



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

Summer Trimester/2010-2011

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

1. Staff:

Kim Sterelny (plus some guest lecturers)

Office: Murphy 719

Phone: x8642

E-mail: Kim.Sterelny@vuw.ac.nz

Office hours: Tuesday 3.00 - 5.00 pm; Thursday 1.00 – 3.00 pm or by arrangement.

2. Time/Place

Monday/Wednesday 1.10 – 4.00 pm in MYLT220. The first class is Monday 10 January; the final class Wednesday 10 February. The exam period is from 14 -19 February.

3. Withdrawal dates

Information on withdrawals and refunds may be found at

<http://www.victoria.ac.nz/home/admisenrol/payments/withdrawalsrefunds.aspx>

4. Blackboard

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

5. Additional Information

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

6. Course Aims and Objectives

The course centres on three themes. The first is historical: how did contemporary human social worlds evolve out of primate and ancient human worlds which were very very different. The second 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 third 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 three contrasts between modern human, ancient 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.

7. Assessment

233 students:

One 2500-3000 word essay worth 40% of the total grade to be submitted on Friday February 11; 3 in-class tests worth 10% of the final grade and a 3-hour, 3-question open-book exam worth 50% of the course grade. The essay material may not be reproduced in the exam. The dates for the class tests are: Wednesday 19 January; Wednesday Feb 2; Wednesday Feb 12. The tests will take approximately 20 minutes.

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 beginning of week 5 (i.e. Feb 3). That will be returned with comments and the final version is to be submitted on Friday Feb 9 (but there will be no penalty if they reach me by Monday Feb 14) . The essay is worth an extra 50%; 10% penalty for failure to submit a draft). In addition, there is a 3-hour, 3-question open-book exam worth 40% of the course grade. The essay material may not be reproduced in the exam. So the 300-level assessment package is: essay plan 10%; essay 50%; exam 40%.

Late essays, if submitted before the Phil 233/Phil 333 exam will be graded without penalty, but will get a grade only; no comments or feedback will be provided. No essay will be accepted after the date of the exam.

8. 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.

The best single books are

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

Hardy, S. B., *Mothers and Others: The Evolutionary Origins of Mutual Understanding* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2009).

Seabright, P., *The Company of Strangers: A Natural History of Economic Life* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010).

Sterelny, K., *The Evolved Apprentice* (Cambridge, MIT Press), (this will be available on Blackboard).

Tomasello, M., *Why We Cooperate* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2009).

But there are a number of others that are very useful on several of the issues important in the course

Very useful general works are:

Jon Elster, *Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989; second edition Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Alexander Rosenberg, *Philosophy of Social Science* (Boulder, Co., Westview, 1988).

Dan Sperber, *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1996).

Daniel Little, *Varieties of Social Explanation* (Boulder, Co., 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* (New York, W.W Norton, 1989).

9. 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. It is acknowledged that students work at different rates, however, for a 20 pt course 200 hours spread across the course is the standard.

10. Lecture Guide

Note: The time allocated to the various topics is an estimate only; it is likely to vary as a result of class interest and reaction.

Session 1: Three Contrasting Social Worlds

The social worlds of modern humans, ancient humans and chimps contrast in very marked ways, despite the close biological kinship of humans and chimps (and despite the fact that they are at most minor biological differences between modern and ancient humans) These contrasts raise two fundamental questions: (a) How can we explain the transition from the chimp-like sociality of our ancestors to our own social and cultural lives; (b) what difference does this transition make to the ways we explain human activity, both individually and collectively?

Session 2: The Program of Methodological Individualism

We can explain chimp behaviour by supposing that they are doing their best to maximise their individual fitness, and their social life is a by-product of their individual behaviour. A crucial question will then be: are the crucial features of human social life likewise a by-product of individual humans seeking to maximise their individual welfare? Can we explain human cultural and social life individualistically, as a by-product of our explanations of individual agency? An alternative view is that culture plays a very different role in our life than it plays in the life of chimps, and so we are not autonomous in the way chimps are; we are made by our social worlds, rather than making our social worlds.

Session 3: Individualism and Rational Agency

One leading approach to explaining human action is to suppose that typically individual agents act to maximise their expected utility: they pursue their individual welfare. If this is true, can we explain human co-operation? This question is explored through a famous dilemma, the Prisoner's Dilemma and important variants of it. In particular, we will discuss the idea that humans have a psychology of "strong reciprocation".

The central background issue here is: how can we explain the role of co-operation in human life. For we are the only animal that routinely co-operates with strangers.

Session 4: Co-operation & Conflict

In this session, we explore two ideas that link co-operation and violence: those of Paul Bingham and Sam Bowles. In different ways, they think our ability to co-operate coevolved with conflict and violence between humans. Sam Bowles, for example, thinks that our capacity to co-operate is the consequence of a long and violent history of conflict between human groups; a history of 100,000 years or more of conflict. Only those that could co-operate with their friends survived encounters with others.

