standard theories of personal identity, and investigate why they all fail, at least if the world is as we ordinarily conceive it to be.

READINGS will be drawn from: Martin and Barresi eds. *Personal Identity* (Blackwell, 2003)

GRADING: 75% final paper, 25% seminar participation

Rationality & Irrationality

Thomas Kelly

DESCRIPTION: We will discuss a number of questions about the rationality of belief and action, with special attention to contexts in which the answers to these questions seem to have significant practical implications. Questions include the following: Is it rational to vote in large elections, even when you know that the chances that your vote will affect the outcome are vanishingly small? Can the fact that you have invested heavily (in time, effort, or money) in some project in the past give you a reason to continue pursuing that project now, or would this be (as most economists insist) irrational, an instance of “the sunk cost fallacy”? Are there circumstances in which being rational makes you worse off? If so, could it be rational to make yourself irrational? What, if anything, is wrong with “slippery slope” reasoning, in politics, law and philosophy?

READINGS: Alvin Goldman, “Why Citizens Should Vote”; Thomas Kelly, “Sunk Costs, Rationality, and Acting for the Sake of the Past”; Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (selections); Thomas Schelling *The Strategy of Conflict* (selections); Eugene Volokh, “The Mechanisms of the Slippery Slope.”

GRADING: 75% final paper, 25% seminar participation.

Moral Epistemology

Sarah McGrath

DESCRIPTION: Many if not all of us have at least some strong moral convictions. Some of these convictions concern controversial topics that are the subject of public debate (such as the moral permissibility of abortion or of eating meat); others are relatively uncontroversial (consider, for example, the view that it is morally wrong to torture innocent people). This seminar is guided by the questions of how (if at all) we can know that our moral convictions are true, how moral knowledge differs from non-moral knowledge, and what the answers to these questions tell us about the nature of morality. We will be focusing on the questions: How does moral inquiry differ from scientific inquiry? What is the epistemic status of moral intuitions? Are moral philosophers moral experts? Does moral disagreement undermine the possibility of moral knowledge?

READINGS: Readings include mostly contemporary articles at the intersection of epistemology and ethics.

GRADING: 75% final paper, 25% seminar participation.

2018

Skepticism, Reason, and Faith:

Daniel Garber

Montaigne, Descartes, and Pascal

DESCRIPTION: The seminar will explore a three interconnected philosophical issues and three very different styles of doing philosophy, using three classic texts in the history of philosophy. In Montaigne we will explore the case for skepticism as presented in his essay, “Apology for Raymond Sebond.” In Descartes we will follow his *Meditations*, where he begins in skepticism but moves toward an ultimate validation of reason. And in Pascal’s *Pensées* we will examine a project that uses rational argument to induce the reader to set reason aside and follow a life of faith.

READINGS: Montaigne, “Apology for Raymond Sebond,” Descartes, *Meditations*, and Pascal, *Pensées*, all available for purchase at Labyrinth.

GRADING: 70% final paper, 30% seminar participation and shorter writing assignments.

Equality and Justice

Sebastian Köhler

DESCRIPTION: Egalitarians believe that distributive justice requires the equal distribution of certain goods. This view has some initial attractions, such as, for example, its appeal to our sense of fairness and to our sense that distributive justice should pay particular attention to the worst-off members of society. However, egalitarianism also raises certain concerns and questions. In this course we want to focus on two questions that are of central importance to egalitarianism. First, what is the good that should be distributed equally? Should social and economic goods be distributed equally? Or should everyone receive an equal share of welfare? Or is the good that should be distributed equally something else entirely? The second question is whether an equal distribution of the relevant good best captures the concerns that lie at the heart of egalitarianism. For example, is it really plausible that a concern for the worst-off is best addressed by distributing the relevant goods equally, rather than in accordance with some other pattern, such as one which gives priority to the worst-off?

READINGS: Sen, “Equality of What?,” Dworkin, “Equality of Resources,” Arneson, “Equality and Equal Opportunity to Welfare,” Nussbaum, “Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism,” Nagel, “The Justification of Equality,” Parfit, “Equality and Priority,” Crisp, “Equality, Priority, and Compassion.”

GRADING: 75% final paper, 25% class presentations, short papers, class participation.

Free Will, Responsibility, & Punishment

Victoria McGeer

Description: Human beings are free and responsible agents. This is the core intuition that underlies many of our personal interactions, the structure of many of our relationships, and the design of many of our social institutions – for instance, the criminal justice system. But can this intuition be defended? Philosophers have long debated this question, but recent work in the biosciences has made this challenge very much more pressing. Can our settled human way of life persist in the face of what we are learning about the workings of mind and brain? Do such discoveries put particular pressure on our understanding of wrongdoing, blame and punishment? How should our institutions of crime and punishment respond to these concerns?

Readings: selections from: Nadelhoffer, ed. *The Future of Punishment* (OUP 2013)

Grading: 70% final paper (with 20% accorded to 1st draft), 30% seminar participation & short assignments

2017

Friendship: History and Theory

Alexander Nehamas

Description: Friendship, which seemed to be central to the ethics of ancient philosophy, stopped being a subject of interest for modern philosophy. In recent years, partly because of renewed interest in Aristotle's ethics (two of the ten books of the *Nicomachean Ethics* are devoted to *philia*, which is assumed to be identical with friendship, it has entered philosophical discussion once again. We will ask why the history of friendship has undergone these changes, which have to do with the supremacy of moral—impartial and universal—values in modern philosophical thought. For that reason, philosophers who want to pay attention to friendship today have tried to show that it is amenable to moral treatment and that it constitutes a moral value. Since I have deep doubts about this last point, I would like to discuss the connection between friendship and morality, ask whether the values of morality exhaust the range of things that make life worthwhile, and suggest that they don't. The partial and particulars values of friendship, along with the values of character and style, and the values of art, which have not been central to philosophical ethics, need to be given renewed attention. We will try to do just that in this seminar.

Readings: Mostly from Michael Pakaluk, *Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship* (Hackett, 1991)

Grading: 75% final paper (first draft will also be taken into account), 25% seminar participation.

Philosophy of Mind

Frank Jackson

The focus will be on three questions. What — precisely — is the causal connection between the mental and the physical, and what does it tell us about the truth or falsity of physicalism? What's special about the phenomenal side of psychology, and does the "phenomenal concepts strategy" help physicalists reply to the knowledge argument? What does it take to see an object?

Readings for each question will be made available in advance.

Grading: 75% final paper (on a topic related to our three questions), 25% class participation (which will include a presentation related to your final paper)

Topics in Normative Ethics

Sarah McGrath

We ordinarily assume that some actions are wrong or morally forbidden (e.g., stealing money from your roommate) while others are morally permitted or even required. What factors determine the moral status of an action? Is the moral status of an action solely a matter of its consequences? If not, what else might be relevant? (For example, do the *intentions* behind the action make a difference?) Is there a morally significant difference between failing to help someone and harming him? We will explore these and related questions.

Readings: The primary text will be Shelly Kagan's *Normative Ethics*.

Grading: 75% final paper, 25% seminar participation.
