

PHILOSOPHY 21410/31410
PHILOSOPHY OF ACTION
University of Chicago, autumn 2003

Course Instructor: Jason Bridges
Office hours: Wednesday, 9-11am, Wieboldt 125

Course Assistant: Chris Ferro
Office hours TBA

DESCRIPTION

In this course we address a group of related philosophical questions about human agency. What is the relationship between an event and an agent such that the event counts as an action of the agent? What is involved in our ordinary psychological explanations of people's actions? Are these explanations distinctively non-causal, holistic, normative or teleological? Do they embody an irreducibly personal or subjective perspective on human behavior? How, if at all, do the concepts of reason and rationality structure such explanations? Are such explanations threatened by the possibility of purely physical explanations of the motions of our bodies? What is a desire, and how does it motivate or justify? How are weakness of the will and other forms of irrationality possible? What is the relationship between the concepts of agency and freedom?

Prerequisite: at least one previous course in philosophy or permission from the course instructor.

READINGS

The course readings are collected in two reading packets. The first is currently available for purchase at the Humanities copy center (Classics 11). The second will be available at the copy center later in the term.

As purchased, the packets consist of loose paper held together by a rubber band. You may find it convenient to have your copies bound, which can be done for a small charge at the copy center on the third floor of the University of Chicago Bookstore or at the Kinko's on 57th.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

First paper:	3 pages	due Oct. 30 th in class	worth 25% of course grade
Second paper:	5 pages	due Nov. 20 th in class	worth 35%
Final paper:	7 pages	due Dec. 10 th in Professor Bridges's teaching box (CL 17)	worth 40%

Late papers will be docked a grade per day (e.g., B+ to B) unless you have received approval ahead of time. No papers will be accepted after Dec. 10th.

Paper topics will be distributed in class 10-14 days before the due dates.

There is no final exam.

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS

Part I: Actions and their explanation

<u>Lecture</u>	<u>Topic</u>	<u>Reading</u>
1	Course overview	
2	What is an action?	Donald Davidson, "Agency" John Austin, "Three Ways of Spilling Ink"
3	Are our ordinary psychological explanations of actions causal?	Davidson, "Actions, Reasons and Causes"
4	Events and agents, part one: anomalous monism	Davidson, "Mental Events"
5	Events and agents, part two: causes and causal explanations	Jennifer Hornsby, "Agency and Causal Explanation" (first half)
6	Events and agents, part three: actions and things done, subjective and objective	Thomas Nagel, "Autonomy," from <i>The View From Nowhere</i> Hornsby (second half)

Part II: The Humean account of action explanation

7	The Humean account, version one: Hume	Hume, excerpt from <i>A Treatise of Human Nature</i> Barry Stroud, excerpt from "Action, Reason and Passion," ch. 7 of <i>Hume</i>
8	The Humean account, version two: belief-desire psychology	Michael Smith, "The Humean Theory of Motivation," in <i>The Moral Problem</i>
9	Supplementing the account: intentions	Michael Bratman, "Two Faces of Intention"
10	Supplementing the account: finding a place for the agent	J. David Velleman, "What Happens When Someone Acts?"
11	(slack)	

Part III: Against the Humean account

12	Seeing what one must do	John McDowell, "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?"
13	Desires and reasons	T. M. Scanlon, excerpt from "Reasons," in his <i>What We Owe to Each Other</i>
14	Extreme anti-psychologism	Jonathan Dancy, excerpts from <i>Practical Reality</i>
15	What is it to act out of a sense of what one has reason to do?	Lewis Carroll, "What the Tortoise Said to Achilles" Stroud, "Inference, Belief and Understanding"
16	(slack)	

Part IV: Lingering questions

17	Is Freud needed to explain irrational action?	Davidson, "Paradoxes of irrationality"
18	And last but not least, are we free? (The subjective/objective contrast revisited)	Nagel, "Moral Luck"