

# PHILOS 771: Action

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Office: UH 311  
Office Hours: Fr 11:30 – 12:30 PM

Class Time: Th 11:20PM – 2:20PM

## Course Description

“What is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?” This is Wittgenstein’s way of asking an old philosophical question: what is it to act intentionally? Intentional action feels familiar from everyday life. Introspectively, we feel we know the difference between winking and blinking, or moving and twitching. But just what this difference amounts to becomes increasingly elusive the closer we look at it.

This seminar invites students to grapple with the nature of action. What is an action? How can I distinguish my intention to do something from a mere prediction? What is it to have a reason for one’s action? Do actions require knowledge? If so, is that knowledge essentially intellectual, or does it involve something non-intellectual? Is the intentional status of an action a causal matter, and if so how can we deal with so-called deviance cases? How should results from empirical psychology bear on our philosophical understanding of action, if at all? How can we account for the nature and significance of the feeling of agency?

We will pursue these questions through critical reading and discussion of classic works by authors like Elizabeth Anscombe, Donald Davidson, and Gilbert Ryle, along with more recent works by authors like Jason Stanley, Alva Noë, and Jennifer Hornsby.

## Texts

All readings to be made available online through Avenue. Students may (optionally) wish to purchase these three books:

1. Ryle, Gilbert. 1949/2009. *The Concept of Mind*. London, New York: Routledge.
2. Anscombe, G. E. M. 1957. *Intention*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
3. Davidson, Donald. 2001. *Essays on Actions and Events*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon.

## Course Objectives

This course is designed to help students cultivate

1. a broad but nuanced understanding of basic issues in the philosophy of action;
2. a broad but nuanced understanding of how philosophical discussion of these issues has developed;
3. an improved ability to read and write philosophy;
4. an improved ability to stake out and defend a novel philosophical position, particularly one that is responsive to relevant literature in the field.

## Methods of Assessment

- 7 weekly think pieces, graded according to a “Levels of Mastery” scheme, each due one hour before a class in which you are not presenting (20 % total)
- 2 class presentations (20% total)
- 1 brief abstract and annotated bibliography (10%)
- Final Paper, with a length of 15 – 17 double-spaced pages @ 250 words per page (50%); due December 15.

## Description of Assignments

### **Think Pieces**

- Like many philosophy seminars, this class requires a series of 1 – 2 page “think pieces” each week.
- However, our think-piece assignments are structured and graded according to a “Levels of Mastery” system—that is, a series of assignments designed sequentially to help you write better critical essays in philosophy.
- The assignments start by targeting basic skills, and then move on (once mastery is demonstrated) to targeting more advanced skills.
- You are allowed a maximum of 7 think-piece attempts during the semester. You may **not** submit a think piece for a class in which you are a presenter. No late submissions will be allowed, except by special arrangement in cases where extenuating circumstances make it impossible for you to complete more than six of these.
- There are four levels of mastery. Each think piece will be marked either as “Level Complete” or “Not Yet.” Levels must each be completed sequentially.
- From week to week, fresh attempts should be based on that week’s reading assignment (i.e., when you get a “not yet,” do not rewrite your last think-piece, but simply try the level again in a fresh paper).
- Formatting: be sure to clearly identify the level number you are attempting at the top of the paper you submit. You should always include a bibliography, and you should always follow a recognized convention (like APA or Chicago) for formatting your references. Either author-date or footnote style is acceptable. Finally, please include your name and the date of submission at the top of your paper.
- Your overall grade for your think pieces will be determined according to the highest level you complete during the semester.

Level 4	A
Level 3	A-
Level 2	B
Level 1	C

- After completing level 4, you are free to produce subsequent think pieces that follow either the level 3 assignment or the level 4 assignment.
- A+ will be awarded if all levels are completed, with at least one of the final think pieces completed in an exemplary fashion.
- The assignments for each level are as follows:

#### *Level 1*

Write a 1 – 2 page - paper (500 words max) where you **isolate** and **document** a single, specific claim made in one of the week’s reading assignments, and then subject that claim to **criticism**. Do not offer a general overview of the article; do not give your overall reaction to the reading. “Documenting” the claim means giving a page number where the author advances the claim in question. If it is not immediately obvious where the author makes this claim, also give a direct quotation. “Criticism” can entail either arguing for or against the claim in question. Either way, be sure to consider reasons the author might give for the claim in question. Prose clarity is essential here, and at all levels.

To a critic, another philosopher’s argument is like a bicycle that comes into the shop for servicing. The critic must disassemble the argument’s basic parts. The parts need to be scrutinized individually to ensure the smooth functioning of the whole. Some parts may just need extra grease to reduce friction—other parts may need to be replaced entirely. Throwing the whole bicycle into the trash is a last-ditch response, something to be done only after trying to repair damaged parts. The fundamental skill involved in this kind of critical writing is taking the pieces of an argument apart. This is the skill you are practicing at level 1—isolating and scrutinizing a single part of the overall argument.

