WEAKNESS OF WILL

PHIL 674: Weakness of Will
Winter 2011
Tuesday, 1:00-3:50
HH 357
Instructor: Mathieu Doucet
Office: HH 328
Email: mdoucet@uwaterloo.ca
Office hours: Wed. 2-4

Description:
Most of us succumb, at least sometimes, to temptation: we procrastinate, we cheat on our diets, and we have that extra drink we promised ourselves we wouldn’t have. When we do, we sometimes say that we are weak-willed. Explaining such weakness has been a perennial philosophical puzzle: how is it that we can act in ways that run counter to our very own sense of the what would be best for us to do? This seminar explores a variety the philosophical debates that center on weakness of will. Questions will include: does weakness of will even exist? If it’s possible, how should we explain it? How does it condition our understanding of intentional action, and how is it different from conditions such as compulsion and addiction? Is it necessarily irrational? What is its moral significance?

Required readings:
Readings will be made available online through the course UW-ACE site.

Evaluation:
Commentaries: 25% (Best 5 of 6 count for 5% each)
Seminar presentation and paper: 25%
Term paper: 50%

Course requirements:
Commentaries:
Through the term, you must submit 6 commentaries, of which the best 5 will count toward your mark. A commentary should not simply summarize the reading(s), though some summarization is fine. Instead, it should engage with the reading(s) critically in some way, by, for example: raising an interpretive question, raising an objection, identifying out an implication or presupposition of the argument, drawing a connection or contrast between two readings, or extending the argument of the reading to a further case.

Commentaries are intended to help you engage critically and analytically with the readings, to get you used to writing about the ideas raised in the readings, to prompt you to think about term paper topics, and to facilitate discussion during our meetings. You should therefore bring a copy of your commentary to class.
Commentaries should be a maximum of 300 words. The ability to concisely explain a concept, mount an objection, or set out a distinction is crucial to good philosophical writing.

Commentaries are due by Monday at 1:00 pm for Tuesday’s meeting. Late commentaries will not be accepted (you have 11 weeks in which to submit 6). At least 3 must be submitted by Feb. 15th. They should be submitted by email in one of the following formats: .doc, .docx, .odt, .rtf, .pdf. Put ‘PHIL 674 commentary’ in the subject line of your email.

Seminar presentation and paper:
After the first meeting, I will put a seminar sign-up sheet on my office door. Each student is responsible for signing up for one presentation—there are two slots available for some weeks.

The paper and presentation should both explain the argument made in the reading and critically engage with it by offering an argument. This can mean, for example: offering an objection, exploring an issue raised in the reading, or connecting the reading to larger debates raised in the course (or even all three of these).

You are responsible for 20-30 minutes of the meeting. Part of that time should include a summary of the argument offered in the reading and of the argument advanced in your paper, but you should not simply read your paper, and part of the time should be dedicated to raising questions and leading the discussion. Those students not presenting will have read your paper (which will be circulated in advance) and should arrive ready to discuss it and respond to it.

Papers should be 1500-1700 words, double-spaced, and formatted using a standard academic style. Email your paper to me by 9:00 am Monday of the week you are to present (i.e. the day before class) and I will email it to the members of the class. Papers must be submitted by email in one of the following formats: .doc, .docx, .odt, .rtf, .pdf. Put ‘PHIL 674 presentation paper’ in the subject line of the email.

You will receive a single mark that will assess both the paper and the presentation.

Term paper:
Approximately 4,000 words, due Friday April 8th by 5:00 pm. Papers must be submitted by email in one of the following formats: .doc, .docx, .odt, .rtf, .pdf. Put ‘PHIL 674 term paper’ in the subject line of the email.
Topics must be approved by Friday April 1st—either email me your proposed topic or arrange a meeting to discuss it.

