

PHIL5630: PHILOSOPHY OF ACTION—GRITTY AGENCY

INSTRUCTOR: Jennifer M. Morton (jmmorton@sas.upenn.edu)
DATE/TIME: Tuesdays 3.30-6:30pm
LOCATION: Cohen 337
STUDENT HOURS: By appointment (I'll be in my office Cohen 426 most Tuesdays from 10am-12pm)

COURSE OBJECTIVES (What this course will aim to enable you to do):

- To engage with recent work in the philosophy of action focused on practical reasoning, practical knowledge, planning agency, grit, and hope.
- To write a high-quality, empirically engaged, original research paper.
- To develop important professional skills—critically engaging with a philosophy paper, giving constructive feedback to peers, presenting a paper idea, and so forth; in addition to those fundamental skills, we will also focus on how to engage with interdisciplinary work that straddles normative and descriptive questions.

All coursework for this class has been designed to help you meet these course objectives.

DESCRIPTION: Many philosophical investigations of agency prefer to focus on the structure of simple, short-term exercises of agency like flipping a light-switch, taking a cookie from a plate, or resisting the urge to take the cookie. But much of our agency is ultimately directed at much larger, more complex, long-term ends. We often set out to pursue such ends in the knowledge that they are difficult to achieve, and without knowing at the outset whether it will be within our power to succeed. Along the way, we gather evidence about our abilities, circumstances, and the kinds of obstacles we are likely to encounter. In the seminar we will explore this connection between evidence, belief, and long-term agency. This is the topic of a book I'm cowriting with Sarah Paul, tentatively titled "Striving: Aiming High, Trying Hard, and Failing Well." In this seminar, we will engage with the literature on moral/pragmatic encroachment, epistemic partiality, practical knowledge, the planning theory of action, hope, weakness of will, etc. Authors will include Anscombe, Bratman, Harman, Holton, Korsgaard, Marusic, Paul, Velleman, among others.

ASSESSMENTS: (TWO OPTIONS)

Option 1: Research Paper

- Attendance & Participation 20%
- Abstract & Bibliography 10%
- Individual Presentation 10%
- 1 Referee Report on Peer's Work 10%
- Longer Research Paper (15-20 pages) 50%

Option 2: Engaging with the Literature

- Attendance & Participation 20%
- 2 Group Discussion Kick-Offs 10% each = 20%
- 1 Referee Report on Peer's Work 10%
- 2 Shorter Discussion Papers (8-10 pages) 25% each = 50%

PARTICIPATION (ALL): How well (or badly) this course goes will depend on every person in this class taking ownership for the course. This means that I expect all of you to contribute to the discussion in some way. Talking in seminar is only one way to participate in the discussion, others include e-mailing me with questions you'd like to see discussed before class, listening to others respectfully, helping a classmate make a point, continuing the discussion with your fellow students outside of class, and coming to my office when the class discussion sparks an idea that you want to discuss. In class discussion, I expect you to do a lot of *listening* as well as *participating* in a way that is *responsive* to your peers. Be mindful of the class dynamics and aim to include your peers in the discussion, rather than talking just to me.

REFeree REPORT (ALL): Another important philosophical skill that you will practice is giving constructive, incisive feedback. You will do so on the basis of a peer's paper draft. I will review your report and pass it on (anonymized) to your peer. Your report should be written like a professional referee report in which you summarize the main argument, suggest areas of improvement, and place the paper in a broader assessment of the literature (to the best of your abilities). You should 'turn around' the referee report within 3-5 days. And it should be concise (300-500 words).

ABSTRACT & BIBLIOGRAPHY (OPTION 1): If you are pursuing the longer research paper option, you must turn in a 300-500 word paper abstract & bibliography by **November 8th**. You should think of the abstract on the model of the conference submission. It should lay out your argument and give the reader a clear sense of the literature with which you will be in conversation. The best abstracts are concise, direct, and leave the reader wanting to read more of your paper (and, thus, accept your paper for presentation). The final paper might (probably, will) deviate from the abstract. That is totally fine. The goal of this assignment is to keep you on track and to practice writing a fantastic abstract.

