

Contemporary Philosophy

Spring Semester 2017
Rochester Institute of Technology

Dr. John Capps
LBR 1309
Office Hours:

john.capps@rit.edu
475-2464
MWF 11:00-12:00
or by appointment

Course Description

This course looks at some main trends in philosophy over the last 75 years. We'll read some pretty important (and influential) works, focusing on fundamental questions concerning the nature of logic, language and rational choice: for example, how the laws of logic gain their necessity, how logic, language, and thinking are related, whether scientific progress is rational, and whether there is a rational basis for important, transformative decisions about our future. The philosophers we'll read are generally pro-logic, pro-reason and pro-science but they also draw our attention to anomalies and ambiguities in how we understand logic and science.

In addition, this course assumes that philosophy doesn't take place in a vacuum. To study contemporary philosophy is to study our contemporary world and our contemporary world view. The idea is to look at commitments that today might seem obvious, natural, and common-sensical, but that are actually relatively recent and have specific historical origins.

Our story begins in 1920s Vienna and with a movement known as logical empiricism. The philosophers, mathematicians and scientists who formed "the Vienna Circle" were united by their mistrust of metaphysical speculation and by their attention to recent developments in logic and science. They developed a philosophy that took its cues from logic and physical science, and, in some cases, argued that ethics and other normative areas are meaningless. (In many ways, they were trying to do for philosophy what Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe were doing for design and architecture.) Logical empiricism (or positivism) became the dominant philosophy in the U.S. and U.K. until the 1950s. However, in the 1960s logical positivism was eclipsed by the work of Thomas Kuhn, among others, who claimed that science, and inquiry in general, does not operate according to logical laws. Instead, Kuhn argued that science largely proceeds on the basis of preexisting "paradigms" that are themselves prone to revolutionary change. Here we'll be reading Kuhn's classic work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

There is a stark difference between logical positivism and Kuhnian constructivism. One side deals in logical absolutes and incorrigible statements. The other side relativizes human activities (including ethical behavior) to particular paradigms. More recently there have been attempts to stake out a middle ground that recognizes contingency while still respecting the existence of independent, objective constraints on human activities and

thinking. This third way, sometimes described as a kind of “naturalism”, or what Penelope Maddy calls “second philosophy” or the method of the “plain inquirer,” aims to show how there can be a credible natural basis to our philosophical, logical, and scientific commitments.

Finally, we’ll be paying special attention to the work of one philosopher in particular: Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951). Despite—or perhaps because of—his sometimes cryptic and condensed style, Wittgenstein has achieved legendary status among many contemporary philosophers. His views have remained tremendously influential and thought-provoking even though they changed dramatically over time—to the degree that he had significant influence over both the Vienna Circle and Kuhn.¹

Texts

These are the books we’ll be reading. They are all available at the campus Barnes & Noble, as well as many other places.

A.J. Ayer: *Language, Truth, and Logic*
T.S. Kuhn: *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*
Ludwig Wittgenstein: *The Blue and Brown Books*
Penelope Maddy: *What Do Philosophers Do?*
L.A. Paul: *Transformative Experience*
Recommended: A.C. Grayling: *Wittgenstein: A Very Short Introduction*

All other course readings are in a photocopied course packet that you can pick up outside my office (Liberal Arts 1309).

Expectations

Discussion-Oriented

1. Philosophy is a group activity that depends on conversation and discussion. This is a discussion-intensive course (which is why it has a low enrollment cap.) Discussion is really the only way to make sure we’re covering our bases and considering all the options we need to consider. There is no way to do this entirely on your own. In order for this class to function well I need to be confident that everyone’s done the reading—no free-riders—but I don’t expect everyone to understand the entire reading. That’s what class and our discussions are for, and even then we will probably still have questions. Simply put, I assume everyone will make a good faith effort to do the reading, to get at least some idea of what it’s about, and to have a couple questions or interesting thoughts to raise. I expect regular attendance, obviously. Finally, I will do everything I can so that everyone feels comfortable participating in our discussions—and I recognize that discussion involves both talking *and* listening. Attendance and participation are worth 20% of the final grade.

2. I may also periodically assign short take-home or in-class writing assignments; these will be factored into the attendance and participation grade.

¹ One final caveat: this course does not offer a complete account of contemporary philosophy: that would take many semesters! Instead, we will focus primarily on philosophy written in English and done in English speaking countries. Nonetheless, the topics we will look at do have analogues in other philosophical traditions.

