

Philosophy 313: Metaphysics

WF 12:35-2:00

D-125

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Course description

This course surveys the responses of contemporary philosophers to central questions in metaphysics, including those related to: the essence of humans, our ability to persist through change, and ability to act freely; the nature of objects and their properties; causation, time, and time travel; what exists, and how we can talk about what does not exist, including fictional entities; how what could be true and must be true relates to what is true; and whether the world is mind-independent. Prerequisite: one 100-level philosophy course, one 200-level social studies course, or permission of the instructor.

Course objectives

This course aims for students to be able to:

1. Articulate an overview of issues in metaphysics
2. Engage in reasoned, charitable, and detailed philosophical discourse about issues in metaphysics
3. Develop greater knowledge and expertise with the methodology of analytic philosophy
4. Demonstrate improved philosophical writing in papers of increasing length throughout the semester
5. Present selected debates in metaphysics accurately and clearly
6. Devise competent critiques of selected philosophers' positions.

Course requirements

Required texts

Metaphysics: Contemporary Readings, ed. Michael J. Loux. Routledge.

Riddles of Existence, Earl Conee and Theodore Sider. Oxford University Press.

Additional readings (marked with an “*”) are available on Moodle.

Assignments

| | | |
|-----------------------------------------|-----|-----------|
| 1 5-page paper (\approx 1600 words) | 30% | 2/21 |
| 2 7-page papers (\approx 2240 words) | 65% | 4/3, 5/12 |
| Professionalism | 5% | Eternal |

The conversion from points to grades is: A (93-100), A- (90-93), B+ (87-90), B (83-87), etc.

Any student not completing all assigned work will fail the class, regardless of their grade on completed assignments. Students are expected to attend all class sessions and to be in class on time, as well as to be thoroughly prepared and ready to contribute to discussions, group work, and individual meetings with the instructor. Any late arrival beyond a certain grace period will count as half a cut. Determining the length of the grace period will require experimenting with late arrivals in such a way that your grade will be negatively affected. Academic dishonesty (see “Handling Texts Responsibly,” below) will result in a failing grade for the course, as well as referral to the appropriate authorities. Students are not required to attend class when it conflicts with a holiday of the religion to which they subscribe so long as they let me know in advance. Please discuss learning accommodations with me as early in the semester as makes sense for you.

The exams will consist of some questions primarily directed at evaluating your comprehension of the material covered in class, and other questions asking you to engage in a more elaborate analysis of the issues we have covered. Papers are to be type-written and double-spaced in 12 point Times New Roman or Garamond font with the default margins for Microsoft Word: 1” top and bottom, 1.25” left and right. Within a reasonable margin, papers are not to exceed the required length. Please include a word count. Papers will be assigned grades on the basis of: (1) clarity; (2) creativity; (3) strength of argument; (4) insightfulness; (5) organization; (6) relevance to topic; and (7) grammar and spelling. Exam grades will be assigned on the basis of: (1) clarity; (2) accuracy; and (3) insightfulness.

Class discussions

Students are encouraged to participate actively in large and small group discussions. Active participation extends to listening as well as speaking. The most helpful contributions to class discussion are often tied to a particular passage from the readings or relate directly to a point made by someone else in the class. All electronic devices should be in airplane mode unless the instructor requests otherwise.

Professionalism

The professionalism portion of the grade is based on attendance and timeliness. Each student starts with 100 points. Points will be deducted as follows:

| | |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| Reading not completed (1 pass) | -10 points |
| 1 st 2 absences | -2.5 points each |
| Additional absences | -10 points each |
| Astral projection during class | -15 points |
| Paper turned in: | |
| 5 min-24 hours late | -5 points |
| 24 hours-1 week late | -10 points |
| 1-2 weeks late | -20 points + -10 points on the <i>paper grade</i> |
| 2-3 weeks late | -30 points + -20 points on the <i>paper grade</i> |
| 3-13 weeks late | -40 points + -20 points on the <i>paper grade</i> |

Papers not turned in at the beginning of class on the date due may be counted as late at the discretion of the instructor. Extensions will be granted in particularly difficult circumstances. The more notice given, the more likely an extension will be granted.

If a student's professionalism grade gets to zero, then every additional 10-point deduction results in the professionalism grade counting an additional 1% of the final grade.

Revision policy

I will accept any number of revisions of any paper, provided that the original paper was turned in *on time* and in *good faith*. The grade for a revised paper replaces the grade of the original paper. Note that there are practical restrictions on the number of revisions, for example, it takes time to grade. This means that if you want the opportunity to revise your final paper, you must turn it in early. In addition, I reserve the right to decide that a particular paper has reached its potential and cannot be revised further for a change in grade.

Illness policy

If you are ill, please email me before the class meeting and attend to your health. With proper notification, absences for illness will not count against professionalism. If illnesses accumulate to the point that the quality of education is threatened, the matter will be resolved with the assistance of the Associate Dean of Academic Affairs.

