

Phil 1111.104

The Explanation of Human Action

Cornell University

Fall 2017 | MW 2:55-4:10 | Tatkon Center 3331

Instructor | Freya Mobus

Email | fmm59@cornell.edu

Office Hours | Goldwin Smith Hall 235 – W: 4:30 – 5:30; by appointment; walk-in; I will also offer a couple of meetings at Temple of Zeus during lunch time.

Course Description

Today, you will perform hundreds of actions: brushing your teeth, walking to class, eating with colleagues. You will be surrounded by people performing their own actions—good and bad ones. Why do we act as we do? Why do we sometimes act badly? What goes wrong when I know I should write my assignment, but watch TV instead? In order to answer those questions, we need to think more about what kind of mental states contribute to actions. What exactly are beliefs, desires, will, and emotions, and what role do they play in the generation of actions? We will look at different answers to those questions given by early modern and contemporary philosophers.

Learning Objectives

The goal of this class is for you to develop the competency to tackle complex philosophical texts and the confidence to engage in thoughtful discussions (oral and written) about those texts. To achieve this goal, you will need to acquire the following skills: You will learn to (i) extrapolate philosophical arguments from a given text, (ii) present arguments clearly and in your own words, (iii) analyze arguments carefully and critically, (iv) weigh and evaluate objections, (v) respond to objections thoughtfully. During the course of the semester, we will continuously improve your writing on the macro and micro level. On the macro level, you will learn how to structure a philosophy paper. On the micro level, you will learn how to write clear, concise, and cohesive sentences, and coherent paragraphs and papers.

Required Readings:

All readings are on Blackboard.

Readings that have a star (*) are non-mandatory, additional readings.

Evaluation of Student Performance and Grading

- 2 papers: 75 %. Drafts will factor into that percentage.
1st paper (4-5 pages), worth 35%
2nd paper (5-6 pages), worth 40%

Paper Formatting | 1.5 spaced, Times New Roman 12-point font, with 1-inch margins, Word Document. This way, the attention of your reader is on the content of your paper, rather than the formatting. A paper needs to fulfill these formatting requirements to count as submitted.

Paper Submission and Responsibility | All papers (drafts and finals) must be submitted on Blackboard. Electronic difficulties may very well happen. It is entirely in your responsibility

to make sure that your papers are submitted on time. I strongly advise you to (i) save multiple drafts of your work in multiple places as you write, and to (ii) download and open the file you submitted on BB to ensure that it actually went through and is readable.

Late Papers | Since we will be on a tight writing schedule, you will need to submit your papers on time. To ensure your progress in this class, and to leave me and your peers adequate time to give comments on your work, deadlines are strict for all assignments. Papers that are late will receive a letter grade penalty per day (i.e., if the paper is due 1pm Sunday and you turn it in 2pm Sunday, an original grade of “A” will become a “B”). If you are late turning in a draft, this grade deduction will be applied to the final paper. Final papers more than four days late receive an “F”.

- **Class Participation: 25%**
(includes participation in class discussions, attendance, professional attitude, homework assignments, in-class quizzes)

Participation | You ‘participate’ when you contribute to the progress of our inquiry, not when you take up air time. Note that there are many ways to contribute to the progress of inquiry. Giving ‘correct’ answers is only one way; other extremely valuable ways include asking questions, giving ‘incorrect’ answers, and providing criticism and objections.

Attendance | Your active participation in class discussions is required both for the course to succeed and for you to succeed in the course. If you are absent, you cannot participate. You will be allowed two absences without penalty, but every subsequent absence will result in a grade deduction. Missing six or more classes will automatically result in an “F”. If you miss class, it is in your responsibility to (i) turn in whatever work is due that day, and (ii) contact colleagues to find out what you missed. There are no make-up assignments or quizzes.

Professional Attitude | I think of our classes as team meetings in which we aim at making progress together. Contributing to this progress is part of your job, and as in any other work environment, you are expected to be a responsible team member. As such, you are expected to (i) read the assigned texts before class, (ii) let me know if you cannot come to class or submit an assignment, (iii) turn off your phone in class and use your laptop for work purposes only, (iv) reach out to me if you need more academic support, and to support your colleagues. Further, as in any other work environment, you will be asked to give short presentations and to exchange your work with others; you might also explicitly be encouraged to contribute (i.e. be called-on). Unprofessional attitude (such as being late, distracting, unsupportive) will be reflected in your grade.

Homework and quizzes | Homework assignments will be announced in class and posted on Blackboard. The purpose of those assignments is (i) to prepare you better for our class, and (ii) to give you an additional opportunity to practice writing. In-class quizzes will not be announced. They are a good way for me to check whether material is understood or needs to be reviewed. Those quizzes also help you to self-evaluate your performance in class.

Code of Academic Integrity

Each student in this course is required to adhere to Cornell’s Academic Integrity Code (<http://cuinfo.cornell.edu/aic.cfm>). Plagiarism, i.e., representing the work of others as one's own, is a

serious violation of the code and may result in a failing grade for the course, or for some portion of it. Code violations will be reported to the dean of the student's college, and the student's transcript will show that s/he has been "declared guilty of violation of the Code of Academic Integrity". Such an entry may have a significant impact on the student's future career. It may, for example, decrease the chances of getting into medical or law school. To avoid plagiarism, all work submitted must be the student's own, and all sources must be properly cited. The student is responsible for providing the source of any idea that is not his/her own, whether s/he got the idea from a written text or from talking to a peer. The ownership of the content must be unambiguously clear to the reader.

