

Metaphysics

PHI 180B 01 TR 9:35a-11:00a Davison 015 crn#24457

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Overview

One way to divide up what philosophy studies is to say it is about metaphysics, epistemology and value: what there is, how we know about it, and what we ought to do. Metaphysics then is the study of what there is and how it hangs together. It is *general* in being about the overall categories or sorts of things there are (rather than particular kinds or particular individuals). It is *universal* in trying to say how things must be (rather than how things just happen, actually, to be). And it is motivated by puzzles or problems or paradoxes: we find, when we try to say what we think the world is like, that what we say doesn't completely make sense. The problem is *philosophical* when it resists repeated attempts to solve it.

I like to think of metaphysics as investigating what's going on in the boiler room: the world is a nice place, comfortable, good heating and cooling, good views—but *how does it work?*

Wilfrid Sellars described philosophy in general this way:

The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term ... To achieve success in philosophy would be, to use a contemporary turn of phrase, to 'know one's way around' ... , not in that unreflective way in which the centipede of the story knew its way around before it faced the question, 'how do I walk?', but in that reflective way which means that no intellectual holds are barred.¹

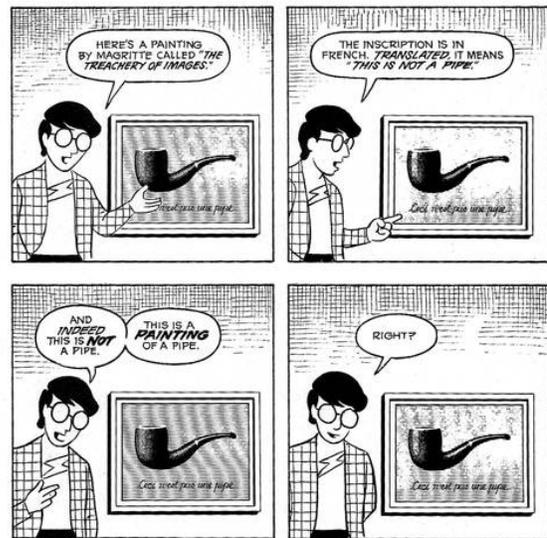


Figure 1: Scott McCloud *Understanding Comics*

In this course we will look at a comprehensive survey of some main problems and puzzles in metaphysics. Our goals are (a) to increase our familiarity with the problems, (b) to be willing to think on as many sides of these peculiar problems as we can manage, (c) to read some recent work on the problems, and (d) to engage with the problems creatively and imaginatively by writing about them.

¹Sellars, W. (1963). Philosophy and the scientific image of man. In *Science, Perception and Reality*, pages 1–40. Routledge & Kegan Paul, New York.

Texts

Required:

- Conee, E. and Sider, T. (2014). *Riddles of Existence: A Guided Tour of Metaphysics*. Oxford University Press. Second edition.
Dardis, Anthony. Logic Handout.

Recommended:

- Beebe, H., Effingham, N., and Goff, P. (2011). *Metaphysics: The Key Concepts*. Routledge, London and New York.

Requirements

1. “Library thing” assignment (Feb 9, see handout): 4%
2. 4 short papers, 750 words, 2-3pp; see “Paper Topics” sheet, each worth 14% of your final grade.
3. One longer final paper (8-10 pages) worth 25%.
4. You must lead the classroom discussion at least once. (See below.) 10% of your final grade will depend on your presentation(s).
5. You must attend 2 talks or similar University events. For proof of attendance, write me a paragraph about what you got out of the event. Each event counts for 2.5% of your grade, for a maximum of 5%.

Class structure

This class is a seminar. This means that there will be a lot of discussion and student interaction, and relatively little lecturing by the instructor. To structure the discussions, you have an additional responsibility.

I will divide the class into pairs. Each pair will be assigned to a day and a reading. Each pair should meet to discuss the reading beforehand and decide what you plan to do with it. It would be a good idea to meet with me as well.

There are three phases to what you want your presentation to do.

1. Describe the “bottom line” or “take away” conclusion of the reading. This is the main idea or ideas that the author wants us to come to believe.
2. Describe the reasons that the author gives for believing that conclusion.
3. Evaluate the argument. This is the most important phase of the presentation. The Dardis handout on logic is a guide to how to think about this. You will want to have some idea of what *kind* of argument you are discussing, and what the standards for that kind of argument are. The key to evaluation is to ask, “should I believe this? what are the alternatives?” Be skeptical; be imaginative.

