

Forms of Philosophical Skepticism

Syllabus

Course Description

The aim of the course will be to consider some of the most influential treatments of skepticism in the post-war analytic philosophical tradition—in relation both to the broader history of philosophy and to current tendencies in contemporary analytic philosophy. The first part of the course will begin by distinguishing two broad varieties of skepticism—Cartesian and Kantian—and their evolution over the past two centuries, and will go on to isolate and explore some of the most significant variants of each of these varieties in recent analytic philosophy. The second part of the course will involve a close look at recent influential analytic treatments of skepticism, with a special eye to how they relate to these two varieties. We will carefully read and critically evaluate writings on skepticism by the following authors, among others: A. J. Ayer, J. L. Austin, Stanley Cavell, Thompson Clarke, Saul Kripke, C. I. Lewis, John McDowell, H. H. Price, Hilary Putnam, Wilfrid Sellars, Barry Stroud, Michael Williams. This will be a lecture course designed for both advanced undergraduate and graduate students. Undergraduates who enroll in the course should have some prior exposure to Descartes and Kant and some prior background in analytic philosophy.

Instructor

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Canvas Site

There is a Canvas website for this course (canvas.uchicago.edu). All readings listed on the syllabus are to be found on this site. In addition, a great many readings not mentioned on the syllabus are also to be found on this site. The latter generally pertain to topics discussed in passing in lecture and are made available for students who wish to pursue them further, perhaps in a final paper for the course. (If you ever encounter any problem obtaining an assigned reading for the course, you should immediately contact Professor Conant or Ryan and let him or her know about the problem.)

Structure of the Course and Related Issues

Lectures: There will be lectures on Mondays and Wednesdays. These will take place from 4:30 to 5:50pm in Harper 140. For more precise information, see the schedule of meetings below. All lectures will be recorded and posted on the canvas site. If you miss a lecture, you will be expected to listen to it before attending the following lecture.

Undergraduates: This course is open only to undergraduates who have had at least one previous course in philosophy.

Graduate Students: This course is open to all graduate students in Philosophy. Graduate students from other departments are welcome to audit or enroll in the course for credit on the condition that they have some prior familiarity with both epistemological skepticism and analytic philosophy.

Policy on Auditors: Anyone with a serious interest in the topic is welcome to audit the course.

Announcements: Announcements (modifications to the syllabus, etc.) will periodically be posted to the Canvas site. Students are expected to keep abreast of these.

Course Participation: All students involved in the course are expected to attend class regularly and be conversant with the required readings.

Undergraduate Discussion Sections: There will be two undergraduate discussion sections for the course, taught by Ryan Simonelli. Every undergraduate enrolled for credit must be assigned to and regularly attend one of these sections, as well as submit a discussion question before each section to the Canvas site. These sections will meet every week of the quarter from first to tenth week. Weekly attendance of sections is mandatory for undergraduates enrolled in the course. The time schedules and locations of these sections are: Friday, 12:30-1:20 in Saieh 242 and Friday, 1:30-2:20 in Weiboldt 230.

Graduate Discussion Section: There will be a graduate discussion section for the course. It will be led by Professor Conant. It will be scheduled via doodle poll, to be taken by those graduate students who wish to attend the section. The graduate section will begin meeting during the third week of the quarter. It is open to all PhD and MA students either enrolled in or auditing the course. Attendance of the graduate section is an optional component of the course even for graduate students enrolled for credit.

Undergraduate Course Requirements: There are three required elements for the course: (1) mandatory attendance and participation in discussion sections, (2) a short midterm paper (6-8 pages) due by Monday, May 13th at 11:59pm, at the beginning of week 7; (3) a longer paper (12-15 pages) due by Friday, June 14th at 11:59pm, at the end of week 11. Special deadlines will be arranged for graduating seniors. All undergraduate papers are to be delivered to Ryan Simonelli in electronic form.

Undergraduate Grade Breakdown: 15% for participation in discussion section; 35% for the short midterm paper, and 50% for the long final paper. To pass the course you must receive a passing grade in every required component of the course: A failing grade in any one of the three required components of the course will result in a failing grade for the course as a whole.