	<p>3. This class will be run as a seminar which means, among other things, that I'll try to keep the lecturing to a minimum. This is so we can work out our own thoughts and exercise some degree of self-control over the topics we discuss. Every once in a while I'll probably lecture because a) I can't help myself or b) there's some crucial background information that I want everyone to have or c) you demand that I do it. But I want to limit my lecturing so we can all participate and not just spectate. If you'd prefer a more lecture-oriented course I'll be happy to recommend some.</p>
<p>Assignments</p>	<p>4. I'm asking everyone to facilitate two class discussions. Here's what I have in mind:</p> <p>A facilitation should give a brief (5 minute) overview of the day's reading, provide any helpful background information that may add to our understanding of the reading, and help coordinate discussion. The emphasis is on helping frame and lead the discussion. You want to be pretty familiar with the day's reading and be able to ask good, insightful questions about it; it is not expected, however, that you have all the answers.</p> <p>Please bring a one page handout. The handout should tell a story about the day's reading: the main points, its arc, how the reading takes us from Point A to Point B. It should also list some issues for discussion. I'll provide examples of handouts early in the semester when, by default, I'll be facilitating discussion. I'll also pass around a sign-up sheet early in the semester.</p> <p>A good facilitation doesn't just summarize the day's reading. Instead, it extracts the essential issues, the points that are especially interesting or problematic, and the themes that are worth discussing. It doesn't attempt to be absolutely comprehensive and it doesn't miss the forest for the trees. That last point is really important.</p> <p>A good handout is usually a narrative or story of some kind. It isn't, usually, a list of loosely connected bullet points. In your handout you want to describe a certain kind of trajectory and that means showing connections and showing how the author builds an argument.</p> <p>I've also noticed that good facilitators usually don't read their handout but rather talk through the main ideas. The handout should not be a script.</p> <p>The facilitations are worth 30% of the final grade.</p>
<p>Facilitation</p>	<p>5. This class is also "writing intensive" which means it satisfies some extremely loose RIT standards for what counts as "writing" and "intensive." In other words, taking this course satisfies RIT's expectation that everyone take an upper-level, general education, writing intensive course.</p> <p>We'll try to do justice to the spirit of these standards by paying particular attention to how we write and to how we can write more and better. If this isn't an issue for you, that's wonderful, really. For the rest of us, I believe there are three things that can help. One is to have a theory about what makes for good writing. I don't care what the theory is, but I do think it's important to have a general sense for what makes the difference between clear and muddled prose. Here I've found the writings of Joseph Williams incredibly useful (see, for example his <i>Style: Toward Clarity and Grace</i>). Second, it's important to know that disciplinary conventions are meant to be broken, so that your writing can be as clear and accessible as possible. Helen Sword's <i>Stylish Academic Writing</i> is excellent on this point, giving lots of empirical evidence that shows how good, successful writers manage to engage their readers while breaking every so-called rule in the book. Finally, I think it's most important to read good writing, since we're likely to</p>
<p>Writing Assignments</p>	

imitate what we read. Unfortunately, most philosophers aren't terribly good writers and probably shouldn't be imitated, even when they're otherwise clear, or smart, or even brilliant. Here we'll work around this by paying close attention to different styles of writing and considering what does, and does not, work.

As far as specific assignments, there will be two short (3 page) writing assignments in the first half of the semester. For both of these, you'll have the option of revising and resubmitting. Then, at the end of the semester there will be a final, 8-10 page paper. For the final paper I'll ask for a one page proposal during the 10th week, which I'll return with comments. During the 13th week I'll ask for a draft, which I'll also return with comments. The final, final, paper will be due during exam week. I'll provide more guidelines as we go along, but you can start thinking about this project as early as you want.

The two short writing assignments will each be worth 10%; the draft of the final paper will be worth 5%, and the final paper will be worth 25%.

6. Since I think philosophy in general, and this time period in particular, is really wonderful and important, I'm always happy to talk about the course. Feel free to drop by my office hours or speak to me after class. I've found it's usually a lot more efficient to talk in person than over e-mail.

7. Feel free to ask if you have a question about where you stand grade-wise. While I expect you can keep track of this, too, I'm happy to give you an up-to-date calculation at any time.

Additional Information

Readings and Assignments

Please note: a particular day's reading should be done before class.

