

Self, Time and the Good

Phi 513: Recent and Contemporary Philosophy, Spring 2015

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Wednesdays 1-4pm, 201 Marx Hall, Princeton University, beginning February 4th

Brief Course Description

If we are reductive naturalists then only a certain range of views about the self and its relation to time are consistent options. The course will present an extended argument to the effect that when we think through what these options are, and their covert ethical consequences, then we will see ethics is either unworkable or absurd in its requirements, unless we take a certain surprising view of the good and our relation to it. (At the end of the course we will consider whether an analogue of the apparently novel problem raised for ethics was already present in the theistic doctrine of creation, and whether the solution to that old problem offered by “divine motivation” theorists could be adapted in some form by naturalists in order to address the new problem.)

In the course, we will not assume knowledge of, but rather work together to get a good understanding of, the following philosophical writing:

1. the literature on identity through time (endurance, perdurance, the stage theory, higher-order individuals, etc.) including material from my memory of Saul Kripke’s lectures on time and identity,
2. the literature on personal identity and self-identity, including the very interesting recent empirical psychological literature
3. some neglected literature on the good, along with Peter Singer’s recent defense of Sidgwick-style hedonism
4. a little literature on why the argument from evil is confused, and just how divine motivation theorists explain the argument away
5. a couple of pieces on what decision theorists call “infinitarian paralysis”, and the difficulties with proposed solutions to it
6. a few readings on Cantor’s theory of the transfinite and on alternatives to it, such as the theory of numerosities, the hyperreals, etc.

Philosophical topics covered will include:

1. the difficulties with conceptual analysis in philosophy, and its particular uselessness in thinking about our own natures
2. the reasons why the idea of grounding is not that helpful in theorizing about our own natures
3. why essentialism seems so crucial in thinking about our natures, and at the same time is so problematic
4. why the most obvious naturalistic account of our natures is not acceptable, and where to go from there

5. why one is not identical with one's thinking part, and whether this implies that there can be thoughts without a thinker, contrary to the recent Cartesian arguments presented by Chris Peacocke
6. whether there is any good reason to recognize selves, distinct from persons or animals
7. the coherence of co-subjectivity, and of the "omni-subjectivity" of the sort postulated by Vedanta (and recently by Linda Zagzebski)
8. just what is wrong with the idea of one's own "mind" or interior realm, within which one finds oneself in the most basic way
9. why one's most urgent first-personal thoughts about one's own death are based on an illusion
10. why the "narrative" or self-creative accounts of our own nature, offered by Marya Schechtman, Dan Dennett and others, fail
11. why numerical identity, and not some other sameness relation, is important to such questions
12. why the distinction usually made between particulars and universals is too simplistic for any serious ontology
13. a new way of thinking about fission, at odds with Robert Nozick's closest continuer theory
14. why Derek Parfit's various attempts to argue from reductionism to the conclusions (i) identity does not matter and (ii) we should think of ethics in a more consequentialist way, fail
15. the problems with David Lewis's project in "Survival and Identity"
16. the difficulties with stage theory of the sort proposed by Ted Sider and Katherine Hawley
17. how four dimensionalism, combined with a very plausible premise about moral status implies that we are presently in a deeply immoral condition
18. why this is so even on a version of four-dimensionalism which has an irreducible or "primitive" relation of personal gen-identity holding among stages
19. why the same implication emerges from stage theory
20. why something similar follows on any three-dimensional continuity theory, be it a bodily continuity theory, a psychological continuity theory, or a mixture of the two in the fashion of Nozick's theory
21. why similar implications go through on an endurantist view of our identity over time, at least on certain plausible views about the range of available essences.
22. why the attempt to answer the difficulties raised by moving to consequentialism either produce a novel version of infinitarian paralysis or absurd ethical consequences
23. why the *relevant* problem of infinitarian paralysis is not addressed by extant proposals, e.g. by appeal to the hyperreals or to the theory of numerosities
24. how a purely hedonic conception of the good might help, and whether this is anyway plausible
25. how a certain suggestion adapted from divine motivation theory might help
26. whether the view that our embodiment over time is in a certain way response-dependent might help
27. whether reductive naturalism should be abandoned.