Graduate Course Requirements: Graduate students taking the course for credit are expected to write a term paper at the end of the quarter, due by Friday, June 14th at 11:59pm, at the end of week 11. Papers are to be submitted via email to Prof. Conant in electronic form. The final paper is the only official requirement for graduate students enrolled in the course. It may be on any topic of your choice pertaining to themes covered in the lecture. Graduate student papers (both M. A. and Ph.D.) should be between 15 and 30 pages.

Policy on Extensions for Graduate Student Papers: Graduate students may hand in their final papers after the official due date and still receive credit for the course, only if they have secured permission from the professor to do so. Any student granted an extension should also be aware of the following: such papers will not be graded immediately upon receipt. The later the paper, the less promptly it will be graded. Even those graduate students who are granted an extension on their paper may not turn their paper in past September 30, 2019.

Schedule of Meetings, Topics and Readings

First Meeting (Monday, April 1st): **Organizational and introductory meeting**

Introduction: Overview of the topics and themes to be covered in the course

Explanation of the approach to be taken to the assigned materials

Overview of the syllabus

No assigned reading for the first meeting.

Second Meeting (Wednesday, April 3rd): **Introduction to Cartesian Skepticism**

Required reading:

1. Descartes, *First Meditation*
2. Conant, “Two Varieties of Skepticism”, Parts I & II

Recommended Reading:

1. Descartes, *Second, Third, and Fourth Meditation*
2. Stroud, “Skepticism and the Possibility of Knowledge”
3. Williams, *Unnatural Doubts*, Chs. 1.1 & 1.2

Third Meeting (Monday, April 8th): **The Structure of Cartesian Skepticism**

Required reading:

1. Price, *Perception*, Ch. 1
2. Ayer, *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge*, Ch. 1.

Required re-reading:

1. Conant, “Two Varieties of Skepticism”, Part II

Recommended Reading:

1. Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism*, Ch. 1
2. Williams, *Unnatural Doubts*, Chs. 2.5 & 2.6

Fourth Meeting (Wednesday, April 10): Cartesian Skeptical Examples

Required reading:

1. Austin, "Other Minds"

Recommended Reading:

1. Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism*, Ch. 2

Fifth Meeting (Monday, April 15th): Clarke on Skepticism

Required reading:

1. Hamawaki, "In Search of the Plain and the Philosophical: Skepticism, Self-Knowledge, and Transcendental Illusion," 190-192.
2. Clarke, "The Legacy of Skepticism"

Recommended Reading:

1. Stroud, "Doubts about the Legacy of Skepticism"
2. Hamawaki, "In Search of the Plain and the Philosophical: Skepticism, Self-Knowledge, and Transcendental Illusion"
3. Clarke, "Seeing Surfaces"

Sixth Meeting (Wednesday, April 17th): Further Features of Cartesian Skepticism

Required reading:

1. Conant, "Two Varieties of Skepticism", Part VI

Recommended Reading:

1. Stroud, "Reasonable Claims"
2. Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism*, Ch. 7
3. Williams, *Unnatural Doubts*, Ch. 4

Seventh Meeting (Monday, April 22nd): Introduction to Disjunctivism

Required reading:

1. Cook, "Human Beings"
2. McDowell, "Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge"

Recommended Reading:

1. McDowell, *Perception as a Capacity for Knowledge*
2. Lockhart, "Motivating Disjunctivism"
3. McDowell, "Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space"

Eighth Meeting (Wednesday, April 24th): The Interface Conception

Required reading:

1. Putnam, *Sense, Nonsense, and the Senses*, Lectures 1 & 2
2. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*, Lectures 1-5.

