

Programme

Winter Semester (lecture period): 13 October 2025 – 14 February 2026

Human Abilities Centre, Schönhauser Allee 10-11, 10119 Berlin

Colloquium

Open to all people on the colloquium list, the paper is normally pre-read.

Email list: humanabilities_colloquium@lists.hu-berlin.de

Tuesdays from 02:15 to 03:45 PM in room 4.17, tea/coffee afterwards

4 November	Eleonore Neufeld
25 November	Tianyue Wu
13 January	Hannes Rakoczy
3 February	Sebastian Bender

Reading Groups

Open to all members of the group. Descriptions below.

1 The Metaphysics of Activities

Organised by Nathaniel Baron-Schmitt and Mike Deigan

Every other Tuesday from 4:15 to 5:45

Starting 21 October

humanabilities_readinggroup1@lists.hu-berlin.de

2 Essence and Existence

Organised by Leonardo Moauro and Sebastian Bender

Every other Tuesday from 10:15 to 11:45

Starting 21 October

humanabilities_readinggroup2@lists.hu-berlin.de

3 Theories of the Will

Organised by Dominik Perler and Tobias Rosefeldt

Every other Tuesday from 10:15 to 11:45

Starting 28 October

humanabilities_readinggroup3@lists.hu-berlin.de

4 Modal Cognition in Infants

Organised by Eleonore Neufeld and Hannes Rakoczy

Every other Thursday from 2:15 to 3:45

Starting 23 October

humanabilities_readinggroup4@lists.hu-berlin.de

5 Emotion and the Capacity for the Real

Organised by Lucy Osler and Jan Slaby

Irregular meeting times: First meeting Friday October 31, 12 to 1:30 (online).

Then 11:15 to 12:45 these Fridays: November 7, December 5, January 9, February 6

humanabilities_readinggroup5@lists.hu-berlin.de

Workshops

Open to all members of the group

The Self as a Political Problem

Organised by Lucy Osler and Jan Slaby

13-14 November 2025

Room 4.17, Human Abilities Centre, Schönhauser Allee 10-11, 10119 Berlin

More workshops to be announced.

Reading Group Descriptions

The Metaphysics of Activities

I was walking around in Potsdam. This entails that I walked around in Potsdam.

I was walking to Potsdam. This doesn't entail that I walked to Potsdam.

This difference in entailments marks the difference between "activities", which don't have a built-in culmination point, and "accomplishments", which do.

This terminology comes from Zeno Vendler, and today the distinction is primarily studied by linguists, but the distinction was important to Aristotle and seems to be metaphysically significant. We will look at a number of metaphysical questions about activities. These topics have been largely neglected in contemporary analytic metaphysics, and our primary goal in

the reading group is to come up with some good questions.
Here are some things we plan to discuss:

- What does the activity/accomplishment distinction have to do with an agent's goals?
- Are activities somehow more fundamental than accomplishments? Do they have a greater degree of being? (or vice versa?) Relatedly, are powers to [activity] more fundamental than powers to [accomplishment]?
- Are activities in some sense more valuable than accomplishments? (or vice versa?)

We will look at a mix of contemporary and historical readings. Our first meeting on Tuesday 21 October will have no reading, and we would like to invite everyone to attend to help us brainstorm (even if you do not plan to attend the rest of the semester).

Essence and Existence

The relation between essence and existence is central to both scholastic and early modern European metaphysics. The guiding intuition is that what something is and whether it is are two distinct matters. The account philosophers give of this deceptively simple distinction—whether it is in things or in the mind alone, whether there is a distinction to be made at all, how it is related to other key concepts such as being and power—is critical to the structure of their ontologies, as evidenced by Descartes' doctrine of eternal truths.

But the roots of the essence-existence distinction lie before Aquinas and outside of Europe: in the rich tradition of Arabic and Islamic philosophy, starting in the 9th century and stretching from Cordoba, Spain to modern-day Uzbekistan. This reading group will start by covering the classical Islamic debate—focusing particularly on Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) and his critics—and then move onto several representative figures in early and/or late scholasticism and the early modern period. We will strive for a good balance between primary and secondary texts.

Theories of the Will

It seems quite natural to assume that we are endowed with the will as a special power that enables us to initiate actions. And it seems equally natural to look at it as a two-way power: it enables us to act or to refrain from acting. Some would even say that it enables us to act freely. But how natural are these assumptions? Does it really make sense to posit the will as a special power in addition to all other human powers? And is it plausible to characterize it as the source of freedom?

The reading group examines these questions by going back to the origins of the idea of the will as a power. It will start with medieval theories of the will and then move on to the critique of these theories in early modern philosophy. We will discuss parts of the manuscript of Robert Pasnau's forthcoming book *Medieval Voluntarism and Agency* and ideally also texts by members of the group.

Emotions and the Capacity for the Real

Emotional abilities are abilities of a subject to cultivate, display and articulate a range of emotions that are reasonable in context. The capacity for the real is the ability to acknowledge, understand and “live with” reality, particularly where the real in reach is unwelcome, painful or counter to what powerful factions put forth as paramount reality in society.

These abilities overlap, as emotions figure among a person’s ability to access, acknowledge and cope with relevant reality, in particular where what is real is both significant to and detrimental to the person’s goals and concerns. Our capacity for the real depends on emotional abilities, for instance the ability to *feel* the significance of what is real, or to have the affective and epistemic resistance to acknowledge unwelcome truths rather than turning away through wishful thinking. A person’s capacity for the real accordingly subsumes emotional abilities.

The reading group explores these two abilities and their interrelation. It engages with work from the philosophy of emotion, social philosophy, social epistemology and feminist philosophy.