Philosophy XYZ: What is a law of nature?
Spring Term 2019 Instructor: Stathis Psillos
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Course outline
This intensive seminar aims to examine in detail the various philosophical theories of laws of nature. It will start with some historical issues concerning the emergence of the idea that nature is law-governed in the seventeenth century, and in particular in the philosophy of nature of Descartes. Descartes’s conception will be contrasted to the views of Hobbes, Newton, Leibniz, Berkeley and Hume. After some discussion of the secularisation of the conception of natural laws by John Stuart Mill (and some French materialists such as Baron d’Holbach), we will move on to discuss the various empiricist (or neo-Humean) attempts to tie laws to regularities by way of avoiding necessities in nature. Next, we will focus on various reactions to the empiricist project, most notably the view that laws are contingent relations of necessitation among universals, the neo-Aristotelian view that laws flow from the powers of particulars and the structuralist view that laws codify worldly symmetries. Finally we will examine the views of those philosophers who deny that there are laws of nature.

TEXTS: Readings are available through a dropbox folder. Lecture notes will be provided.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS: This is an intensive course. There will be 8 sessions in the space of three weeks. Then there will be two or three more sessions over skype with student presentations. All those who take it for credit are required to write two essays. One short essay (about 2500 words) which will be delivered by the end of March and one standard size essay (about 4500 words) to be delivered by the end of April. They are also required to make a presentation of a paper.
The course will start on Wednesday 27th of February 2019.

Plan of the course (exact dates to be provided)
1. Introduction-Overview. The emergence of the law-governed conception of the world
2. The laws of nature debate during the 17th century
3. Empiricist approaches to laws I
4. Empiricist approaches to laws II: The Mill-Ramsey-Lewis View
5. Laws as relations among universals: The ADT view
6. Dispositional essentialism and laws
7. Primitivism
8. Structuralism and beyond

Key texts for preparation:
Psillos, S. 2002. Causation and Explanation, chapters 5-7
Ott, W. 2009. Causation and Laws of Nature in Early Modern Philosophy, chapters 1, 3, 9
Psillos, S. unpublished manuscript. From Natures to Laws of Nature
Psillos, S. Laws and powers in the frame of nature.
Mill, J.S. A System of Logic, chapter VI: Laws of Nature