#### *Level 2*

Write a 1-page paper (250 words max) where you **extract** and **reconstruct** a central argument given in one of the week’s reading assignments. To “reconstruct” the argument, you need to isolate and document the conclusion the argument seeks to establish; you also need to isolate and document each premise you think the author’s reasoning relies on. Your reconstruction should be maximally charitable—i.e. the argument must at least be valid (if it’s a deductive argument) or reasonably strong (if it’s an inductive argument), and the premises must at least be prima facie plausible. To advert to our metaphor, the bicycle you return to the owner (your reconstructed argument) must at least be in operable condition. You must also demonstrate that your reconstructed argument is “extracted” from the argument in a responsible way. In other words, you need to show that the reconstructed argument really gives a plausible account of the author’s reasoning. Do this by citing a relevant page number where the author espouses each premise (and the conclusion) in your reconstructed argument. It is OK (and sometimes necessary) if one or more premises in your argument reconstruction are marked as “suppressed.” A suppressed premise is a premise the author relies on, but only tacitly.

### *Level 3*

Write a 2-page paper (500 words max) where you **extract, reconstruct, and analyze** an argument from the week's reading. This level asks you to combine the skills you have demonstrated in the two prior levels. In this assignment, to "analyze" the argument, you need to critically discuss what you take to be the most important premise (or premises) on which the argument relies.

### *Level 4*

Write a 1 – 2 -page (500 words max) argument for a novel thesis of your own that connects in a meaningful way with one of the week's assigned readings. Be sure you clearly state (right at the outset) the thesis you are arguing for and identify how that thesis relates to the paper you are discussing. Document where the author in question discusses the relevant claim or claims. Then, develop an argument for your thesis.

Every level so far has involved bringing novel ideas to the table; but in level four your focus is on hatching a novel thesis around which the rest of your paper is structured. Since you are trying to make contact with one of the week's assigned readings, the best level-4 papers will defend a thesis that is directly related to a claim that is integral to the assigned reading. You are permitted (though not required) to refer to more than one of the assigned readings for the semester, as long as one of the readings to which you refer is assigned for the week you are turning this think piece in.

Many professional conferences, today, call for the submission of what's often called an "extended abstract." An extended abstract is a detailed summary of a paper you propose to present at the conference in question. At level 4, we aim to produce the kind of writing that could work effectively as an extended abstract in this sense. These should be short but detailed. They do not just offer a general overview of some themes you would like to discuss; they lay out the central argument you propose to make in your conference paper.

## **Presentations**

- Twice during the semester, students take responsibility for guiding class discussion on one of the week's assigned readings.
- Please prepare either a handout or slides to help structure the discussion.
- Presentations should be about twenty minutes, followed by ten minutes of q and a.
- Treat your presentation like a conference paper that discusses one specific article.
- Just like in a conference paper, your goal is not to summarize the entire paper (though brief summary may be helpful to bring everyone along with your argument). Instead, your main goal is to make a novel argument of your own that is focused on the paper under discussion.

## **Abstract and Annotated Bibliography**

- By November 30, students must turn in a 500-word extended abstract of the final paper, along with a lightly annotated bibliography of three other essays relevant to the final paper.

- The three essays you choose should not be on the syllabus.
- You may (though you need not) use a think piece as the basis for your term paper abstract.

### **Final Paper**

- Students will be expected to submit a term paper at the end of the semester (December 15).
- The term paper should be about something we read in class, or at a minimum should be closely connected to something we read.

## Attendance

Students are expected to attend our classes every week. While there is no separate attendance grade per se, you need to be in class to get credit for your think piece each week.

## Policy on Missed Work, Extensions, and Late Penalties

Think pieces are in part meant to structure seminar discussions, so they will not be accepted late (except in the rare case where a student has a documentable, excused, and extended absence).

Grades for term papers turned in after the stated deadline will be lowered at a rate of 5% per each 24-hour period. If you expect to need an extension for the essay, you must make arrangements with me at least 48 hours in advance of the deadline.

If you sign up for a presentation but fail to do your part without prior arrangement, you will be marked off for this portion of your grade, at my discretion.

## Other Standard Policies

### Academic Integrity

You are expected to exhibit honesty and use ethical behaviour in all aspects of the learning process. Academic credentials you earn are rooted in principles of honesty and academic integrity. It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty.

Academic dishonesty is to knowingly act or fail to act in a way that results or could result in unearned academic credit or advantage. This behaviour can result in serious consequences, e.g. the grade of zero on an assignment, loss of credit with a notation on the transcript (notation reads: "Grade of F assigned for academic dishonesty"), and/or suspension or expulsion from the university. For information on the various types of academic dishonesty please refer to the Academic Integrity Policy, located at <https://secretariat.mcmaster.ca/university-policies-procedures-guidelines/>

The following illustrates only three forms of academic dishonesty:

- plagiarism, e.g. the submission of work that is not one's own or for which other credit has been obtained.
- improper collaboration in group work.
- copying or using unauthorized aids in tests and examinations.

