



School of History, Philosophy, Political Science and International Relations
Philosophy Programme

Summer Trimester/2008-2009

**PHIL 233/333 (CRN 1013/1058) INDIVIDUALS, SOCIETIES AND CULTURES
Course Information**

1. Faculty:

Kim Sterelny (plus some guest lecturers)

Murphy 719; phone x8642; e-mail: Kim.Sterelny@vuw.ac.nz Office
hours Monday 3-5; Wednesday 1-3 or by arrangement.

2. Time/Place

Tue, and Thur from 12noon-2.50pm in MY 101

3. Blackboard

This course will be listed on the University Blackboard System. The course
information, overheads, and a virtual course book will be posted.

4. Additional Information

Any additional information will be posted Blackboard. There will be separate hand-
outs with information about essay topics, and readings.

5. Course Aims and Objectives

The course centres on two themes. The first concerns the relationship between
individual agents and the cultures to which they belong. Does the actions of agents
make cultures and societies what they are, or, instead are agents constructed by the
societies in which they live? The second theme is methodological. How do we explain
the actions of humans and groups of humans? Are the human sciences like
anthropology or history distinct in critical ways from the natural sciences? To a
considerable extent we shall consider these issues through an evolutionary lens. For
we shall ask whether the richly co-operative life of humans could evolve through, and
be maintained by, individual agents pursuing their own interests. The course begins
by setting up the central problems of the course through a contrast between human

and chimp social life. The tools of the individualist approach are then introduced, and their adequacy tested in the light of human co-operation and human culture.

The essays and exam questions all, in various ways, take up these issues. So by the end of the course, students should have a grasp on the problem of explaining the uniquely co-operative nature of human and cultural life; the basic structure of ideas of methodological individualism and the critical responses to it, and have developed an understanding of some of the methodological debates that surround explanation in the social sciences.

6. Assessment

233 students: one 2500-3000 word essay worth 40% of the total grade to be submitted on Friday February 13; 3 in-class tests worth 10% of the final grade and one 3-question open-book final exam worth 50% of the course grade. The essay material may not be reproduced in the exam.

333 students: One Research essay of approximately 6000 words on a topic of your choice, but one clearly relevant to the course content. A plan/synopsis of between 500 and 1000 words should be submitted by the end of week 2 of lectures (= 10%). A draft is to be submitted at the end of week 5. That will be returned with comments in week 6. The final version is to be submitted on Friday February 13 (worth an extra 50%; 10% penalty for failure to submit draft). In addition, a 3-hour 3-question open-book exam worth 40% of course grade. The essays may not be reproduced in the exam.

7. Reading

There are a number of very useful books that cover many of the issues discussed in this course, but there is no book that it is essential that students buy. A selection of crucial materials will be posted onto Blackboard as a virtual reader.

Very useful general works are:

Jon Elster *Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*; Cambridge University Press, 1989
Alexander Rosenberg *Philosophy of Social Science* Westview 1988.
Dan Sperber *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach*; Blackwell 1996
Daniel Little *Varieties of Social Explanation*; Westview Press, 1991
Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Co-operation* (London: Penguin, 1984)
John Cartwright, *Evolution and Human Behaviour: Darwinian Perspectives on Human Nature* (London: Macmillan, 2000)
Robert Frank, *Passions within Reason: The Strategic Role of the Emotions*; W.W Norton, 1989.

The best single book is probably

Kevin Laland and Gillian Brown *Sense and Nonsense: Evolutionary Perspectives on Human Behaviour*; OUP, 2002.

8. Workload:

By the end of the course, all students will be expected to have read one of the general books covering the issues of the course as a whole. There will also sometimes be ancillary reading for particular sessions. Such reading will not be extensive in quantity; students will not be expected to read more than one, or at most two, additional papers for any session of the course. In addition, of course, students will need to do substantial amounts of extra reading for their essays and to prepare questions for the exam. Moreover, this material must be read closely and critically. Different students, depending on their background, aptitudes and ambitions will take very different amounts of time to read these materials, so there is no point in quoting an average expected workload.