

Syllabus

Name of the course: Dispositions and Powers

Semester: 2016, Winter, Wednesday 9–10.40

Instructor: Ferenc Huoranszki

Number of credits: 2

Course level: MA, elective course

Teaching format: Seminar

Course description: In many areas of philosophy it is common to distinguish ‘categorical’ terms and properties from ‘dispositional’ ones. Often used examples for the latter are physical properties like fragility, solubility, conductivity, but also mental properties like having beliefs or being irascible. Dispositions are metaphysically interesting primarily because they are modal in the sense that dispositional terms express how things or persons *could* behave or how they *would* behave if they were in certain circumstances. Hence dispositions seem to have an essential link to counterfactuals, necessities and potentialities. In the course, we shall discuss dispositions’ connection to counterfactual conditionals, causation, essences and finally, and most importantly, to potentialities.

Goals of the course: Students attending this course are expected to familiarize themselves with the most important issues concerning the semantics and ontology of dispositions as well as some specific philosophical issues that involve the ascription of powers.

Learning outcomes: Students are expected to acquire the ability to reconstruct and analyze philosophical arguments or positions. These involve the understanding of validity and soundness of the arguments, the ability to identify background principles and assumptions as well as the ability to draw out the consequences of certain philosophical commitments. They are also expected to acquire certain oral communication skills such as the ability to formulate arguments concisely and accessibly in words and to give short critical comments. They should also learn how to identify and execute an appropriate writing project. Finally, they should be familiarized with the main contemporary debates about dispositions. Learning outcomes shall be measured by term papers and oral presentations on the relevant topics.

Assessment: Students’ performance shall be evaluated on the following grounds. First, students are required to attend classes regularly and to participate actively in seminar discussions. 30 % of their final grade shall be given on the basis of this in-class activity. Second, students are required to give one or two short presentations of some chosen topic(s). The choice of topic is optional, but overlap should be avoided. This will make up another 30 % of their final grade. Thirdly, students are required to submit a max. 2 000 word long term-paper. The chosen topic should be approved by the instructor and presented in the last class of the course. The term paper’s contribution to the final assessment of students’ performance is 40 %.

Grading criteria: Students should be able to make comments on the texts they have read, and respond to the presentations of other student. Their presentation must include the logical reconstruction of the main arguments of the relevant article/chapter and, possibly, critical remarks or questions for discussion. Students are also expected to prepare and distribute a maximum two page long hand-out that they distribute before their presentation. The topic of the paper can be either a careful critical reconstruction of a particular and important argument for some position discussed in the course; or a comparison between competing arguments about alternative solutions to a problem; or a defense of some particular position/argument against some relevant criticism. References can, but need not, go beyond the material included into the compulsory readings.

Deadline for submitting term-papers: April 12, 2017.

	Topics	Readings
Week 1	Introduction and overview	
Week 2	Dispositions and episodes	Ryle G. <i>The Concept of Mind</i> , London, Hutchison and Co., 19: 42–45; 116–135.
Week 3	Dispositions and their causal grounds	Armstrong, D. A. <i>Belief, Truths, and Knowledge</i> , CUP, 1973: 7–23. Mackie, J. L. ‘Dispositions, Grounds and Causes’, <i>Synthese</i> 34 (1977): 361–369.
Week 4	The reducibility of dispositions	Mellor D. H. ‘In Defense of Dispositions’, <i>Philosophical Review</i> 83 (1974): 157–81;
Week 5	Dispositions and conditionals	Martin C. B. ‘Dispositions and Conditionals’, <i>The Philosophical Quarterly</i> 44 (1994): 1–8. Lewis D. ‘Finkish Dispositions’, <i>The Philosophical Quarterly</i> 47 (1997): 143–158.
Week 6	Masked Dispositions	Manley, D. and R. Wasserman ‘On Linking Dispositions and Conditionals’, <i>Mind</i> , 2008: 59–84.
Week 7	Dispositions without conditionals	Vetter, B. ‘Dispositions without Conditionals’, <i>Mind</i> 2014: 1–28.
Week 8	Causal powers and properties	Shoemaker S. ‘Causality and Properties’, in Kim, J. – E. Sosa, (eds.) <i>Metaphysics. An Anthology</i> (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999): 253-268.
Week 9	Dispositions and laws	Bird, A. ‘Laws and Essences’, <i>Ratio</i> 18(2005): 437–461.
Week 10	Dispositions and potentialities	McKittrick, J. ‘Dispositions and Potentialities’, in <i>Potentiality: Metaphysical and Bioethical Dimensions</i> , (ed. John P. Lizza) Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014: 49–68.
Week 11	Aristotelian potentiality	Weissman, D. ‘Real Potentiality’, in his <i>Dispositional Properties</i> , Southern Illinois University Press, 1965, 159-193.
Week 12	‘Can’ and dispositions	Vetter, B. 2013. “‘Can’ without Possible Worlds. Semantics for anti-Humeans.’ <i>Philosophers’ Imprint</i> 2013: 13:1–27.

Some suggested further readings:

Goodman, N. *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*. Harvard UP, 1983
 Prior, E. *Dispositions*. Aberdeen University Press, 1985.
 Crane, T. (ed.) *Dispositions: A Debate*. Routledge, 1996.
 Mumford, D. *Dispositions*. OUP, 1998.
 Ellis, B. *Scientific Essentialism*. CUP, 2001.
 Molnar, G. *Powers: A Study in Metaphysics*. OUP, 2003.
 Bird, A. *Nature’s Metaphysics*. OUP, 2007.
 Hawthorne, J. ‘Causal Structuralism’, *Philosophical Perspectives* 15, (2001): 361–378.