### Authenticity / Plagiarism Detection

Some courses may use a web-based service (Turnitin.com) to reveal authenticity and ownership of student submitted work. For courses using such software, students will be expected to submit their work electronically either directly to Turnitin.com or via Avenue to Learn (A2L) plagiarism detection (a service supported by Turnitin.com) so it can be checked for academic dishonesty.

Students who do not wish to submit their work through A2L and/or Turnitin.com must still submit an electronic and/or hardcopy to the instructor. No penalty will be assigned to a student who does not submit work to Turnitin.com or A2L. All submitted work is subject to normal verification that standards of academic integrity have been upheld (e.g., on-line search, other software, etc.). To see the Turnitin.com Policy, please go to [www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity](http://www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity).

### Courses with an On-Line Element

Some courses use on-line elements (e.g. e-mail, Avenue to Learn (A2L), LearnLink, web pages, capa, Moodle, ThinkingCap, etc.). Students should be aware that, when they access the electronic components of a course using these elements, private information such as first and last names, user names for the McMaster e-mail accounts, and program affiliation may become apparent to all other students in the same course. The available information is dependent on the technology used. Continuation in a course that uses on-line elements will be deemed consent to this disclosure. If you have any questions or concerns about such disclosure please discuss this with the course instructor.

### Online Proctoring

Some courses may use online proctoring software for tests and exams. This software may require students to turn on their video camera, present identification, monitor and record their computer activities, and/or lockdown their browser during tests or exams. This software may be required to be installed before the exam begins.

### Conduct Expectations

As a McMaster student, you have the right to experience, and the responsibility to demonstrate, respectful and dignified interactions within all of our living, learning and working communities. These expectations are described in the Code of Student Rights & Responsibilities (the "Code"). All students share the responsibility of maintaining a positive environment for the academic and personal growth of all McMaster community members, whether in person or online.

It is essential that students be mindful of their interactions online, as the Code remains in effect in virtual learning environments. The Code applies to any interactions that adversely affect, disrupt, or interfere with reasonable participation in University activities. Student disruptions or behaviours that interfere with university functions on online platforms (e.g. use of Avenue 2 Learn, WebEx or Zoom for delivery), will be taken very seriously and will be investigated. Outcomes may include restriction or removal of the involved students' access to these platforms.

### Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities who require academic accommodation must contact Student Accessibility Services (SAS) at 905-525-9140 ext. 28652 or [sas@mcmaster.ca](mailto:sas@mcmaster.ca) e-mail to make arrangements with a Program Coordinator. For further information, consult McMaster University's Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities policy.

### Email correspondence policy

It is the policy of the Faculty of Humanities that all email communication sent from students to instructors (including TAs), and from students to staff, must originate from each student's own McMaster University email account. This policy protects confidentiality and confirms the identity of the student. Instructors will delete emails that do not originate from a McMaster email account.

### Modification of course outlines

The University reserves the right to change dates and/or deadlines etc. for any or all courses in the case of an emergency situation or labour disruption or civil unrest/disobedience, etc. If a modification becomes necessary, reasonable notice and communication with the students will be given with an explanation and the opportunity to comment on changes. Any significant changes should be made in consultation with the Department Chair.

### Request for Relief for Missed Academic Term Work McMaster Student Absence Form (MSAF)

In the event of an absence for medical or other reasons, students should review and follow the Academic Regulation in the Undergraduate Calendar "Requests for Relief for Missed Academic Term Work".

### Academic Accommodation for Religious, Indigenous and Spiritual Observances (RISO)

Students requiring academic accommodation based on religious, indigenous or spiritual observances should follow the procedures set out in the RISO policy. Students should submit their request to their Faculty Office normally within 10 working days of the beginning of term in

which they anticipate a need for accommodation or to the Registrar's Office prior to their examinations. Students should also contact their instructors as soon as possible to make alternative arrangements for classes, assignments, and tests.

### Copyright and Recording

Students are advised that lectures, demonstrations, performances, and any other course material provided by an instructor include copyright protected works. The Copyright Act and copyright law protect every original literary, dramatic, musical and artistic work, including lectures by University instructors.

The recording of lectures, tutorials, or other methods of instruction may occur during a course. Recording may be done by either the instructor for the purpose of authorized distribution, or by a student for the purpose of personal study. Students should be aware that their voice and/or image may be recorded by others during the class. Please speak with the instructor if this is a concern for you.

### Extreme Circumstances

The University reserves the right to change the dates and deadlines for any or all courses in extreme circumstances (e.g., severe weather, labour disruptions, etc.). Changes will be communicated through regular McMaster communication channels, such as McMaster Daily News, A2L and/or McMaster email.