Session 5: Co-operation & Trust

Many of the most distinctive features of human life depend on trust. For such human social life depends on long term partnerships, where each partner trusts others to keep their bargains in the future, even in the face of (some) temptation to do otherwise. In this session, we explore a famous solution to the trust problem developed in Robert Frank's Passions Within Reason, and various subsequent developments of Frank's ideas.

Session 6 Co-operation & Cheating: Our Inner Policeman?

As discussed in the last sessions, two very central features of human action are our ability to co-ordinate with others, and to co-operate with others by trusting them to keep their bargains in the future, even in the face of (some) temptation to do otherwise. But we also differ from other primates in endorsing and to some extent internalising explicit norms. In this session we explore this puzzling feature of human social life, and discuss the idea (defended by Marc Hauser, Richard Joyce and others) that moral cognition and co-operation coevolved: moral thought helps us co-operate.

Session 7 Co-operation & Cheating: Someone to Watch Over Us?

In this session, we explore the idea that religion has evolved as a mechanism that enables humans and human groups to co-operate; religion is an adaptive illusion that enables us to co-operate better. Joe Bulbulia, in Religious Studies, is a pioneer of this idea.

Session 8: Learning from Others

One very distinctive feature of human life is that we learn so much from others. Learning from others is, arguably easier and less costly than finding out about the world's dangers and benefits for yourself. But if that is true, why is cultural learning of the kind that is typical of us so rare? Young chimps learn from their mother, but those mothers do not deliberately go out of their way to teach their children about resources and dangers. Why not? How has cultural learning transformed human culture; how did it come to be so important in human lives, and only in human lives? Why, for example, do only humans have a language? Why don't chimps have a simple language?

Session 9: Memes and cultural inheritance: When ideas Escape

In this session we discuss memes: the idea that culture can be thought of as a set of cognitive atoms that are copied from one generation to the next, and that successful memes (for example, catchy tunes) spread at the expense of those less fit. Do cultures evolve in the same kind of way that organisms evolve?

Richard Dawkins has famously argued that religious ideas are a viral meme. Does this idea really make sense? If so, how could we tell if he was right?

Session 10: Tracking, Talking, Telling Stories

Our cousins the chimps eat meat when they can get it, and hunt small animals when opportunity arises. But they do not eat meat often, and their worlds are not organised around hunting and meat-eating. Many human societies in the deep past were. But unlike many mammals, humans do not hunt with their nose, and they do not hunt by visual search and fast pursuit. They hunt by tracking, stalking and co-operating. Kim Shaw-Williams argues that these skills of “reading the land” lead to language, and to a mind that organised information in the form of stories. In this session, he explains this picture of the foundations of human life.

Session 11: Complex society and the End of Equality

Ancient forager societies were remarkably egalitarian. About 10,000 years ago, with the origin of farming, that changed. Human worlds went from small, intimate and equal, to large, anonymous and profoundly unequal. Most humans now live in mass societies, with their lives dominated by interactions with large, complex social institutions. How did such complex societies arise? How do we explain their organisation and persistence?

11. Information Common To All Courses

Academic Integrity and Plagiarism

Academic integrity means that university staff and students, in their teaching and learning are expected to treat others honestly, fairly and with respect at all times. It is not acceptable to mistreat academic, intellectual or creative work that has been done by other people by representing it as your own original work.

Academic integrity is important because it is the core value on which the University’s learning, teaching and research activities are based. Victoria University’s reputation for academic integrity adds value to your qualification.

The University defines plagiarism as presenting someone else’s work as if it were your own, whether you mean to or not. ‘Someone else’s work’ means anything that is not your own idea. Even if it is presented in your own style, you must acknowledge your sources fully and appropriately. This includes:

- Material from books, journals or any other printed source
- The work of other students or staff
- Information from the internet
- Software programs and other electronic material
- Designs and ideas

- The organisation or structuring of any such material

Find out more about plagiarism, how to avoid it and penalties, on the University's website: <http://www.victoria.ac.nz/home/study/plagiarism.aspx>

GENERAL UNIVERSITY POLICIES AND STATUTES

Students should familiarise themselves with the University's policies and statutes, particularly the Assessment Statute, the Personal Courses of Study Statute, the Statute on Student Conduct and any statutes relating to the particular qualifications being studied; see the *Victoria University Calendar* or go to the Academic Policy and Student Policy sections on:

<http://www.victoria.ac.nz/home/about/policy>

The AVC(Academic) website also provides information for students in a number of areas including Academic Grievances, Student and Staff conduct, Meeting the needs of students with impairments, and student support/VUWSA student advocates. This website can be accessed at:

http://www.victoria.ac.nz/home/about_victoria/avcacademic/Publications.aspx