Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology
Philosophy M.A. Program

Course Title: PH 4950, Medieval theories of action
Semester/Year: Fall 2015
Professor: Christopher Caruana OP – christopher.caruana@kcl.ac.uk

Course Description: The first major task of this course will be to offer an analysis and interpretation of self-motion in both Classical and Medieval philosophy. Secondly, the impact of the patristic account of the psychology of action on medieval theories of action and freedom needs to be carefully examined. In particular, how does the reception of voluntas affect the medieval reception of Aristotle’s theory of human agency and freedom? This will enable us to understand more fully the medieval theory of liberum arbitrium and to determine whether it adds anything significant to our understanding of human freedom and to practical reason-based theories of action.

Student Learning Goals: 

a) Students will acquire a deeper understanding of the rich philosophical medieval debate on human agency and freedom.
b) Three main goals characterize this course: delving into the challenging but crucial notion of self-motion as developed in Greek philosophy; outlining a critical survey of the main theories of action in medieval philosophy; highlighting the major impact brought by the introduction of voluntas into the ‘classical’ account of the human act.
c) Students will be guided in reading philosophical passages and will be asked to prepare schematic notes on every lecture. At the end of the course they will be assessed on an essay related to the topics discussed during the course unit.
d) This course provides some of the most pertinent reasons why contemporary philosophers should engage with medieval thought, particularly with the synthesis provided by Thomas Aquinas.

Student Learning Outcomes: 

a) Great importance is attached at DSPT to the History of Philosophy and to the thought of St Thomas Aquinas. Students choosing this course will have global understanding of the development of the theory of human action in medieval philosophy. Specifically, they will engage with the historical account of the psychology of action in a critical way and develop skills that examine the coherence of the various solutions discussed.
b) Students will need to engage with the writings of the main philosophers in this debate. They will write an essay to
demonstrate their ability to answering a question in a disciplined way as well as their understanding of the main theories involved.

Methodology: Lectures followed by discussion. Time will be allowed for presentations by students related to their assignment which will be a long research paper.

Requirements: Students will be expected to attend lectures regularly in line with the policies stated in the Student Handbook at DSPT.

Credit weight: 4000

Textbooks: Students are encouraged to read up in order to support content delivered in lectures following the suggested readings assigned below. One of the following books may be chosen as a good handbook to this course:


Course schedule:

Week 1: Introducing Aristotle on self-motion
Suggested reading:
Aristotle, *Physics*. Book II. 1 and Book VIII. 4-6

Week 2: Aristotle and the Stoic Tradition
Suggested reading:
Week 3: Overview of the Classical Tradition
Suggested reading:

Week 4: The emergence of the will
Suggested reading:

Week 5: Augustine on will and freedom
Suggested reading:

Week 6: Action theory and freedom in Anselm
Suggested reading:

Week 7: Anselm (2)
Suggested reading:

Week 8: Albertus Magnus on self-motion
Suggested reading:

Week 9: Albertus Magnus theory of action
Suggested reading:

Week 10: Aquinas theory of action (1)
Suggested reading:

Week 11: Aquinas theory of action (2)
Suggested reading:

Week 12: Scotus on human action and the will
Suggested reading:

Week 13: Scotus (2)
Suggested reading:

Week 14: The problem of incontinentia
Saarinen, R. Weakness of the Will in Medieval Thought. Brill: Leiden-Cologne-Boston. 1994
Bibliography:

Primary Sources:


Secondary Literature:


