



**Universität
Zürich**^{UZH}

**Institute of Philosophy
Doctoral Program "Philosophy – Language, Mind and Practice"**

Master Class

From Descartes to Darwin and beyond

Reflections on traditional versus modern views of the human mind,
its reliability, and its place in nature

with

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(University of Zurich)

10th – 11th October 2014

Synopsis

There is a familiar contrast between the traditional religious conception of human nature as the creation of a good God, and the modern ‘naturalist’ worldview according to which our human nature is the result of an accidental chain of purely natural causes and conditions. The seminar will aim to deepen our understanding of the philosophical problems that arise for each of these outlooks, taking Descartes and Darwin as key representatives, and will explore some unexpected continuities and parallels. The main focus will be on how far, whether on the theistic view or on the naturalistic view, the human mind can be expected to be a reliable instrument for the pursuit of truth.

We shall begin with an examination of Descartes’s validation of the reliability of the human mind in the *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), referring to his theory of ‘clear and distinct perception’ as it emerges in the first four Meditations, and looking in detail at the Sixth Meditation, where Descartes tackles the question of why human beings so often go astray in their judgements, particularly in judgements based on the fluctuating and often misleading testimony of the senses. In working this out, Descartes reaches a conclusion about the functional role of sensory perception that is, paradoxically, not far from that offered by Darwinian naturalism: the sensory faculty, for Descartes, is *not* inherently geared to tracking the truth; instead, its role is to contribute to the *health and survival* of the human organism. In virtue of his theistic metaphysics however, Descartes is able to set this conclusion against the background of the (divinely bestowed) faculty of *reason*, that, although finite and limited, is in principle an accurate instrument for detecting the truth.

In stark contrast with the Cartesian view of reason as a special faculty that sets us apart, Charles Darwin, in Chapter 4 of *The Descent of Man* (1871) produces a series of considerations purporting to show that ‘the difference in mind between man the higher animals, great as it is, certainly is one of degree and not of kind.’ We shall ask how plausible is Darwin’s account of the similarities and differences between the human and the animal worlds and at the question of whether there is any prospect of identifying a single ‘anthropological difference’. We shall also examine the implications of Darwinism for the reliability of the human mind, given that it was shaped by success in the competition for survival rather than through any inherent tendency to track the truth. In this context, we shall briefly look at ‘evolutionary epistemology’ and, possibly, at evolutionary anthropology. Finally, we shall consider Thomas Nagel’s arguments (in *Mind and Cosmos*, 2012) that modern scientific naturalism cannot fully account for the powers of the human mind, and in particular its emergence as a ‘instrument of transcendence’ capable of grasping objective meaning, truth, and value. On Nagel’s view, any evolutionary account of the place of reason ‘presupposes reason’s validity and cannot confirm it without circularity.’

In reviewing these various contrasting positions from the seventeenth, nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, the course will attempt to look beyond various prevailing preconceptions (whether theistic or naturalistic) about humanity and its place in the natural world. We shall instead aim to examine in detail the arguments offered by the three main protagonists mentioned above in order to make a careful philosophical assessment of their strengths and weaknesses, and perhaps to draw some conclusions about the status of the naturalistic outlook that is an increasingly dominant feature of the contemporary philosophical climate.

Programme

Friday, 10th October 2014

9:30 – 12:30 Descartes on Clear and Distinct Knowledge

14:30 – 18:30 Reliability of the Mind: Cartesian and Darwinian Perspectives

Saturday, 11th October 2014

9:30 – 12:30 Evolutionary Epistemology and the ‘Anthropological Difference’

14:30 – 18:30 The Human Mind in a Naturalistic Cosmos

Registration: phd@philos.uzh.ch

Details: <http://www.philosophie.uzh.ch/doktorat/meisterkurse.html>

Venue: Philosophisches Seminar, Zürichbergstrasse 43, 8044 Zürich

Room: ZUP-U-8

No fees apply, but please note that participants are expected to have done the reading of the texts. PhD students at the UZH are required to book the module in order to get credit points.

Readings

Friday, 10th October 2014

Descartes on Clear and Distinct Knowledge

Descartes, René: *Meditations on First Philosophy* [*Meditationes de prima philosophia*, 1641], trans. J. Cottingham, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd ed., 1996; Meditations One to Four. Cottingham, John: *Descartes*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1986, Chs. 2 and 3.

The Reliability of the Mind: Cartesian and Darwinian Perspectives

Descartes, René: *Meditations on First Philosophy* [*Meditationes de prima philosophia*, 1641], trans. J. Cottingham, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd ed. 1996; Meditation Six. Cottingham, John: ‘Descartes and Darwin: Reflections on the Sixth Meditation’, in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* Supplementary Volume lxxxvii (2013), pp. 239-277. Darwin, Charles: *The Descent of Man* [1871/1879] (London: Penguin, 2004), esp. Chapters 3-5.

Saturday, 11th October 2014

Evolutionary Epistemology and the ‘Anthropological Difference’

Plantinga, Alvin: ‘Against Naturalism’, in Plantinga, A. and Tooley, M.: *Knowledge of God*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2008.
Glock, H.J.: ‘The Anthropological Difference’, in C. Sandis and M.J. Cain (ed.), *Human Nature*, CUP 2012.
Glock, H.J.: ‘Evolutionäre Erkenntnistheorie’, in P. Schmid-Hempel and H.U. Reyer (eds.), *Evolution* (vdf, Zurich 2011), pp. 235-249.

The Human Mind in a Naturalistic Cosmos

Nagel, Thomas: *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
Dupré, John: Review of Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*. *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/35163-mind-and-cosmos-why-the-materialist-neo-darwinian-conception-of-nature-is-almost-certainly-false/>.
Orr, H. Allen, Review of Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*. *New York Review of Books*, February 7, 2013.