Schedule of Readings and Assignments

Readings marked with a '*' are available on the course Moodle site. Note that the reading for this class is difficult, requiring both close attention and occasional re-reading. *Riddles of Existence* is intended as background reading. It is recommended that you read it before any other articles in the unit; however, it is not required that you complete it until the end of the unit.

January 22 Introduction

Nonbeing and Fictional Entities

January 24 *Bertrand Russell, "Descriptions"
W. V. O. Quine, "On What There Is," 42-56

January 29 *Amie Thomasson, "Fictional Entities"
*Saul Kripke, *Reference and Existence*, Lecture III

Universals

January 31 Bertrand Russell, "The World of Universals," 14-19
David Armstrong, "Universals as Attributes," 65-91
Riddles of Existence, Chapter 8

February 5 H. H. Price, "Universals and Resemblances," 20-41
D. C. Williams, "The Elements of Being," 57-64

February 7 *David Lewis, "New Work for a Theory of Universals"

Particulars

- February 12 Max Black, "The Identity of Indiscernibles," 104-113
Edwin Allaire, "Bare Particulars," 114-120
- February 14 James Van Cleve, "Three Versions of the Bundle Theory," 121-133
Albert Casullo, "A Fourth Version of the Bundle Theory," 134-150
- February 19 *Karen Bennett, "Spatio-Temporal Coincidence and the Grounding
Problem"
Riddles of Existence, Chapter 7
- February 21 **5-page paper due**
No class

Possible Worlds

- February 26 David Lewis, "Possible Worlds," 160-167
Alvin Plantinga, "Actualism and Possible Worlds," 168-187
Riddles of Existence, Chapter 9
- February 28 David Lewis, "Counterparts or Double Lives?," 188-217
- March 4 Saul Kripke, "Identity and Necessity," 218-250

Causation

- March 6 *Bertrand Russell, "Psychological and Physical Causal Laws"
*Susan Stebbing, "Causality"
G. E. M. Anscombe, "Causality and Determination," 284-300

Spring Break

- March 25 J. L. Mackie, "Causes and Conditions," 301-325
- March 27 David Lewis, "Causation," 326-338

Freedom of the Will

- April 1 *R. E. Hobart, "Free Will as Involving Determination and
Inconceivable without It"
*Peter Van Inwagen, "The Consequence Argument"
*Peter Van Inwagen, "The Mystery of Metaphysical Freedom"
Riddles of Existence, Chapter 6
- April 3 **7-page paper due**
No class

- April 8 *Roderick Chisholm, “Human Freedom and the Self”
 *Timothy O’Connor, “The Agent As Cause”
- April 10 *Harry Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a
 Person”
 *Kadri Vihvelin, “Stop Me Before I Kill Again”

Time

- April 15 J. M. E. McTaggart, “Time,” 350-361
 C. D. Broad, “Ostensible Temporality,” 362-368
 Riddles of Existence, Chapter 3
- April 17 A. N. Prior, “The Notion of the Present,” 379-383
 D. H. Mellor, “The Need for Tense,” 394-407
- April 22 *David Lewis, “The Paradoxes of Time Travel”
 *Kadri Vihvelin, “What Time Travelers Cannot Do”

Identity Through Time

- April 24 Heller, “Temporal Parts of Four-Dimensional Objects,” 418-442
 *Dean Zimmerman, “Temporary Intrinsic and Presentism”
 Riddles of Existence, Chapter 1
- April 29 Derek Parfit, “Personal Identity,” 464-484
 David Lewis, “Survival and Identity,” Parts I-III, 485-495
- May 1 David Lewis, “Survival and Identity,” Parts IV-Postscripts, 495-509
 *Ted Sider, “All the World’s a Stage”
- May 6 **Last Day of Class**
 *Elselijn Kingma, “Lady Parts”
- May 12 **7-page paper due**

Advice On Writing Philosophy Papers

Goal

Achieve a deep understanding of an author or authors' position; think about the arguments *for* and *against* this position; decide which group of arguments *you* find most persuasive; and report your findings to the reader in a compelling and clear manner.

Structure

I. Introduction

Give a brief statement of the position you will be examining, and express your satisfaction or dissatisfaction with this position. Be sure to provide some clues about the particular direction you'll be taking.

II. Body

There are two main tasks involved in writing a critical philosophy paper: *explication* and *critique*.

Explication is the presentation of an author's position as clearly and fairly as possible. Thus explication involves stating the *conclusion*, the *premises* used in the proof of the conclusion, and the *argument* (i.e. the relationship between the premises and the conclusion). Be sure to interpret the position so that it makes the most sense that it can. This is not to be nice. It is in your best interest: for if your interpretation is not the strongest possible, your criticisms might be easily avoided by a stronger interpretation.

Critique can be positive or negative; in either case, it involves the same sorts of skills. If you *agree* with the author, you might want to: (1) show how the author's argument can be strengthened; (2) discuss objections that have been or might be made against the position, and present solutions to these objections. If you *disagree* with the author, you might want to: (1) show that the author's premises are flawed; (2) demonstrate that the author's argument is not valid—i.e. that the conclusion does not follow from the premises; (3) argue that the consequences of the author's position are unacceptable. Whether you agree or disagree with the author, be sure to consider objections to *your own views*; for example, if you disagree with the author, say how she might respond to your objections, and attempt to answer her response.