Recommended Reading:

1. Hilary Putnam, *Sense, Nonsense, and the Senses*, Lecture 3
2. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*, Lectures 6-11

Ninth Meeting (Monday, April 29th): Introduction to Kantian Skepticism

Required reading:

1. Conant, "Two Varieties of Skepticism", Parts III, IV, & V

Recommended Reading:

1. Stroud, "Transcendental Arguments"
2. Hamawaki, "Cartesian Skepticism, Kantian Skepticism and Transcendental Arguments"

Tenth Meeting (Wednesday, May 1st): **Introduction to Lewis's Version of Kantianism**

Required reading:

1. C. I. Lewis, *Mind and the World Order*, Ch. 2
2. Lewis, "Reply to Firth".

Recommended Reading:

1. C. I. Lewis, *Mind and the World Order*, Chs. 1 & 3
2. Firth, "Lewis on the Given"

Eleventh Meeting (Monday, May 6th): **The Structure of Kantian Skepticism**

Required reading:

1. McDowell, *Mind and World*, Lectures 1-2
2. Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind", Parts I - III

Recommended Reading:

1. McDowell, *Mind and World*, Lecture 3, Afterword, Parts 1 & 2
2. Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind", Part IV

Twelfth Meeting (Wednesday, May 8th): **Varieties and Features of Kantian Skepticism**

Required reading:

1. McDowell, *Mind and World*, Lectures 4-6
2. Conant, "Two Varieties of Skepticism", Part VII

Recommended reading:

1. McDowell, *Mind and World*, Afterword, Parts 3 & 4

Thirteenth Meeting (Monday, May 13th): The Relation between Cartesian & Kantian Skepticism

Required reading:

1. McDowell, *Mind and World*, Introduction
2. Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Parts V, VI, & VIII

Recommended reading:

1. McDowell, “The Disjunctive Conception of Experience as Material for a Transcendental Argument”
2. McDowell, “Avoiding the Myth of the Given”

Fourteenth Meeting (Wednesday, May 15th): Cartesian and Kantian Philosophical Vocabulary

Required reading:

1. Conant, “Two Varieties of Skepticism”, Part VIII

Required re-reading:

1. Price, *Perception*, Ch. 1
2. C. I. Lewis, *Mind and the World Order*, Ch. 2

Recommended reading:

1. C. I. Lewis, *Mind and the World Order*, Chs. 1 & 3

Fifteenth Meeting (Monday, May 20th): Putnam vs. McDowell?

Required reading:

1. Conant, “Two Varieties of Skepticism”, Parts IX & X

Recommended reading:

1. Putnam, "McDowell's Mind and McDowell's World"
2. McDowell, "Reply to Putnam"

Sixteenth Meeting (Wednesday, May 22nd): Kantian Skepticism about Rules and Meaning

Required reading:

1. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, Chs. 1 & 2
2. McDowell, "Meaning and Intentionality in Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy".

Recommended reading:

1. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, Ch. 3
2. McDowell, "Wittgenstein on Following a Rule"
3. Finkelstein, "Wittgenstein on Rules and Platonism"

Monday, May 27: No Meeting, Memorial Day

Seventeenth Meeting (Wednesday, May 29th): Cavell vs. Kripke?

Required reading:

1. Cavell, "The Argument of the Ordinary"
2. Conant, "Two Varieties of Skepticism", Part XI

Recommended reading:

1. Cavell, "What is the Scandal of Skepticism?"

Eighteenth Meeting (Monday, June 3rd): McDowell vs. Cavell?

Required reading:

1. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, Ch. 2
2. Conant, “Two Varieties of Skepticism”, Parts XII & XIII
3. Albritton, “Wittgenstein’s use of the term Criterion,” Postscript (

Required re-reading:

1. McDowell, “Criteria Defeasibility and Knowledge”

Recommended reading:

1. Gustafsson, “Perfect Pitch and Austinian Examples”
2. Hamawaki, “Cavell, Skepticism and the Idea of Philosophical Criticism”
3. Albritton, “Wittgenstein’s use of the term Criterion”

Nineteenth Meeting (Wednesday, June 5th): Skepticism, Mind, and Nature

Required reading:

1. Boyle, “Additive Theories of Rationality”

Recommended reading:

1. Boyle, “Essentially Rational Animals”