And there are two things you **really don’t** want to do:

1. **Don't read a presentation!** It's a very good idea to work out what you are going to say beforehand, in writing. But it's generally a very bad idea to read from a prepared text.
2. **Don't look at the text!** You must digest the reading and present it from your own point of view. You *do not* want to attempt to present the author's arguments *from the text*. Your goal isn't to summarize everything the author says. Your goal is to critically evaluate the overall argument that the author makes. Give yourself plenty of time: you and your partner may well want to consult with me before your presentation, and so you should schedule your time with that in mind.

Reading, writing and argument

As you read, you want to answer the following questions for yourself:

1. What is the conclusion of this argument: what is this author trying to convince us to believe?
2. What are the author's reasons? Are the author's reasons *true*, that is, do they say how the world really is?
3. How is the argument supposed to work? The main choices (see the Dardis handout on logic) are: (1) it's supposed to be deductive (something like the "A = B; B = C; therefore A = C" pattern); (2) it's supposed to be inductive or statistical ("leading scientists have data showing . . ." or "the Quinnipiac poll shows that voters . . ." patterns); (3) it supposed to be an explanation ("if we assume that properties or universals exist, we can explain what similarity and difference are and what laws of nature are"). There are different standards for how good an argument is, depending on what kind it is. What are the relevant standards? Does the argument meet the standards—does it support its conclusion well?

It's worth keeping in mind, both for our class, for your other classes, and for your life outside the university, that argumentation is always relevant to what you are encountering. Authors, and people in general, think various things—about the world of her writing, in an author's case, and about the world itself, for the rest of us. What do they think? why do they think that? (There's always another way to do something [or something else to do], so why did the author do it *that way*?) Answering a "why" question is providing a reason, and once again we have an argument to think about. Second, *you* think various things about what you are reading and about the world around you. To make discoveries, and to persuade others that you are right, you have to provide reasons for what you think. There you have more arguments, and more arguments to evaluate.

Your papers will present your thinking about the texts. Your papers will be "critical response" or "critical reflection" papers; they are not primarily for exposition or for conveying information. The best strategy for writing a paper for this class is to describe and evaluate an argument to a conclusion. Since philosophy is about thinking and reasoning about the big picture, most philosophical writing consists in giving reasons to believe some conclusion about the big picture, and showing the reader that they are good reasons. Most academic writing is very similar: it aims to persuade the reader to believe a conclusion, by producing the best set of reasons it can for that conclusion.

Good papers have three features: good mechanics (spelling, grammar); good understanding (accurate and insightful description of the subject matter, in our case, what goes on in a text); good thinking (interesting, insightful, accurate critical response to the text). *Good thinking is by far the most important*. It is easy to hide good thinking with bad writing.

Your papers **must** include at least one bibliographic reference, in the form of a footnote or an endnote. I do not have any preferences about the form of the reference. If you are comfortable

with some standard reference format (MLA, APA), use that; if you don't have one that you are comfortable with yet, pick one, Google it (use the Hofstra Library main web page links to citation style guides . . .), and learn it cold. Suggestion: use/get a good reference management system for your computer.² You should also include a reference if you find yourself using or discussing the ideas of others, for instance ideas that have come up in class from me or from your classmates.³ Never assume that just because something seems well-known, that you shouldn't provide a citation to it.

You'll be writing two kinds of papers:

- (a) The short papers. You'll be writing one about every two weeks (see below for due dates). As you are reading, and as we are discussing, ask yourself "what is the most puzzling and interesting thing I'm running into here?" The aim of the paper is (a) to describe the argument that is so puzzling and interesting, and (b) to state a critical response to the argument. The aim of these papers is to hone your skills in finding the arguments in texts, in describing them, and in critically evaluating them. I place more emphasis on a thoughtful imaginative critical evaluation than on description.
- (b) The final paper. You will need to pick the metaphysical issue that most intrigues/plagues/puzzles you. The aim of this paper is to work out your own thoughts about this issue. Your paper must work with at least three sources from the readings we are doing in class and must in addition draw on at least three other sources. There are many places to look for additional sources. A good guide to philosophy sources is available at http://www.hofstra.edu/Libraries/lib_srg_philosophy.cfm. The *Philosopher's Index* is a database (available on-line through the Hofstra Library Web page) of all nearly all philosophical writing published for the last 60 years. And don't forget the on-line Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, which often contains very good overviews of topics in philosophy and philosophy of mind.

Policies

- No computers in class. (The only exception is to consult an electronic version of a text, article, etc.) That includes phones, tablets, cars . . .
- A paper with no complete bibliographic reference will receive the grade of F.
- Hard copy only. No electronic submissions of papers accepted.
- No late papers accepted.
- Any paper may be rewritten: a rewrite must be turned in by 2 weeks from the original due date.
- Attendance is required. I will take attendance ("Present" means: you were present when I took attendance). If you are absent more than 4 times you will receive the grade of F.

