

Phil 290-2: Promises and Promissory Obligation

M, 12–2pm

Website: <http://sophos.berkeley.edu/kolodny/12SPhil290.htm>

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Description:

Promises are ubiquitous phenomena that greatly facilitate human social life, but they are also philosophically elusive. Promising can be understood as a device for generating new obligations where there were none before, a device whose operations help us to coordinate our activities and to make effective plans for the future. But how exactly do promises function? Do promissory obligations result from our participation in beneficial social practices, or do they derive instead from the effects of the promise on the attitudes of the promisee? Can promises be binding even if nobody expects you to fulfill them? Promises seem to involve obligations that are directional, insofar as they are owed specifically to the promisee; but is this an idea that we can make good sense of? How do promises function in the law (what is the relation between promises and contracts?), and in the context of intimate personal relationships? What human interests ultimately ground the kind of “normative powers” that promising confers on agents?

The seminar will involve close study of some of the most important contributions to the extensive contemporary literature on promising. Philosophers whose works will be discussed include Raz, Scanlon, Thomson, Shiffrin, and Owens (among others).

Requirements:

An 18-page term paper due Monday, April 30

Syllabus:

Monday, January 23

Introduction

Monday, January 30: Social practices

Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, Part ii, Sections 1–2, 5

Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, §18, 52

Monday, February 6: Normative powers

Raz, “Voluntary Obligations and Normative Powers,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, *supp. vol.* 46 (1972): 76–102

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4106798>

Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, Ch. 7

Monday, February 13: Giving one's word

Thomson, *The Realm of Rights*, Ch. 12

Warnock, *The Object of Morality*, pp. 95–117

No class Monday, February 20

Monday, February 27: The value of assurance

Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, Ch. 7

Kolodny and Wallace, "Promises and Practices Revisited"

<http://sophos.berkeley.edu/kolodny/papers.htm>

Monday, March 5

Shiffrin, Promising, Conventionalism and Intimate Relationships, *Philosophical Review* 117 (2008): 481–524

http://cdn.law.ucla.edu/SiteCollectionDocuments/faculty/shiffrin-promising_intimate_relationships.pdf

Monday, March 12

Shiffrin, "Immoral, Conflicting and Redundant Promises," in *Reasons and Recognition*

Monday, March 19

Owens, *Shaping the Normative Landscape*, Introduction and Part II: Powers

Spring Break

Monday, April 2

Owens, *Shaping the Normative Landscape*, Part III: Practices

Monday, April 9: Promising and asserting

Watson, "Asserting and Promising", *Philosophical Studies* 117 (2005): 57–77

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4321436>

MacFarlane, "What is Assertion?"

<http://johnmacfarlane.net/papers.html>

Monday, April 16: Promises and property

Scanlon, "Natural Wrongs and Institutional Rights I: Property"

Thomson, *The Realm of Rights*, Ch. 13

Monday, April 23: Promises and contracts

Scanlon, "Promises and Contracts," in *The Difficulty of Tolerance*

Shiffrin, "The Divergence of Contract and Promise," 120 *Harvard Law Review* 708–53 (2007)

<http://cdn.law.ucla.edu/SiteCollectionDocuments/faculty/shiffrin-divergenceofcontractandpromise.pdf>