Disabilities, Special Conditions etc.:

I am committed to help every student succeed in this class. If you have a need for reasonable academic adjustments due to a physiological or psychological condition, please let me know right away.

| Week | Date | Topics & Assigned Readings | Papers & Deadlines |
|---|------------------------|--|------------------------|
| 1 | Aug. 23 rd | Introduction to Explaining Human Actions What can philosophers contribute to the explanation of human actions? | Plagiarism quiz |
| Are all our actions motivated by selfish desires? | | | |
| 2 | Aug. 28 th | Hobbes: Excerpts from <i>Leviathan & Elements of Law Natural and Politic.</i> | |
| | Aug. 30 th | Batson: <i>How Social an Animal: The Human Capacity for Caring.</i> ♪ TED Talk on Altruism: http://www.npr.org/programs/ted-radio-hour/529942441/wired-for-altruism | |
| 3 | Sept. 4 th | No class (Labor Day) | |
| Are all our actions motivated by desires? | | | |
| | Sept. 6 th | Hume: Excerpts from <i>Treatise of Human Nature and Enquiry concerning Principles of Morals.</i> | |
| Are some of our actions motivated by reason alone? | | | |
| 4 | Sept. 11 th | Kant: Excerpts from <i>Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals.</i> | |
| | Sept. 13 th | Kant Continued | |
| 5 | Sept. 18 th | Guyer: <i>Passion for Reason: Hume, Kant, and the Motivation for Morality.</i> | |

| Psychopaths – A problem (only) for Rationalists? | | | |
|---|------------------------|---|------------------------------------|
| | Sept. 20th | Nichols: <i>How Psychopaths Threaten Moral Rationalism: Is it irrational to be amoral?</i> | |
| 6 | Sept. 25 th | Kennett: <i>Do Psychopaths really threaten Moral Rationalism?</i> | |
| | Sept. 27 th | Writing Philosophy Papers: Portmore: <i>Tips on writing a philosophy paper.</i> Pryor: <i>Guidelines on writing a philosophy paper.</i> Lenman: <i>How to write a crap philosophy essay.</i> ♪ This American Life “The Psychopath Test”: https://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/436/the-psychopath-test | 1st paper sketch |
| Yuck! That’s disgusting! | | | |
| 7 | Oct. 2 nd | Haidt: <i>The Emotional Dog and its Rational Tail.</i> | 1st paper draft |
| | Oct. 4 th | Nussbaum: <i>Disgust and our Animal Bodies in Hiding from Humanity.</i> *Salles: <i>Sobre el Asco en la Moralidad.</i> | |
| 8 | Oct. 9 th | No class (Fall Break) | |
| | Oct. 11 th | Nussbaum Continued ♪ TED Talk: David Pizarro <i>The Strange Politics of Disgust.</i> https://www.ted.com/talks/david_pizarro_the_strange_politics_of_disgust#t-349681 | 1st paper final |
| What are Emotions and Intuitions? | | | |
| 9 | Oct. 16 th | Prinz: <i>Piecing Passions apart in Gut reactions: A Perceptual Theory of Emotion.</i> | |
| | Oct. 18 th | ♪ Invisibilia on Emotions: http://www.npr.org/programs/invisibilia/530718193/emotions | |
| Is Weakness of Will possible? | | | |
| 10 | Oct. 23 rd | Stroud’s Summary of Davidson “ <i>How is weakness of will possible?</i> ” | |
| | Oct. 25 th | Stroud Continued | |
| 11 | Oct. 30 th | Watson: <i>Skepticism about Weakness of Will.</i> | |
| | Nov. 1 st | Watson continued | |

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| | | *Tappolet, Pironet: <i>Faiblesse de la raison ou faiblesse de volonté: peut-on choisir?</i> | |
| 12 | Nov. 6 th | Holton: <i>Intention and weakness of will.</i> | |
| | Nov. 8 th | Holton Continued | 2nd paper sketch |
| Are some of our actions motivated by virtues? | | | |
| 13 | Nov. 13 th | Tiberius: <i>What Kind of State is a Virtue?</i> ♪ TED Talk Philip Zimbardo (leader of the 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment) on The Psychology of Evil. https://www.ted.com/talks/philip_zimbardo_on_the_psychology_of_evil | |
| | Nov. 15 th | Kamtekar: <i>Situationism and Virtue Ethics on the Content of our Character.</i> | 2nd paper draft |
| 14 | Nov. 20 th | Kamtekar Continued | |
| | Nov 22 nd | No class (Thanksgiving) | |
| Review: What have we learned? | | | |
| 15 | Nov. 27 th | 2 nd Paper Revision Boot Camp Session. | |
| | Nov. 29 th | Summary: Why do we act morally and why do we sometimes fail to do what is right? | 2nd paper final |