²Microsoft Word includes a reference manager. There are alternatives. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comparison_of_reference_management_software describes them; some of them (for example, JabRef, which can work with Microsoft Word) are open-source—free—software. Zotero is a free plugin for the Firefox browser. You might also consider writing with the free typesetting program L^AT_EX, along with its reference management system, BibTeX. These are very stable, very solid, very powerful programs; they are available for Windows, Mac OS X, and Linux. This *Syllabus* was prepared using L^AT_EX. EndNote is a very good professional reference manager but rather expensive.

³I want to thank Professor Jennifer Corns for generous advice on philosophy and pain, and James Wilkerson for discussion of ideas about how to organize a syllabus.

- Excuse clause: stuff happens. If for some reason you are unable to hand in work, let me know as soon as possible, and be ready to provide documentation. Occasionally there may be a reason for you to email me a paper, but you **must** check with me first.
- If you must leave class early, please inform me before class starts.
- If you cannot attend class, please inform me.
- Students with Disabilities: If you have any documented disability-related concerns that may have an impact upon your performance in this course, please meet with me within the first two weeks of the current semester, so that we can work out the appropriate accommodations on an individualized, as-needed basis after the needs, circumstances and documentation have been evaluated by Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD). SSD is located in 212 Memorial Hall and can be reached at 516-463-7075 or ssd@hofstra.edu.
- **Academic dishonesty.** If I have reason to believe that any kind of plagiarism whatsoever has occurred I will request a discussion of the work. (See the *Hofstra Writer's Guide* for a definition of plagiarism. If you are in any doubt, consult with me.) If plagiarism has occurred, I will ask for the work to be completely rewritten. If rewritten work contains plagiarism, I will award the grade of F **for the course**. If there is plagiarism in the final paper, I will award the grade of F for the course. I will always file an academic dishonesty form with the Dean of Students if I believe that plagiarism has occurred. (These policies are in accord with the University's Policy on Academic Honesty as stated in the Hofstra University Bulletin. Procedures for Handling Violations of Academic Honesty by Students at Hofstra University are detailed in Faculty Policy Series #11 (rev. 2004.) for undergraduates.)

Schedule

We will discuss the following readings on the dates noted below. Do the reading before class.

Philosophy must be read **actively**. The aim of philosophical writing is to discover the truth—truth about something controversial and hard. **Read slowly**. Sentence by sentence, you must constantly question what you are reading, asking whether you think what the author says is true, and asking whether you think the author's conclusions follow. Figure out why, why not, take notes, write down what you think (and ask yourself: am I right?). Read with someone else, maybe out loud.

Date	Topic	Readings	Assignments
Jan 26 Jan 28	Introductory	Dardis handout Dardis handout	
Feb 2 Feb 4	Modality Some concepts	<i>Riddles</i> Chapter 9 Dardis handout	
Feb 9 Feb 11	Library thing Personal identity	<i>Riddles</i> Chapter 1	
Feb 16 Feb 18	(no class)	Sider, "All the worlds's a stage"	
Feb 23		Parfit "The unimportance of identity"	

Continued on next page

Date	Topic	Readings	Assignments
Feb 25	Fatalism	<i>Riddles</i> Chapter 2	SP 1
Mar 1 Mar 3		Taylor, "Fatalism" Pike, "Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action"	
Mar 8 Mar 10	Time	<i>Riddles</i> Chapter 3 McTaggart, "The unreality of time"	
Mar 15 Mar 17	God	Skow, "Experience and the passage of time" <i>Riddles</i> Chapter 4	SP 2
Mar 22 Mar 24	Why	<i>Riddles</i> Chapter 5 Parfit, "Why anything? why this?"	
Mar 29 Mar 31	(no class) (no class)		
Apr 5 Apr 7	Free Will	<i>Riddles</i> Chapter 6 Mumford and Anjum "A new argument against compatibilism"	
Apr 12 Apr 14	Constitution	<i>Riddles</i> Chapter 7 Paul, "The puzzles of material constitution"	SP 3
Apr 19 Apr 21	Universals	Thomasson, "The controversy over the existence of ordinary objects" <i>Riddles</i> Chapter 8	
Apr 26 Apr 28		Dardis, "Modal fictionalism and modal instrumentalism" Glasgow, "A theory of race"	SP 4
May 3		Haslanger "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be?"	
May 10			Final paper due

This course conforms to the HCLAS General Education Learning Goals and Objectives for Liberal Arts Distribution credit.