Philosophy 196A: Philosophy of Action
University of Vermont
Spring 2011
MWF 3:00 - 3:50, Lafayette Hall L411

"Let us not forget this: when `I raise my arm', my arm goes up. And the problem arises: what is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?"
(L. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, I, § 621.)

Professor: Randall Harp
Office: 70 S Williams room 209
Office Hours: MW 1:00 - 2:00, and by appointment
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Prerequisites: One of 1, 3, 4, 95, 96, or permission
Required Texts All course readings available on Blackboard

Course Description: We are agents; we are capable of acting in the world. What is the difference between an action and a mere occurrence? And what, exactly, do we contribute to the production of our actions? In this course we will examine what it means to be an agent. In the process, we will address the following topics: Do our psychological attitudes (beliefs, desires, intentions) provide us with reasons to act? Do they cause our actions? Is weakness of the will possible, or even intelligible? What is the psychological structure of the rational human being? Does sharing agency with others fundamentally alter our model of the (individual) agent?

Course Goals: Philosophy 195A is an intermediate-level course in philosophy. As such, I assume that you have some familiarity with philosophical methodology. In this class, you will gain experience in applying that methodology to a particular set of philosophical problems. The goals for this course are accordingly three-fold. First, you will become acquainted with the philosophical difficulties attendant upon our attempt to clearly define the nature, causes, and boundaries of our agency. Second, you will improve your skills at recognizing and analyzing complex arguments. Third, you will improve your analytical skills by producing your own carefully reasoned arguments.

Readings: There is a fair amount of reading for this course, and the readings are difficult. Some articles are technical, and all are very dense. I encourage you to read or skim articles before the class in which they are discussed, and then read or skim them again following the class. If you pay careful attention to the readings, and think hard about them, you will be rewarded.

Evaluation: There are four components to your grade for this course. The first component is one page papers, and is worth 30% of your final grade. You must hand in at least three one page papers, and you may hand in up to six. I will count the
three highest scores for your one page papers, and each will be worth 10% of your final grade. One page papers are to be written on one of the assigned texts for each section of the course, and they are due at 11:59pm on the day they are due (see schedule of assigned readings); **late one page papers will not be accepted.**

The second component to your grade is your medium length paper; this paper must be **1400–1800 words** (about 5–7 pages) and is due **Wednesday, May 4 at 11:59pm.** Your medium length paper is worth 30% of your final grade. Medium length papers which are late will be penalized one third of a letter grade for every 24-hour period that the paper is late.

The third component is the **final exam;** it will be held on **Monday, May 9 from 10:30am–1:15pm** and is worth 30% of your final grade.

Lastly, the fourth component of your grade is class participation, and is worth 10% of your final grade; see below for information on class participation.

**Class Participation:** You should show up to class. I dislike taking attendance. (We are all adults here; I have no interest in forcing you to do anything.) Accordingly, **we will jointly set an attendance policy** on the first day of class that we can all live with.

Regardless of our attendance policy, if you do not show up to class, your grade will likely suffer in one of two ways. First, you will not acquire the information and skills necessary to get good grades on your papers or the final exam. Second, you will do poorly on the class participation portion of your grade.

When I assign you a class participation grade, I ask myself the following questions: ``do I know who this student is?'', ``do I know what this student thinks about the readings?'', and ``do I know how this student thinks about the readings?''' If I know the answer to these questions, you will get a good participation grade. If I do not, you will not.

Note well: I am very bad with names. If I do not say your name frequently, I will not remember who you are. Also note: nowhere do I say that your contributions to discussion need to be brilliant. If you think that the readings are all about unicorns, and say this in class, I will remember who you are, and I will know what and how you think about the readings, and so you will get an A for participation. (You probably won't get an A on your papers or exams; the readings really aren't about unicorns.)

If you are shy, or reluctant to talk during class, you can email me your thoughts, or talk to me during office hours; those are also acceptable ways to get me to know who you are, and what and how you think about the readings.

**Statement on Academic Honesty:** I expect that we are all here to learn from one another. To this end, I ask that all students abide by the Code of Student Rights and Responsibilities as well as the Code of Academic Integrity. If you have any questions about whether your work violates the Code of Academic Integrity, please ask.

**Statement on Disability Accommodations:** In keeping with University policy, any student with a documented disability interested in utilizing accommodations should contact ACCESS, the office of Disability Services on campus. ACCESS works with students to create reasonable and appropriate accommodations; contact ACCESS at A170 Living/Learning Center, 802-656-7753. Their webpage is www.uvm.edu/access.
Schedule of Assigned Readings

1. Acting for Reasons
   January 19: Introduction. (no readings)
   January 21: George Wilson, ``Action.'' Introduction and Section 1.
   January 24: Donald Davidson, ``Agency."
   January 26: Donald Davidson, ``Actions, Reasons, and Causes."

   **First One Page Paper Due:** January 31

2. Causal or Non-Causal Explanations of Actions?
   January 31: Jaegwon Kim, ``Mechanism, Purpose, and Explanatory Exclusion.''
   February 7: Jennifer Hornsby, ``Agency and Actions.''
   February 14: Carl Ginet, ``Reasons Explanations of Action.''

   **Second One Page Paper Due:** February 18

3. Intending
   February 21: Michael Bratman, ``Two Faces of Intention.''
   February 28: J. David Velleman, ``What Good is a Will?''

   **Third One Page Paper Due:** March 4

   (Spring Break: March 7–March 14)

4. Agents and Actions
   March 14: Harry Frankfurt, ``Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person.''
   March 21: J. David Velleman, ``What Happens When Someone Acts?''
   March 23: Harry Frankfurt, ``The Faintest Passion.''

   **Fourth One Page Paper Due:** March 28

5. Weakness of Will
   March 28: Gary Watson, ``Skepticism about Weakness of Will.''
   April 4: Donald Davidson, ``How is Weakness of the Will Possible?''
April 11: Al Mele, "Is Akratic Action Unfree?"

**Fifth One Page Paper Due:** April 15

6. **Collective Action**
   April 18: Margaret Gilbert, "Walking Together: A Paradigmatic Social Phenomenon."
   
   April 25: Michael Bratman, "Shared Intention."

   **Sixth One Page Paper Due:** April 29

**Medium Paper Due:** May 4

**Final Exam:** May 9, 10:30am, Lafayette L411