

Syllabus

Name of the course: Action and agency: causal and teleological interpretations

Instructor: Gergely Csibra; Ferenc Huoranszki

Number of credits: 2

Semester: 2017, Winter, Thursday, 11–12⁴⁰.

Course level: PhD, elective

Course format: Seminar

Course description: The purpose of this course is to introduce students into some contemporary debates over the nature and understanding of actions and agency. Although intentional actions are commonly explained with reference to agents' goals, many contemporary philosophical and psychological accounts of action presuppose that the teleology implicit in such explanations cannot be fundamental. Since agency is a causal concept and human agents have the capacity to represent their goals, many theories attempt to explain the intentionality of actions in terms of causation by representational states (like beliefs, desires, intentions). In the course we shall discuss arguments both from philosophy and from current cognitive research regarding the necessity and/or possibility of such causal interpretations of agency and action.

Goals of the course: Students attending this course are expected to familiarize themselves with the most important issues concerning some philosophical problems concerning the nature and interpretation of human actions, its relation to teleological reasoning and causal knowledge as well as the contribution of current research in cognitive science to understanding the concepts of agency and causation.

Learning outcomes: Students are expected to acquire the ability to reconstruct and analyze arguments or critically evaluate philosophical positions and drawing theoretical consequences from empirical research in the areas of agency, action, and causation. These involve the understanding of validity and soundness of the arguments, the ability to identify background principles and assumptions as well as the ability to draw out the consequences of certain philosophical commitments as well as some empirical findings. They are also expected to acquire certain oral communication skills such as the ability to formulate arguments concisely and accessibly in words and to give short critical comments. They should also learn how to identify and execute an appropriate writing project. Finally, they should be familiarized with the main contemporary debates about causation, time, and free will. Learning outcomes shall be measured by term papers and oral presentations on the relevant topics.

Assessment: Students' performance shall be evaluated on the following grounds. First, students are required to attend classes regularly and to participate actively in seminar discussions. 30 % of their final grade shall be given on the basis of this in-class activity. Second, students are required to give one or two short presentations of some chosen topic(s). The choice of topic is optional, but overlap should be avoided. This will make up another 30 % of their final grade. Thirdly, students are required to submit a max. 4 000 word long term-paper. The chosen topic should be approved by the instructor and presented in the last class of the course. The term paper's contribution to the final assessment of students' performance is 40 %.

Deadline for submitting term-papers: April 12, 2017.

Grading criteria: Students should be able to make comments on the texts they have read, and respond to the presentations of other student. Their presentation must include the logical reconstruction of the main arguments of the relevant article/chapter and, possibly, critical remarks or questions for discussion. Students are also expected to prepare and distribute a maximum two page long hand-out that they distribute before their presentation. The topic of the paper can be either a careful critical reconstruction of a particular and important argument for some position discussed in the course; or a comparison between competing arguments about alternative solutions to a problem; or a defense of some particular position/argument against some relevant criticism. References can, but need not, go beyond the material included into the compulsory readings.

Topics and readings:

Week 1	<i>The problem of action</i> (h)	
Week 2	<i>Two types of causality embedded in actions</i> (g)	
Week 3	<i>Rationalization and action explanation</i> (h)	Davidson, D. (1980) 'Actions, Reasons and Causes,' in <i>Essays on Actions and Events</i> . OUP, 3–19.
Week 4	<i>Teleological interpretation of actions by utility calculations</i> (g)	Jara-Ettinger, J., Gweon, H., Tenenbaum, J. B., & Schulz, L. E. (2016). The naïve utility calculus: core principles underlying social cognition. <i>Trends in Cognitive Sciences</i> .
Week 5	<i>Intentional actions and mental state attribution</i> (h)	Thompson, M. (2012) 'Naïve action theory' in his <i>Life and Action</i> , Harvard UP, 85–146.
Week 6	<i>Action mirroring and action understanding</i> (g)	Rizzolatti G, Fogassi L, Gallese V. 2001. Neurophysiological mechanisms underlying the understanding and imitation of action. <i>Nat. Rev. Neurosci.</i> 2, 661-70. Gallese, V., Goldman, A. (1998). Mirror neurons and the simulation theory of mind-reading. <i>Trends in Cognitive Sciences.</i> 2, 493–501.
Week 7	<i>Event causation and agent causation</i> (h)	Lowe, E. J. (2009) 'Event Causation and Agency Causation', 'Personal Agency', in his <i>Personal Agency</i> , OUP, 119–157.
Week 8	<i>Causation, intervention, and agency</i> (h)	Menzies, P. - H. Price, (1993). Causation as a Secondary Quality. <i>The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science</i> 44, 187–203. Woodward, J. F. (2009) Agency and Interventionist Theories' in H. Beebe, C. Hitchcock, P. Menzies (eds.) <i>The Oxford Handbook of Causation</i> . OUP, 234–263.
Week 9	<i>Inferring causes and inferring agents</i> (g)	Bonawitz, E., Ferranti, D., Saxe, R., Gopnik, A., Meltzoff, A., Woodward, J., & Schulz, L. (2010). Just do it? Investigating the gap between prediction and action in toddlers' causal inference. <i>Cognition</i> , 115, 104–117.
Week 10	<i>The perception of causality and agency</i> (g)	Mayrhofer, R., & Waldmann, M. R. (2014). Indicators of causal agency in physical interactions: The role of the prior context. <i>Cognition</i> , 132, 485–490.
Week 11	<i>Causation, reasons and teleology</i> (h)	Wilson, G. (1989) 'Teleology and Reasons for Actions', in <i>The Intentionality of Human Action</i> , Stanford UP, 168-204.
Week 12	<i>Teleological vs. causal explanations</i> (g)	Lombrozo, T., & Carey, S. (2006). Functional explanation and the function of explanation. <i>Cognition</i> , 99, 167–204