

Mental Action and its Pathologies

An Advanced Philosophy Seminar

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Thinking is something you do. It is something you can do intentionally, for particular reasons. It can be successful or unsuccessful. It can be effortful, and it can feel that way. All of these are possible features of mental actions: things you do in thought.

In this seminar, we will explore the nature of mental action and its importance to mental metaphysics and epistemology. Why do we think we have the capacity to act in thought? What are the constraints on that agency? What kinds of mental actions can we perform intentionally? Are those actions freely willed? Are they voluntary? What kind of responsibility do we bear for them? What kind of knowledge do we have of them?

We will also study possible failures and pathologies of mental action. Sometimes we can simply fail to call things to mind in imagination without knowing why. Our nightly dreams may involve general mental paralysis. Some who suffer from schizophrenia report having thoughts inserted into their minds by other agents with particular intentions.

This is a seminar aimed mainly at advanced undergraduates and graduates in philosophy, but the assigned readings include many sources from the cognitive sciences. Familiarity with various empirical sciences of the mind (including but not limited to psychology, neuroscience, computational AI, and neuropathology) will enrich your experience in this class. General facility with both philosophical and scientific texts will be assumed. Grades will be based on seminar participation, one in-class presentation of an unassigned reading, and a long (15-20 page) research paper due in reading week.

Course Schedule

Week 1: An introduction to mental action

Gilbert Ryle, “The thinking of thoughts: What is ‘Le Penseur’ doing?”

William James, “On some omissions of introspective psychology”

Richard Taylor, “The stream of thoughts versus mental acts”

Joëlle Proust, “Mental acts”

Week 2: Skepticism about mental action

Fred Dretske, “Awareness and authority: Skeptical doubts about self-knowledge”

Galen Strawson, “Mental ballistics or the involuntariness of spontaneity”

Andrei Buckareff, “How (not) to think about mental action”

Alfred Mele, “Mental action: A case study”

Week 3: A causal theory of mental action

Jesús Aguilar & Andrei Buckareff, “The causal theory of action: Origins and issues”

Lucy O’Brien, “Self-knowledge, agency, and force”

Lucy O’Brien, Selections from *Self-Knowing Agents*

John Gibbons, “Reason in action”

Week 4: Mental agency and self-knowledge

Joëlle Proust, “Is there a sense of agency for thought?”
David Pitt, “The phenomenology of cognition, or what is it like to think that *P*?”
Matthew Soteriou, Selections from *The Mind’s Construction*
Antonia Peacocke, “Embedded mental action in self-attribution of belief”

Week 5: Freedom in mental action

Benjamin Libet, “Do we have free will?”
Eliza Filevich et al., “There is no free won’t”
Richard Holton, “The act of choice”
Storrs McCall, “Decision”
Gregory Kavka, “The toxin puzzle”

Week 6: Voluntarism and non-voluntarism about judgment

Conor McHugh, “Judging as a non-voluntary action”
Fabian Dorsch, “Judging and the scope of mental agency”
Nishi Shah and David Velleman, “Doxastic deliberation”
Pamela Hieronymi, “Two kinds of agency”

Week 7: Spontaneity and judgment in Kant

Immanuel Kant, Selections from *Critique of Pure Reason*
Béatrice Longuenesse, Selections from *Kant and the Capacity to Judge*
Patricia Kitcher, Selections from *Kant’s Thinker*

Week 8: Mental paralysis in dreams

Brian O’Shaughnessy, Selections from *Consciousness and the World*
Matthew Soteriou, Selections from *The Mind’s Construction*

Week 9: Attention as action

William James, Selections from *The Principles of Psychology*
Wayne Wu, “Mental action and the threat of automaticity”
Sebastian Watzl, “Attention as structuring the stream of consciousness”

Week 10: Thought insertion

Martin Voss et al., “Altered awareness of action in schizophrenia”
G. Lynn Stephens and George Graham, Selections from *When Self-Consciousness Breaks*
John Campbell, “Schizophrenia, the space of reasons, and thinking as a motor process”
Jordi Fernández, “Thought insertion and self-knowledge”
Paulo Sousa and Lauren Swiney, “Thought insertion: Abnormal sense of thought agency or thought endorsement?”

Week 11: Imaginative resistance

David Hume, “Of the standard of taste”
Tamar Gendler, “The puzzle of imaginative resistance”
Brian Weatherson, “Morality, fiction, and possibility”
Tamar Gendler, “Imaginative resistance revisited”
Kendall Walton, “On the (so-called) puzzle of imaginative resistance”