Discussion question:
Each week, you should identify at least one question about the reading(s) for discussion by the class. Write the question down and bring it to class. These serve two functions—formulating questions requires you to engage with the readings in an analytic or critical manner, and the questions themselves help to guide seminar discussion. We will begin class each week by listing the questions. Coming to class with a question prepared is a crucial element of participation in the seminar.
**Attendance and participation:**
Weekly attendance is expected. Participation in the discussion is strongly encouraged. A successful graduate seminar should be a student-led affair, and is a chance to engage in an extended discussion about interesting philosophical material, which is just plain fun. The best philosophy happens in collaborative discussion, not in an armchair (though armchairs have their place). The ability to think on your feet in discussion, debate, and argument is an essential philosophical skill, and this skill is best developed in graduate seminars.

**Schedule of readings:**
The following schedule is subject to minor changes, with advance notice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Readings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 2:</td>
<td>Classical voices</td>
<td>• Plato, <em>Protagoras</em></td>
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<td>Jan. 11</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Aristotle, <em>Nicomachean Ethics</em> Book. VII</td>
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<td>Week 3:</td>
<td>Is weakness of will possible?</td>
<td>• Davidson, “How is weakness of will possible?”</td>
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<td>Jan. 18</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Mele, <em>Irrationality</em> Ch. 1</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Mele, <em>Irrationality</em> Ch. 2 (optional)</td>
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<td>o Bratman, “Practical reasoning and weakness of the will” (optional)</td>
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<td>Week 4:</td>
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<td>• Watson, “Skepticism about weakness of will”</td>
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<td>Jan. 25</td>
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<td>• Levy, “Resisting weakness of will”</td>
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<td>Week 5:</td>
<td>Weakness of will and akrasia</td>
<td>• McIntyre, “What is wrong with weakness of will?”</td>
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<td>Feb. 1</td>
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<td>• Holton, “Intention and weakness of will”</td>
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<td>Week 6:</td>
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<td>• Mele, “Weakness of will and akrasia”</td>
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<td>Feb. 8</td>
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<td>o Dodd, “Weakness of will as intention violation” (optional)</td>
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<td>Week 7:</td>
<td>Hyperbolic discounting</td>
<td>• Ainslie, <em>Breakdown of Will</em> Part I</td>
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<td>Feb. 15</td>
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<td><strong>Reading Week: no class</strong></td>
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<td>Week 8:</td>
<td>Is weakness of will always irrational?</td>
<td>• Audi, “Weakness of will and rational action”</td>
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<td>March 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>• McIntyre, “Is akratic action always irrational?”</td>
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<td>Week 9:</td>
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<td>• Arpaly, “Acting rationally against one’s best judgment”</td>
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<td>March 8</td>
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<td><strong>Week 10:</strong></td>
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<td>Week 10:</td>
<td>Is weakness of will a moral failing?</td>
<td>• Bennett, “The conscience of Huckleberry Finn”</td>
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<td>March 15</td>
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<td>• Arpaly and Schroeder, “Praise, blame, and the whole self”</td>
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<td>Week 11:</td>
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<td>• Hill, “Weakness of will and character”</td>
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<td>March 22</td>
<td>Weakness of will and addiction</td>
<td>• Mele, “Akratics and addicts”</td>
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<td>Week 12:</td>
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<td>• Wallace, “Addiction as a defect of the will”</td>
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<td>March 29</td>
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<td>o Watson, “Excusing addiction” (optional)</td>
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Bibliography:
Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VII
Bratman Michael. (1979) “Practical reasoning and weakness of the will” * Nous* 13
Hill, Thomas. (1986) “Weakness of will and character” *Philosophical topics* (14)
McIntyre, Alison. (2006) “What is wrong with weakness of will?” *Journal of Philosophy* (103)
Mele, Al. (2010) “Weakness of will and akrasia” *Philosophical Studies* (150)
Plato. *Protagoras.*
Watson, Gary. (1977) “Skepticism about weakness of will” *The Philosophical Review* 86