PRESENTATION (OPTION 1): Excellent philosophical research is the result of a long process of writing and rewriting on the basis of feedback. One of the most important ways through which you will receive such feedback is the conference presentation. Preparing for a presentation is a great opportunity for you to think carefully about the main ideas of your paper, finesse the best way to communicate them to an audience, and anticipate objections or critical feedback. Do not be surprised if, as you work on your presentation, you realize that you need to change your argument or radically rewrite your paper. This is a critical part of the process. You should have a **presentation by November 15th** and a **paper draft** ready by **December 6th**. During the presentation, you will receive feedback from your peers about the ideas in the paper. You will have to be quick on your feet to respond to the concerns brought up by your peers. Often, the response you offer in the moment will be unsatisfactory. The question will nag at you. That is to be expected. As you rewrite, the paper will get better. You will iterate this process many times. One day, you feel fairly confident that the paper can withstand the critical pressure of its audience and you will send it off (or turn it in).

LONGER RESEARCH PAPER (Option 1): Your final term paper should be an original, well-argued essay that draws on material from this class. The topic is up to you, but, ideally, you will try to incorporate some empirical work. By this point in the class you will have received a lot of feedback from me and from your peers. You will also have rewritten the paper several times in response to that feedback. If you stick to these steps, the final state of the paper writing process will involve finessing and tightening your argument. I strongly discourage incompletes or late submissions (for your own good—they add up!). If you must take an incomplete for this class, you **must** turn in a well-developed draft by the final due date, **12/20**.

SEMINAR DISCUSSION KICK-OFF (OPTION 2): If you are pursuing the discussion paper option, I will ask you to kick-off our seminar discussion once during the term with one or two other students. You can arrange with me beforehand when you will do this. I expect you to come ready with questions to guide the discussion and to use **creative pedagogical techniques** that will engage your peers. If you have a handout for the class, I recommend you limit it to a single page per reading discussed.

SHORTER DISCUSSION PAPER (OPTION 2): You should write two essays that engage with an argument in the literature. Each essay should ideally explain to the reader the terms of the debate, draw on the relevant literature, and make a modest contribution. I will be looking for clear, well-argued papers that reflect engagement with what we have read in class.

READINGS (ALL): I'm not going to sugar coat it; this class will have a lot of reading. Read carefully, charitably, and with an eye to bringing questions for clarification and discussion to seminar. The BEST questions are often those that arise out of confusion. If a work is not available online through Penn, I will try my best to make it accessible to you. I highly recommend you take a look at Sarah Paul's [Philosophy of Action: A Contemporary Introduction](#) (Routledge 2021).

COVID (ALL): We will follow the university's guidance as to mode of teaching, mask-wearing, etc. Masks are optional and required when you have had a known exposure or feel any symptoms (cough, sneezing, etc.). If you are feeling unwell, let me know and I will arrange for you to zoom into class. Even as we get back to 'normal', I expect that some of you will be touched by this pandemic during this semester whether it is health-wise, financially, or psychologically. Do not hesitate to reach out and tell me what you need. Your physical and mental health is a priority. I will do my best to connect you to resources and to be flexible about class expectations. We are all in this together. There might be times when we have to meet online in order to keep us all safe. I will only resort to this when it is absolutely demanded by circumstances. If we keep lines of communication open and we all remain flexible, we will have a great semester.

HONOR CODE (ALL): All students are expected to follow the guidelines of Penn's Code of Academic Integrity. In particular, students are expected to refrain from "lying, cheating, or stealing" in an academic context (but it's also probably good to avoid doing these things in general). If you are unsure about which actions violate that honor code, please consult <https://catalog.upenn.edu/pennbook/code-of-academic-integrity>. Plagiarism of any kind will not be tolerated. Always cite any resource that you use (including friends with whom you have worked if cooperation is permitted on an assignment). Do not reuse papers written for other classes. The internet has made it easier than ever before to catch this sort of thing, so (moral reasons aside) it is not a particularly wise idea.

