Topics in Cognitive Science: Varieties of Freedom*

Mondays 11:15am – 1:45pm

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We are not free to cease being free.


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Being and Nothingness
— JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

At fifteen I set my heart on learning. At thirty I could stand. At forty I had no doubts. At fifty I knew the Decree of Heaven. At sixty I was already obedient [to this Decree]. At seventy I could follow the desires of my mind without overstepping the boundaries [of what is right].

Analects
— CONFUCIUS

1 Motivation and overview

It should not be surprising that humans, as individually self-aware members of an ultrasocial species, are deeply conflicted by the concept of freedom. Being free means different things to different people; moreover, people often disagree about how much freedom can, or should, be had by their conspecifics, or even by themselves. In this advanced seminar, we shall discuss some of the questions that arise with regard to freedom, sampling from a range of disciplines, including philosophy, evolution and psychology, history and geography, anthropology, politics, and education.

2 Notes for participants

This section contains essential information for participants: format description, inclusion statement, ground rules for discussion, and credit requirements.

2.1 Format

2.1.1 The prerequisites

At least one course in a social science (psychology, sociology, anthropology), or permission of instructor.

2.2 Diversity, inclusion, and ground rules for discussion

Unlike in a large-enrollment lecture-based course, in which some students may choose, and succeed, to remain virtually anonymous, in a small-class seminar setting you are required to speak in front of the class (when presenting) and are expected to contribute to the discussion on other occasions. Because your informed opinion on every aspect of the material is unique and valuable, I shall strive to facilitate the conversation so as to make all voices heard. In this, I’ll be counting on your help, and on the help of your classmates.

Even matters of “consensus” are not always easy to talk about, as the rare dissenters who dare voice their opposition know full well; how then should we approach potentially controversial topics? With care and compassion, diligence, openness, and daring: care for our shared humanity; diligence with regard to the relevant knowledge and findings; openness to informed dissent; and daring to venture into uncharted territory, as befits good education.

If at any point during the semester (no matter whether in class or after hours) you feel that you need to talk about any of these things, please let me know immediately — doing so will be my top priority.

2.3 Credit and grading

There are three components to getting credit for this course:

1. Attend and contribute to the discussion during the weekly meetings. During the closing discussion at the last meeting of the semester (December 4), offer brief (5 min or so) informal remarks summing up your impressions and lessons from the readings.

2. By 9am on the Monday for which readings have been assigned, post on the Canvas discussion board questions on the material (at least 10 questions should be submitted by the end of the semester). Be prepared to raise these questions in class.

3. By Labor Day (September 4, no class), choose the dates of your two presentations using this sign-up sheet.

A typical presentation should include:

- A brief introduction to the topic and an overview of the background to the paper(s) and the relevant methodology (if applicable);

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1The remarks in section 2.2, which are specific to this course, are intended to supplement the official Cornell statement on diversity and inclusion, which covers dimensions such as gender, race, socio-economic background, etc., and which can be found here: http://diversity.cornell.edu/
• The paper’s findings / arguments;
• A critique of the approach / ideas;
• A summary of the conclusions and their significance for the seminar’s theme.

It is recommended that the presenting teams meet/Zoom with the instructor ahead of their presentations, to address any questions and coordinate the details.

**Final grade components** (for planning your time investment; no actual numerical assessment of anything will be made in this seminar):—
- Weekly questions 30%
- Participation in the discussions: 20%
- Presentations: 50%

3  **Weekly topics and readings**

- **(August 21) Overview. Varieties of freedom. Free will.**

- **(August 28) Freedom: some philosophical perspectives**

- **(September 4) [Labor Day — no class]**
• (September 11) Freedom and Bread.


• (September 18) Freedom and Capitalism.


• (September 25) Capitalism and the State.


• (October 2) CAPITALISM AND FASCISM.


• (October 9) [Fall break — no class]

• (October 16) FREEDOM IN THE U.S.


• (October 23) THEORETICAL ANARCHISM AND DIALECTICS OF FREEDOM.


• (October 30) FREEDOM, PREFIGURATION, AND EDUCATION.

• (November 6) The Dawn of Everything.


• (November 13) Freedom and Culture.


• (November 20) Anarchist Praxis: Rojava.


• (November 27) Anarchist Praxis: Chiapas.


• (December 4) CLOSING GENERAL DISCUSSION.


References


