

Reading Guide Introductory Lecture

Readings for 11 January 2011

REQUIRED READINGS

- [A] Dan Ariely, “The Problem of Procrastination and Self-Control.” Chapter 6 from *Predictably Irrational* (Harper Collins, 2008), pp. 109-126. V*2)

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED OPTIONAL READINGS

- [B] Simon Blackburn, “What is Philosophy?” (a selection from pages 1-12 of Simon Blackburn’s *Think* (Oxford University Press, 1999), as reprinted in Gendler, Siegel and Cahn, eds. *The Elements of Philosophy: Readings from Past and Present* (Oxford, 2008)), pp. 1-5 (V*2)

[A]

Background

Dan Ariely (1967-) is an Israeli-American professor who currently serves as the James B. Duke Professor of Psychology and Behavioral Economics at Duke University; there he holds a range of appointments, including at the Fuqua School of Business, the Center for Cognitive Neuroscience, the School of Medicine, and the Department of Economics. From 1998-2008, he was a professor of Behavioral Economics at MIT’s Sloan School of Management. Ariely is known both for his highly-engaging popular writing, and for his innovative scientific studies.

The chapter we are reading comes from his lively and readable popular work, *Predictably Irrational* (2008). You should read the chapter in full. (At one point, Ariely makes reference to a distinction drawn in the previous chapter – between “cool” reason and “hot” emotion – but the context provides sufficient background to understand what he is saying without going back to read that chapter.)

Later this semester, we will be reading the actual study (Ariely & Wortenberg 2002) on which the discussion from pages 112-117 is based, in the context of a broader discussion of weakness of the will.

Terms, Concepts, and Examples

Be sure that you understand and are able to distinguish among the following terms, concepts and examples:

Terms and Concepts: procrastination; precommitment mechanisms

Examples: paper deadline study; Ford/Honda bundled services story; “ice-glass” method; self-control credit card

Reading Questions

As you read, pay special attention to the following issues and questions:

- (1) What were the results of the paper deadline study described on pages 112-117? What explanation does Ariely offer for the results?
- (2) What does Ariely mean by “precommitments”? What are some of the domains in which he thinks precommitments might be useful?
- (3) What is the “ice-glass” method? How does the self-control credit card extend this idea?

[B]

Background

Simon Blackburn (1944-) is a British professor of philosophy known both for scholarly work, and for his efforts to introduce philosophy to non-professional audiences. He is currently Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cambridge (England) and Research Professor of Philosophy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Additional biographical information about him can be found at the beginning of the assigned reading. He is also the author of the *Dictionary of Philosophy* that we will be using as a reference work throughout the semester.

The selection we are reading is drawn from the opening pages of his introductory text, *Think*. (1999). It provides a nice overview of some of the main topics that philosophers are concerned with, and explains some of the reasons that people have found these topics engaging. If you have not taken a philosophy class before, you may find this discussion helpful in deciding whether this is a field about which you wish to learn more.

Posted 1/7/2011