

# Thomas Nagel

## **2008 Balzan Prize for Moral Philosophy**

*For his fundamental and innovative contributions to contemporary ethical theory, relating to both individual, personal choices and collective, social decisions. For the depth and coherence of his original philosophical perspective, which is centered on the essential tension between objective and subjective points of view. For the originality and fecundity of his philosophical approach to some of the most important questions in contemporary life.*

## **Philosophical Aspects of Global Order**

### **New York University**

*Adviser for the General Balzan Committee: Salvatore Veca*

To show the complexity of ethics and politics: thanks to the second half of the Balzan Prize to Thomas Nagel, New York University will be able to offer graduates from other countries the possibility of participating in the activities of the Institute of Philosophy – which promotes groups that do research on themes of public interest characterized by philosophical aspects on a global level – as well as in the seminar on law, philosophy and social theory held by Thomas Nagel and Ronald Dworkin at the Law School.

Part of the funds support activities of the Institute of Philosophy fostering research groups on topics of public concern that have an important philosophical dimension, such as “Science and Religion” or “Epistemology and Ethics of Disagreement”. These working groups bring together junior and senior scholars and graduate students regularly over an extended period, with research papers subjected to criticism and discussion. During the spring term of 2010 the funds supported a research seminar on “Evolution and Ethics”, conducted by two assistant professors in the NYU Philosophy Department, Sharon Street and Laura Franklin-Hall. They describe their project as follows: “In this seminar we will examine recent philosophical work concerning the relevance of evolutionary biology to ethics. Questions to be addressed include: How should we understand the role of biological and cultural evolution in shaping our capacity for normative thought and motivation, and in shaping the content of human values? Are such traits properly understood as evolutionary adaptations? What implications, if any, might evolutionary explanations have for our understanding of the

nature of normative truth (both practical and epistemic) and our ability to know what it is? Are the causal origins of normative judgments ever relevant to normative theorizing – whether “first-order” or “meta-ethical” – and if so, in what way? Do the details of the best causal explanation matter? Does normative theory have an “autonomy” of sorts, and if so, how should we understand this idea? We will begin with some background in the relevant biology and ethics, and then focus our attention on the work of the following authors, each of whom will be visiting the seminar: Philip Kitcher, John Dewey Professor of Philosophy and James R. Barker Professor of Contemporary Civilization at Columbia University, Allan Gibbard, Richard B. Brandt Distinguished University Professor of Philosophy at the University of Michigan, Richard Joyce, Associated Professor of Philosophy at the University of Sydney, and Chandra Sripada, Assistant Professor at the University of Michigan”. The Authors’ visits are funded with the second half of the 2008 Balzan Prize for Moral Philosophy.

Most of the funds are being used to provide fellowships to enable visiting graduate students from abroad to spend time at New York University, to participate in the Institute of Philosophy research activities as well as in the NYU Law School “Colloquium in Legal, Political and Social Philosophy”, conducted by Thomas Nagel and Ronald Dworkin. The Colloquium examines scholarly work in progress on the issues of global justice, international human rights, immigration and national boundaries, and the relation between democratic legitimacy and judicial versus legislative supremacy. Students, younger scholars, and senior faculty members, all participate in this program of ongoing discussions. For the three years of the project, several Balzan Fellowships will be allocated each year to students coming to the Philosophy Department, either to do an M.A. or to spend a year as visiting graduate students. Every effort is made to identify students with the appropriate interests and abilities, so that such a visit might provide them with an opportunity to greatly expand their intellectual horizons.

The program of visiting Balzan Fellowships to New York University for graduate students from abroad was set up in the fall of 2008. A Committee in the Philosophy Department sent out requests to a number of philosophers in different countries, asking for nominations of suitable candidates. The nominees were asked to submit CVs, statements of research interests, and samples of written work. A good number of promising applications were received and the following three fellowships for the 2009-2010 academic year have been awarded:

- Camil Golub, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Bucharest. He is working on the relation between normativity and evolutionary theory, with respect to the norms of logic and belief as well as the norms of intention and action.

- Ana Hulton, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Buenos Aires. She is working on the metaphysics of natural kinds and laws of nature, with special reference to modality and the distinction between essential and accidental properties. She also works in the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of cognitive science.

- Stefan Ionescu, a Ph.D. candidate at the Central European University in Budapest. He is working in the philosophy of science, with special reference to the analysis of causation and explanation.

Each of the Balzan Fellows is taking two graduate seminars per semester for credit in the department, and is also participating in the various colloquia and conferences sponsored by the Institute of Philosophy, the Philosophy Department, and the School of Law.

Any publication in scholarly journals resulting from this program will acknowledge the support of the Balzan Foundation through its 2008 Prize in Moral Philosophy awarded to Thomas Nagel.

**Statement by the Prizewinner:** *Every effort will be made to identify students with the appropriate interests and abilities for whom such a visit would be an opportunity greatly to expand their intellectual horizons.* Thomas Nagel (Rome, 24.11.2006)