III. Conclusion

If you haven't stated, developed and argued for your position by now, it's too late. But be sure to wrap up: remind the reader where you've been, and perhaps suggest where things might go from here. To keep things interesting, you might want to summarize from a fresh perspective, or emphasize a theme you haven't explicitly dealt with in the main body of your paper.

Style, Form, and Attitude

The audience of your paper should be your intelligent but philosophically uninformed roommate.

The most important aspect of philosophical style is *explicitness*. Explicitness is just *saying exactly what you mean*; and saying exactly what you mean involves thinking about what *every word* means. This sounds simple, but it is actually quite difficult. After you have finished your first draft, look for all the passages that might be misinterpreted and clarify them.

Organize. Discuss one thing at a time.

Don't be afraid to change your mind while writing—after all, it's a sign that you're doing some serious thinking about the issues. But if you are convinced by an argument against your intended conclusion, *it is infinitely better to change your conclusion than to try to cover up the argument*: chances are high that your reader will notice the objection whether you acknowledge its existence or not. If you change your conclusion—and even if you don't—it is a great idea to edit at least once for organization in light of your (new) conclusion.

Your reader will not be impressed by big words, so make your diction as simple as you can. When you must use technical vocabulary (e.g. 'sound', 'valid') let the reader know precisely what these terms mean. Once you define a word, stick with it--don't use synonyms, because this reduces clarity.

If you want, break some of the rules they taught us in high school: use "I" or "you" or whatever, feel free to use contractions, and don't think you have to write a five-paragraph essay. On the other hand, *don't* feel free to break basic rules of grammar and spelling.

When you do use the first person, use it to make it clear what your opinions are; for example, "Descartes thinks he has proven that we have knowledge of the external world. I think, however, that he has done no such thing." You **should not** use the first person in order to adopt a conversational tone: "I was waking up this morning and as I was eating breakfast I thought about skepticism. At first I thought it was a good argument but then I changed my mind, because I really feel like the world exists."

Don't stray from the topic in order to fill up space (or for any other reason). If you think that you've addressed the paper topic and you feel your paper is too short, odds are extremely good that you haven't addressed the topic in as much detail as you should.

Do not start your introduction with grand phrases like "Since time immemorial" or "Humans have always puzzled over . . ." Also, be wary of historical claims such as "Descartes was the first philosopher to present the argument 'I think, therefore I am'": they may be false (as is this one), and they do not add much to the philosophical substance of your paper.

HANDLING TEXTS RESPONSIBLY

Plagiarism is defined as “submitting a piece of work which in part or in whole is not entirely the student’s work without attributing those same portions to their correct source.” In other words, it consists of misrepresenting someone else’s work as your own. This can happen **even if you are explicitly discussing the author you are plagiarizing**. For example, say that you are presenting the following passage:

A naive reaction to the idea that everything we do is completely determined by a causal chain that extends backward beyond the times of our births involves thinking that in that case we would have no control over our behavior whatsoever. (Susan Wolf)

You **cannot** write:

Wolf says that determinism holds that everything we do is completely determined by a causal chain that extends backward beyond the time of our births. A naive reaction to this case is that we would have no control over our behavior whatsoever.

If you do, you are plagiarizing. If you do not put quotes around a phrase or sentence, you are telling the reader that that phrase is your own. Thus if you do not put quotes around words that are not your own, you are misrepresenting the author’s work as your own. Similarly, you cannot write:

Wolf examines a naive reaction to determinism, which is that we would have no control over our behavior.

Even if you only take portions of an author’s phrases, you are still plagiarizing.

There are severe penalties for plagiarism. A paper containing plagiarism fails automatically, and the violation is reported to the academic judiciary. The student is brought before the appropriate committee, and can be given sentences ranging from community service to graduation deferral; in addition, the violation may be posted on the student’s transcript.

There are other ways of mishandling a source. For example, you could write:

Wolf says that an immature reaction to determinism is that in that case we wouldn’t have control over our actions at all.

or:

Determinism holds that our whole lives are completely determined by a causal chain that began before we were born.

Here the existence of plagiarism is controversial: if you follow the sentence with a citation—“(Wolf 1988, 50)”—then it may not be in technical violation of the standards of academic conduct. It is, however, terribly inadequate scholarship. If you paraphrase an author’s words, substituting synonyms here and there and juggling the sentence order around, **you are not saying anything which the author isn’t saying**. Furthermore, you are not demonstrating any comprehension of the material. The point of writing a paper is to demonstrate comprehension by giving a fresh exposition of the author’s argument; changing “we would have no control over our behavior” to “people might not have control over their actions” is completely unacceptable. If you can’t think of a fresh paraphrase of a passage, you should just quote the passage.

Here is an acceptable way to summarize the above passage:

Determinism is the view that all events, including all of our actions, are entailed by past events and the laws of nature. Wolf first considers the view that determinism implies that “we would have no control over our behavior whatsoever” (1988, 50).