

# Thomas Nagel

**Professor of Philosophy and Law at New York University**

## **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 centred 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.*

**Institution Administering Research Funds:** New York University

**Adviser for the Balzan General Prize Committee:** Salvatore Veca

## **Philosophical Aspects of Global Order**

The main aim of the research project is to explore the complexity of ethics and politics, but it also supports young researchers in the fields of philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, and philosophy of science.

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 Philosophy Department's program and its 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 four year duration of the project, several Balzan Fellowships are to be allocated each year to students coming to the Philosophy Department 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. Each of the Balzan Fellows will take two graduate seminars per semester for credit in the department, and also participate in the various colloquia and conferences sponsored by the Institute of Philosophy, the Philosophy Department and the School of Law.

A further portion of the funds supports 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, “Evolution and Ethics”, conducted by two assistant professors in the NYU Philosophy Department, Sharon Street and Laura Franklin-Hall. The seminar examined recent philosophical work concerning the relevance of evolutionary biology to ethics. Questions to be addressed included: 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? Attention was focused on the work of the following authors, each of whom visited 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 were funded with the second half of the 2008 Balzan Prize for Moral Philosophy.

Funds were used to support three NYU/Columbia Graduate Student Philosophy Conferences:

In April 2011, the following papers were presented at the conference: “Shifts of Attention and the Content of Perception”, Adrienne Prettyman (University of Toronto); “Against Epistemic Akrasia”, Sophie Horowitz (MIT); “A Two-pronged Strategy for Solving the Platonist’s Access Problem”, Sharon Elizabeth Berry (Harvard); “It’s All too Hard”, Aness Webster (University of Southern California).

In April 2012, the following papers were presented: “Of Grounding and Explanation”, Ryan Perkins (Oxford); “Self-Forgiveness and Quality of Will”, Per-Erik Milam (University of California, San Diego); “Epistemic Blame and the Challenge of Doxastic Involuntarism”, Charles Cote-Bouchard (Montreal); “Subjective Ought”, Jennifer Carr (MIT); “Quasi-Realism and the Problem of Unexplained Coincidence”, James Dreier (Brown).

In April 2013, the following papers were presented: “Quantum Mechanics and Humean Supervenience”, Elizabeth Miller (Harvard); “Is the Experience of Temporal Passage a Reason to Reject the B-Theory of Time?”, Melissa MacAulay (Western Ontario); “A Smaller Self: Two Criticisms of Real Self Theories”, Ross Colebrook (CUNY); “Against Intellectualist Accounts of Belief”, Jack Marley-Payne (MIT); “Time-Slice Epistemology and Action under Indeterminacy”, Sarah Moss (Michigan).

In the spring of 2013, Balzan funds were used to support a series of conferences conducted by the New York Institute of Philosophy, on the Foundations of Epistemology. The conferences brought together junior and senior scholars for intensive discussion of specific materials, presented by their authors. There were three meetings in all, the first two in New York and the third at the NYU conference center La Pietra, near Florence:

February 16: The Value of Truth

Peter Railton (University of Michigan), “The Value of Truth and the Value of Belief”, with comments by Sinan Dogramaci (University of Texas); Paul Horwich (NYU), “Belief-Truth Norms”, with comments by Daniel Greco (NYU).

April 13: Reasoning

John Broome (Oxford), “Reasoning and Normativity”, with comments by Jim Pryor (NYU); Dan Sperber (Paris), “Why Do Humans Reason?” with comments by Matthew Kotzen (University of North Carolina).

### June 3-6: The A Priori

Tim Williamson (Oxford), “How Deep is the Distinction Between A Posteriori and A Priori Knowledge”, with comments by Paul Boghossian (NYU); Crispin Wright (NYU), “The Basic A Priori: Simple Arithmetic as a Case Study”, with comments by Josh Schechter (Brown); John Bengson (University of Wisconsin), “The Intellectual Given”, with comments by Amia Srinivasan (Oxford); Robin Jeshion (USC), “Intuiting the Infinite”, with comments by Jane Friedman (Oxford); David Chalmers (NYU), “Constructing the World”, with comments by Stephen Schiffer (NYU).

