Phil 290-2: Promises and Promissory Obligation
M, 12–2pm
Website: http://sophos.berkeley.edu/kolodny/12SPhil290.htm

Instructors:
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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
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](http://sophos.berkeley.edu/kolodny/papers.htm)

Monday, March 5
[http://cdn.law.ucla.edu/SiteCollectionDocuments/faculty/shiffrin-promising_intimate_relationships.pdf](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
MacFarlane, “What is Assertion?”
[http://johnmacfarlane.net/papers.html](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*
[http://cdn.law.ucla.edu/SiteCollectionDocuments/faculty/shiffrin-divergenceofcontractandpromise.pdf](http://cdn.law.ucla.edu/SiteCollectionDocuments/faculty/shiffrin-divergenceofcontractandpromise.pdf)