

Philosophy of Biology

PHIL 68I. Spring 2012. Klein

Professor	Alexander Klein
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Office Location	MHB 912
Office Hours	TU: 10 – 12; TH: 10 – 12, 3:30 – 4:30 o.b.a.
Class Location	LA1 304
Class Time	Tu 7 – 9:45

Course Description

This graduate seminar explores distinctively philosophical problems associated with the science of evolutionary biology. We will begin the semester with a review of some basics of biological science. We will then investigate philosophical issues such as the following: how to define fitness (if natural selection is defined as the survival of the fittest, then on pain of circularity, a fit organism cannot simply be defined as one that survives); the units of selection problem (what kinds of entities can natural selection be said to act on? Alleles? Genes? Genotypes? Organisms? What about communities of organisms?); and adaptationism (when can we assume that a trait we are trying to explain is due to natural selection, as opposed to non-adaptive evolutionary forces such as drift or genetic hitchhiking?). We will conclude the semester by looking at some recent work in evolutionary psychology, and will ask whether this subdiscipline is vulnerable to any systematic philosophical difficulties. Prior advanced work in biology is not a prerequisite, but some exposure to the subject at the college level is recommended, and current biology students of all levels are particularly encouraged to enroll—we will try to explain relevant biological concepts to the philosophy students, and relevant philosophical concepts to the biology students!

Course Goals

Upon completion of this course, diligent students should find that they

- can identify and explain (both orally and in writing) some central areas of scholarly debate in the sub-field of philosophy of biology;
- can offer a critical analysis (both orally and in writing) of various important positions in the sub-field of philosophy of biology;
- can show an improved ability to conduct original philosophical research and to write scholarly, philosophical essays;
- can show an improved ability to comprehend and critically analyze complex philosophical texts.

Books

Sober, Elliott (1993/1999), *Philosophy of Biology*. 2nd Ed. Boulder: Westview Press.
All other articles and readings will be available for download on Beachboard.

Grading

- Plagiarism Quiz (0%) *
- Two Papers (25% each)
- 2 Short Presentation (15% total)
- 3 Expository Writings (12.5% total)
- 3 Analytic Writings (12.5% total)
- Participation (10%)

* You must score 100% on the plagiarism quiz before you will be permitted to hand in any written work in this class. You may take the quiz as many times as you need to. Until you score 100% on this quiz, any other written work you turn in will accrue late penalties.

More Information about Assignments

Papers

These essays will be 10 – 12 pages in length. They will be due around the middle of the semester and at the end of the semester respectively. These are standard philosophy essays, and we will spend some class time discussing strategies for producing such work effectively.

Presentation

Each week, we will have a brief (7 – 8 minute) presentation on each of the week's assigned essays or chapters. I will be positively savage in keeping you within these limits! Spend the first 3 – 4 minutes summarizing the upshot of the article as you see it, and the second 3 – 4 minutes offering critical reflection. You should consider at least these four questions when preparing your presentation:

1. What is the most *important* claim the author advances in this reading?
2. How does the author support said claim?
3. What is the most *interesting* point in this reading?
4. To what kinds of objections are the important and/or interesting claims most vulnerable?

The most common way to lose points on these assignments is to load the presentation with exposition, and to be too brief in the analysis you offer. I will grade these presentations using a rubric that is available on our Beachboard site.

Writing Exercises

There will be six short (1 page—absolutely no more than 2) writing exercises throughout the semester, **DUE ON BEACHBOARD 2 HOURS BEFORE CLASS**. The first three will be primarily expository, and the last three will be more analytical. There will be no written assignments for these—your task will simply be to explain or critically analyze (depending on the week) the most important points of one of the week's readings. I will not give extensive comments on these. They will be graded using a check/check-plus/check-minus system, and a final grade on these will be determined by curve at the end of the semester.

Late Penalties

Late assignments will be docked one fraction of a letter grade per each day late. For instance, an otherwise B paper handed in after the deadline, but before the first 24

hours has expired, will receive a B- . Late writing exercises will go down one notch, for example from check plus to check, per each day late.

Plagiarism

My penalty for any and all plagiarism is an F for the final course grade. I give no second chances. I will not permit you to rewrite the paper or assignment. I will simply fail you.

Why do I care so much about plagiarism? The grades you have when you graduate, the honors or distinctions that may go along with those grades, and the letters you get from your professors on the basis of your performance in their courses, are all you will have to show prospective employers or PhD programs that you are qualified to be employed or admitted. Plagiarism is a way of cheating in this process, pure and simple.

The founding ideal of the American university system is precisely that opportunity should be correlated with performance. In fact, the idea that social opportunities like jobs and education should be commensurate with actual performance, not with one's family or fraternity connections, money, or whatever, is also among the founding ideals of our entire American democracy. Since plagiarism is an affront to this idea of a meritocracy, and thus to founding ideals of our nation, I simply will not tolerate it.

Unfortunately the rise of the internet has ushered in a new era of plagiarism. Perhaps plagiarism seems less serious these days because it is so easy to cut, paste, and paraphrase. Whatever its source, the new wave of plagiarism has forced many professors to institute no-tolerance policies, and I am certainly part of that trend. So please—do not get mixed up in a plagiarism case. You will fail the course with no second chance.

To be sure that everybody knows what constitutes plagiarism, you are required to complete a plagiarism quiz before the first written paper is due. The quiz actually instructs you about any mistaken ideas you might have about what constitutes plagiarism. See above for details.

Finally, please be aware that **I use turnitin.com to collect and check all written work in this class.** Turnitin.com is a tool embedded in Beachboard. It compares your paper with every written word available online, and with every written word ever submitted to turnitin.com. I then receive your paper along with the results of turnitin.com's search. I never use the turnitin.com report automatically to trigger a charge of plagiarism. Instead, I use the turnitin.com report as a tool for helping me find source material that might have been copied in the event of a suspected case of plagiarism.

This Syllabus

It is your responsibility to read and understand the rules and regulations set out in this syllabus. If there is anything you do not understand, it is your responsibility to ask me for a clarification early in the semester.

Beachboard

This class requires the use of Beachboard. I will distribute the syllabus and some readings and assignments simply by posting them online. I will also post your grades to Beachboard, and send the occasional group email to all enrolled students.

Withdrawal

I do **not** drop students who fail to attend the first week of class. Any student who wishes to withdraw from the class must take responsibility for withdrawing (in keeping with the University's withdrawal policy) him or herself. The University's withdrawal policy can be found here:

http://www.csulb.edu/divisions/aa/catalog/current/academic_regulations/part_one_definitions.html#withdrawal

How to Submit Assignments in Case of an Excused Absence

All writing assignments will be submitted on Beachboard. So if you have an excused absence you should not have trouble submitting your work outside of class—just use Beachboard as you normally would.

In the event of an extended, documented emergency, please contact me so we can try to make alternate arrangements for you to finish the work required in this class.

Disability

I am happy to accommodate any special requirements you may have in connection with a University-documented disability. Please notify me in advance if you need any such accommodation. I would appreciate hearing from you as soon as possible.

This syllabus subject to change with appropriate notice