### **Researchers:**

Assistant Professors (Seminar):

Laura Franklin-Hall, NYU Philosophy Department

Sharon Street, NYU Philosophy Department

### Graduate Fellowships 2009-2010:

- Camil Golub, Universitatea din București. He worked 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. He took classes in: Philosophy of the High Level Sciences; Meaning, Understanding and Truth; Constructing the World; Non-Classical Logics; Evolution and Ethics. Individual advisor: Laura Franklin-Hall.
- Ana Hulton, Universidad de Buenos Aires. She worked 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 worked on the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of cognitive science. She took the following classes: Topics in Metaphysics: Metaphysics and Metaphilosophy and Constructing the World. (1 term). Individual advisor: Ted Sider.
- Stefan Ionescu, Central European University, Budapest. He worked in the philosophy of science, with special reference to the analysis of causation and explanation. He took classes on: The Philosophy of the Special Sciences, General Philosophy of Language and the class “Constructing the World”. Individual advisor: Michael Strevens.

### Graduate Fellowships 2010-2011:

- Ramiro Caso, Universidad de Buenos Aires, took courses on Philosophical Logic and Philosophical Research. He produced six papers. Two papers were on relativism about truth; two were on sets and quantification; another was on admissible

solutions for the problem of self-undermining chances raised by Lewis' Principal Principle; a final paper was produced on Aristotelian metaphysics (1 term). Individual advisor: Crispin Wright.

- Orsolya Reich, Central European University, Budapest, attended classes in Ethics, Decision Theory and Egalitarianism. She produced two papers: "The Fairness Theory and the Particularity Requirement" and "Global Equality of Resources". Individual advisor: Thomas Nagel.
- Shun-Pin Hsu, National Yang Ming University in Taipei, focused on the level theory in biology. Individual advisor: Laura Franklin-Hall.
- Joy Chihyi Hung, National Yang Ming University in Taipei, focused on philosophy of mind, and took courses in Metaphysics, Philosophy of Biology, Philosophy of Creativity, Philosophy of Mind. Individual advisor: Ned Block.

#### Graduate Fellowships 2011-2012:

- Yun-Chak Chong, Chinese University of Hong Kong, participated in the Colloquium in Law, Philosophy and Social Theory; seminars on metaethics and on equality; on the philosophy of physics and individual directed research on the moral philosophy of Hume and Kant. His research is especially concerned with the problem of how demanding moral requirements are in relation to the interests of the individual agent. Individual advisor: Thomas Nagel.
- Alfonso Losada, Universidad de Buenos Aires, is working on the semantics of natural language and the link between the meaning and the epistemic dimension of expressions. He is also concerned with the epistemology of modality, and whether conceivability is a good guide to possibility. Individual advisor: Stephen Schiffer.
- Attila Mraz, Central European University, Budapest, participated in the Colloquium in Law, Philosophy and Social Theory, and took other seminars in metaethics and equality. His research focuses on the relation between equality and justice and the scope of egalitarian justice – whether it applies nationally or internationally – as well as the question of how the structure of actual institutions affects this scope. Individual advisor: Samuel Scheffler.
- Adriana Sora, Universitatea din București, participated in seminars in metaphysics and the philosophy of science. Her research focuses on philosophy of mind, with special reference to the epistemological aspects of the mind-body problem. She participated in the workshop conducted by David Chalmers on problems about consciousness. Individual advisor: Peter Unger.

Graduate Fellowships 2012-2013:

- David Bitter, Central European University, Budapest, pursued research on the cognitive status of hypnosis and hallucinations, and on the relation between the phenomenal and intentional content of perception, in discussion with Ned Block. In the fall he attended a seminar at Rutgers conducted by Jerry Fodor and Zenon Pylyshyn on the Role of Concepts in Perception. In the spring he took Jesse Prinz's seminar on Recent Issues in Consciousness, and the Mind and Language seminar conducted by Stephen Schiffer and Stephen Neale. He also participated in David Chalmers's workshop on consciousness in the fall term. Individual supervisor: Ned Block.
- Sapphires Sin Ting Wong, Chinese University of Hong Kong, came with a primary interest in philosophy of mind. She was individually supervised in the fall by Ned Block on the neurobiological basis of consciousness, by Thomas Nagel on the problem of personal identity in the fall term, and on ethical theory in the spring. In the spring she also had supervision by Helen Yetter Chappell in philosophy of mind. She participated in seminars and workshops conducted by Ned Block, Jesse Prinz and David Chalmers on neuroscience and the philosophy of mind. Individual supervisor: Thomas Nagel.

The research funds have been used almost exclusively to support graduate students in the middle of their studies, rather than post-doctoral researchers. But the opportunities the fellowships offer to students from all over the world to expand their horizons and enrich their intellectual experience have been invaluable, and will certainly bear fruit in the future.