



**University of  
Zurich<sup>UZH</sup>**

Philosophisches Seminar  
Doktoratsprogramm: „Philosophie: Sprache, Geist und Praxis“

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Masterclass

## **Action, Causation and Freedom**

**with Prof. Helen Steward  
University of Leeds**

21-22 November 2019

## Synopsis

Do we ever act freely? This question is often asked in philosophy, where much stress is laid on the adverb – the question becomes the question what it is to act *freely*. In particular, philosophers have often worried about the possibility that a thesis they call ‘determinism’ might be true, and that if it *were* true, it would be impossible for us to act freely. Others have added, even more worryingly, that it would still be impossible for us to act freely, even if *indeterminism* was true – because the truth of indeterminism would merely introduce an unhelpful kind of randomness into the world. In this Meisterkurse, we will be trying to dig down into some of these issues by asking about some of the concepts in terms of which they are framed – in particular, the concepts of action, determinism and indeterminism. In particular, we will be taking a look at (i) the question what it is to *act*, by way of considering what kinds of things might be able to act (the wind? a solvent? A Venus fly-trap? a wasp? a dolphin?); (ii) the question what the ontology of action should look like: for example, should actions be regarded as events or as processes or as exercises of active power .... or none of these?; and (iii) asking whether an acceptably naturalistic conception of action might exist which might allow some things genuinely to be up to us.

On the second day, we’ll turn to apply some of the ideas from day 1 to the debate concerning free will and determinism. We’ll start by asking the important question what determinism is and whether the standard definition is really the one we should be using; and then we’ll move on to consider the question what we might say about the challenge presented by indeterminism to the possibility of free agency. Then finally we will consider some issues concerning the *epistemology* of determinism and indeterminism – whether, for example, contrary to orthodoxy, the falsity of determinism might be knowable *a priori*.

## Program and Reading

Day 1 – 21 November 2019

### Session 1 – What is it to Act?

10h00-10h30 – Introduction by Prof. Helen Steward

10h30-10h40 – Comment by PhD student 1

10h40-10h45 – Short break

10h45-12h00 – Q&A

Reading:

- (i) Helen Steward, 'Animal Agency', *Inquiry* 52 (2009): 217-31.
- (ii) Donald Davidson, 'Agency' in his *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: OUP, 1980): 43-61.
- (iii) Brian O'Shaughnessy, *The Will Volume 2*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: CUP, 2008), Ch. 11.
- (iv) John Hyman, *Action, Knowledge and Will*, Ch. 2.

12h- 13h – Lunchbreak

### Session 2 - What are Actions?

13h00-13h30 – Introduction by Prof. Helen Steward

13h30-13h40 – Comment by PhD student 2

13h40-13h45 – Short break

13h45-15h00 – Q&A

Reading:

- (i) Helen Steward, 'Actions as Processes', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 26:1 (2012) 373-88.
- (ii) Donald Davidson, 'The Logical Form of Action Sentences' in N. Rescher (ed.) *The Logic of Decision and Action* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press); repr. in his *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press): 105-22.
- (iii) John Hyman and Maria Alvarez, 'Agents and their Actions', *Philosophy* 73 (2) (1998): 219-45.
- (iv) Jennifer Hornsby, 'Actions and Activity', *Philosophical Issues*, 22 (1) (2012): 233-45.

15h-15h30 -Break

### Session 3 – Action and Downward Causation

15h30-16h00 – Introduction by Prof. Helen Steward

16h00-16h10 – Comment by PhD student 3

16h10-16h15 – Short break

16h15-17h00 – Q&A

Reading:

- (i) Helen Steward, 'Action as Downward Causation', in *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplementary Volume 80* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017): 195-215.
- (ii) Helen Steward, *A Metaphysics for Freedom*, Section 8.6.
- (iii) Jaegwon Kim, 'Making Sense of Downward Causation', in Anderson, Emmeche, Finneman and Christiansen (eds.) *Downward Causation* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2000).
- (iv) Roger Sperry, 'Macro vs. Micro-determinism', *Philosophy of Science* 53 (2) (1986): 265-70.

*Day 2 - 22 November 2019*

#### **Session 4 – What is Determinism?**

10h00-10h30 – Introduction by Prof. Helen Steward

10h30-10h40 – Comment by PhD student 4

10h40-10h45 – Short break

10h45-12h00 – Q&A

*Reading:*

1. (i) Helen Steward, 'What is Determinism?' (hopefully!) forthcoming in M. Hausmann and J. Noller (eds.) *Free Will: Historical and Systematic Perspectives*.
2. (ii) Helen Beebe, 'The Non-Governing Conception of Laws of Nature', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 61 (2000): 571-594.
3. (iii) Kadri Vihvelin, *Causes, Laws and Free Will*, Ch. 1.
4. (iv) Bertrand Russell, 'On the Notion of Cause' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 1912-13, repr. in his *Mysticism and Logic* (London: Allen and Unwin) 173-99.

**12h- 13h – Lunchbreak**

#### **Session 5 – The Challenge from Chance**

13h00-13h30 – Introduction by Prof. Helen Steward

13h30-13h40 – Comment by PhD student 5

13h40-13h45 – Short break

13h45-15h00 – Q&A

*Reading:*

- (i) Helen Steward, *A Metaphysics for Freedom*, Ch. 6.
- (ii) Al Mele, *Free Will and Luck*, Introduction.
- (iii) Laura Ekstrom, *Free Will*, Ch. 4.
- (iv) Timothy O'Connor, *Persons and Causes*, Ch. 5.

**15h-15h30 -Break**

#### **Session 6 – Epistemological Issues**

15h30-16h00 – Introduction by Prof. Helen Steward

16h00-16h10 – Comment by PhD student 6

16h10-16h15 – Short break

16h15-17h00 – Q&A

*Reading:*

- (i) Helen Steward, 'Free Will and External Reality: Two Scepticisms Compared', forthcoming in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 2019-20.
- (ii) John Martin Fischer, *My Way*, Introduction.
- (iii) Bob Lockie, *Free Will and Epistemology*, Ch. 7.
- (iv) James Pryor, 'What's Wrong with Moore's Argument?', *Philosophical Issues* 14 (2004).349- 78.

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