1.23.17	Introductory Remarks
1.25.17	Introductory Remarks (continued; read over this syllabus)
1.27.17	A.J. Ayer: <i>Language, Truth and Logic</i> , Preface and Chapter 1
1.30.17	A.J. Ayer: <i>Language, Truth and Logic</i> , Chapter 2 + pp. 59-62
2.01.17	A.J. Ayer: <i>Language, Truth and Logic</i> , Chapter 4
2.03.17	A.J. Ayer: <i>Language, Truth and Logic</i> , Chapter 5
2.06.17	A.J. Ayer: <i>Language, Truth and Logic</i> , Chapter 6
2.08.17	A.J. Ayer: <i>Language, Truth and Logic</i> , Chapter 8
2.10.17	Ludwig Wittgenstein: <i>Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus</i> , Preface, 1-3.26
2.13.17	Ludwig Wittgenstein: <i>Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus</i> , 3.3-4.462
2.15.17	Ludwig Wittgenstein: <i>Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus</i> , 5-7
2.17.17	Frank Ramsey: "Philosophy" and "Truth and Probability" pp. 52-70
2.20.17	Frank Ramsey: "Truth and Probability" pp. 86-94; "Epilogue"
	Short Writing Assignment #1 Due
2.22.17	Marion Gaspard: "Logic, Rationality and Knowledge in Ramsey's Thought"
2.24.17	Ludwig Wittgenstein: <i>The Blue Book</i> , pp. 1-6

2.27.17	Ludwig Wittgenstein: <i>The Blue Book</i> , pp. 6-15
3.01.17	Ludwig Wittgenstein: <i>The Blue Book</i> , pp. 15-28
3.03.17	Ludwig Wittgenstein: <i>The Blue Book</i> , pp. 28-39
3.06.17	Ludwig Wittgenstein: <i>The Blue Book</i> , pp. 39-50
3.08.17	Ludwig Wittgenstein: <i>The Blue Book</i> , pp. 50-61
3.10.17	Ludwig Wittgenstein: <i>The Blue Book</i> , pp. 61-74
3.13-17—3.17.17	Spring Break — Begin Reading Kuhn
3.20.17	T.S. Kuhn: <i>The Structure of Scientific Revolutions</i> , Chapters 1-4
3.22.17	T.S. Kuhn: <i>The Structure of Scientific Revolutions</i> , Chapters 5 & 6
3.24.17	T.S. Kuhn: <i>The Structure of Scientific Revolutions</i> , Chapters 7 & 8
3.27.17	T.S. Kuhn: <i>The Structure of Scientific Revolutions</i> , Chapter 9 Short Writing Assignment #2 Due
3.29.17	T.S. Kuhn: <i>The Structure of Scientific Revolutions</i> , Chapter 10
3.31.17	T.S. Kuhn: <i>The Structure of Scientific Revolutions</i> , Chapter 11
4.03.17	T.S. Kuhn: <i>The Structure of Scientific Revolutions</i> , Chapters 12 & 13
4.05.17	T.S. Kuhn: <i>The Structure of Scientific Revolutions</i> , Postscript
4.07.17	J.L. Austin: "Performative Utterances" Final Paper Proposal Due
4.10.17	Penelope Maddy: <i>What Do Philosophers Do?</i> , pp. 1-40
4.12.17	Penelope Maddy: <i>What Do Philosophers Do?</i> , pp. 40-72
4.14.17	Ludwig Wittgenstein: <i>Philosophical Investigations</i> , 105-155
4.17.17	Ludwig Wittgenstein: <i>Philosophical Investigations</i> , 179-224
4.19.17	Penelope Maddy: <i>What Do Philosophers Do?</i> , pp. 73-92, 109-141
4.21.17	Penelope Maddy: <i>What Do Philosophers Do?</i> , pp. 141-175
4.24.17	Ludwig Wittgenstein: <i>On Certainty</i> Final Paper Draft Due
4.26.17	Paul Horwich: "Was Wittgenstein Right?" & "Williamson's Philosophy of Philosophy" Optional: Williamson: "Précis of <i>The Philosophy of Philosophy</i> " and Lynch: "Of Flies and Philosophers"
4.28.17	Penelope Maddy: <i>What Do Philosophers Do?</i> , pp. 176-220
5.01.17	L.A. Paul: <i>Transformative Experience</i> , pp. 1-24
5.03.17	L.A. Paul: <i>Transformative Experience</i> , pp. 24-51
5.15.17	L.A. Paul: <i>Transformative Experience</i> , pp. 52-56; 71-104
5.08.17	L.A. Paul: <i>Transformative Experience</i> , pp. 105-123
5.10.17	L.A. Paul: <i>Transformative Experience</i> , pp. 124-131, 150-159, 177-178
5.12.17	Concluding Remarks
5.17.17	Final Paper Due