BASIC NEEDS SUPPORT (ALL): It is important to me that you have the resources you need to be able to focus on learning in this course – this includes both the necessary academic materials as well as taking care of your day-to-day needs. Students experiencing difficulty affording the course materials should reach out to the Penn First Plus office (pennfirstplus@upenn.edu). Students who are struggling to afford sufficient food to eat every day and/or lack a safe and suitable space to live should contact Student Intervention Services (vpul-sisteam@pobox.upenn.edu). Students may also wish to contact their Financial Aid Counselor or Academic Advisor about these concerns. You are welcome to notify me if any of these challenges are affecting your success in this course, as long as you are comfortable doing so – I can help you access the resources Penn has available for you.

ACADEMIC SUPPORT (ALL): The Weingarten Center offers a variety of resources to support all Penn students in reaching their academic goals. All services are free and confidential. To contact the Weingarten Center, call 215-573-9235. The office is located in Stouffer Commons at 3702 Spruce Street, Suite 300.

DISABILITY SERVICES (ALL): The University of Pennsylvania provides reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities who have self-identified and received approval from Disability Services. Students can contact Disability Services and make appointments to discuss and/or request accommodations by calling 215-573-9235.

MODIFICATIONS TO SYLLABUS (ALL): I reserve the right to make changes to the Syllabus, including project due dates and test dates, when unforeseen circumstances occur. These changes will be announced as early as possible so that you can adjust your schedules

Date	Topic	Readings & Assignment	
8/30	Practical Identities	• Harry Frankfurt, “The Faintest Passion” • Joseph Raz, “When We Are Ourselves: The Active and the Passive”	
9/6	Practical Knowledge	• Anscombe, Elizabeth, Selections from <u>Intention</u> • Sarah Paul, “How we know what we’re doing”	
9/13	Practical Reasoning	• Gilbert Harman “Practical Reasoning” • David Velleman, “The Possibility of Practical Reasoning” • Christine Korsgaard, “Practical Reason and the Unity of the Will”	
9/20	Planning Agency	• Michael Bratman, Chs 1-2 from <u>Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason</u> • Bratman, “Reflection, Planning, and Temporally Extended Agency”	
9/27	Weakness of Will	• Donald Davidson, “How is Weakness of the Will Possible?” • Richard Holton, Chapter 4 from <u>Willing, Wanting, and Waiting</u> • Nomy Arpaly, “On Acting Rationally Against One’s Better Judgment”	
10/4	Empirical Approaches	• Angela Duckworth, “Self-Control and Grit: Related but Separable Determinants of Success” • Peter Gollwitzer & Michelle Oettingen. “Goal pursuit.”	[Op. 2] Paper 1 Draft for Peer Review
10/11	Evidence and Agency	• Berislav Marusic, Chapters 1 and 6 from Evidence and Agency	
10/18	Permissivism	• Matthew Kopec and Michael Tittelbaum “The Uniqueness Thesis” • Bernard Williams, “Deciding to Believe”	[Op. 2] Paper 1 Due
10/25	Encroachment	• Sarah Stroud, “Epistemic Partiality in Friendship” • Rima Basu, “The Wrong of Racist Beliefs” • Sarah Moss, “Moral Encroachment”	
11/1	Hope	• Katie Stockdale, selection <u>Hope Under Oppression</u> • Ryan Preston-Roedder, “Three Varieties of Faith” • Philip Pettit, “Hope and Its Place in Mind”	
11/8	[Class Canceled—Rescheduled Date TBA] Paper Presentations		
11/15	Grit	• Jennifer Morton and Sarah Paul, “Grit” • Berislav Marusic, “No Grit Without Freedom”	[Op. 1] Abstract & Bibliography
11/29	Failing Class Guest: Sarah Paul	• Sarah Paul, “Plan B” • Selections from Morton & Paul <u>Striving</u> (Manuscript)	[Op. 2] Paper 2 Draft for Peer Review
12/6	Student Choice	• TBA	[Op. 1] Draft for Peer Review
12/12	[Op. 2] Paper 2 Due		
12/22	[Op. 1] Paper 1 Due		