MSc/PGDipl/PGCert

Philosophical Methods I

PHIL11177
Course Guide 2019-20

People

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Please email James Openshaw to make an appointment if you need to discuss material covered in the course or essay topics.
Course aims and objectives

This course offers an introduction to philosophical methodology, with a particular focus on thought experiments, conceptual analysis and the role of rational intuitions. Conceptual analysis was once considered to be of primary concern to philosophers: to understand what a particular property is, such as being morally good, being conscious, being caused, or being known, one must produce necessary and sufficient conditions for something to fall under the concept of that property. Moreover, such conditions must be spelled out in a way that is independent of the concept in question. For instance, to say that someone falls under the concept of pain if and only if they are in pain is uninformative. Next to all such analyses have been confronted with counterexamples that rely on rational intuitions about how to describe possible cases. For instance, to say that someone falls under the concept of pain if and only if they exhibit withdrawal behavior when prompted by tissue damage is informative, but also possibly false. Imagine a perfect actor pretending to suffer pain. In response, some philosophers have given up on conceptual analysis altogether, some have adopted various weaker kinds of conceptual entailments, and some have argued that such intuitions are defeasible if the conceptual analysis in question leads to an otherwise explanatorily powerful philosophical theory about the property in question.

These are some of the central issues in contemporary philosophical methodology, which we will be addressing in this course. We will examine the rational intuitions that particular thought experiments are meant to elicit, and we will assess the role of these intuitions in supporting or criticising a philosophical theory, or even in adjudicating between rival philosophical theories.

Note on pre-recorded and on-campus lectures

This course is delivered through a blend of either pre-recorded lectures and on-campus seminars or pre-recorded lectures, live online seminars, and online discussion forums. Pre-recorded lectures will be delivered by a range of faculty. All on-campus and live online seminars will be delivered by Dr. James Openshaw. Please direct any queries regarding any segment of the course to James Openshaw (james.openshaw@ed.ac.uk). (For instance, please note that Professor Kallestrup is no longer affiliated with the University of Edinburgh.)

On-campus seminars will be held weekly, 11:00–13:00 in Room F.21 at 7 George Square. Synchronous online seminars will be held fortnightly from Week 3 at a time to be announced. In asynchronous forum weeks, Dr. Openshaw will monitor forum discussions.

Intended learning outcomes

On completion of this course, students should:

- Have a grasp of fundamental issues in philosophical methodology, e.g. the nature of thought experiments, the role of rational intuitions, conceptual analysis.
- Be able to critically analyse and engage with literature by key philosophers in this field.
• Be able to present arguments clearly and concisely both within a classroom context and in a 2,500 word essay.
• Gain transferable skills in research, analysis and argumentation.

### Learning, teaching and assessment

#### Syllabus: Schedule of lectures, seminars, tutorials and assessments

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<td>Week 1</td>
<td>Introduction to Conceptual Analysis and Thought Experiments</td>
<td>Jesper Kallestrup</td>
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<td>Week 3</td>
<td>Hume on Miracles: Bayesian Approaches</td>
<td>Alasdair Richmond</td>
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<td>Moral Twin Earth</td>
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<td>Galileo’s Falling Bodies, Newton’s Bucket, and Einstein’s Elevator</td>
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<td>Week 7</td>
<td>Artificial Intelligence and the</td>
<td>Alistair Isaac</td>
<td>• Synchronous online seminar: date TBA.</td>
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Topics and reading

N.B. All the readings below should be available online via the University Main Library, using your MyEd login. If you encounter problems, contact the library or IT for support, or the course instructor (james.openshaw@ed.ac.uk).

Week 1 – Introduction to Conceptual Analysis and Thought Experiments

We look at different conceptions of conceptual analysis, and what role such an analysis can play in the course of advancing a philosophical argument. Traditionally, many philosophers have aimed to come up with reductive analyses of key philosophical concepts. Problem is that any such proposed analysis has been troubled by putative counterexamples. We introduce the paradox of analysis: no conceptual analysis can be both correct and informative. Lastly, we look at attempts to explicate pre-theoretical, common sense concepts as found in folk theory. Such intuitive conceptual analysis is contrasted with naturalized and pragmatic types of conceptual analysis.
Class Reading


Secondary Reading


Online Resources:


Week 2 – Hume on Miracles: The Great Original

This week, we look at a classic, if oft-misrepresented, text from David Hume - Section X of Hume's first Enquiry, the (in) famous 'Of Miracles'. Our focus is on getting clear about (textual and interpretative) details of what Hume might actually have been trying to say and also on which pitfalls we'd be well advised to avoid. We'll look at how a miracle is defined by Hume, what makes miracle testimony problematic, Hume's positive account of induction (yes, there was such a thing) and his account of when miracle-testimony could be rationally compelling. (Yes, Hume did offer a view here too.)

Class Reading


Secondary Reading


Week 3 – Hume on Miracles: Bayesian Approaches

Building on week 2, this week looks at Hume on miracles through the lens offered by Bayesian probability theory. In particular, we consider questions like: What is Bayesianism? How might Hume's argument be recast in Bayesian terms? Which Bayesian interpretations of Hume work best?

Class Reading


Secondary Reading


Week 4 – The Open Question Argument and the Paradox of Analysis

G. E. Moore's Open Question Argument is supposed to show that no naturalistic reduction of ethical concepts and properties is possible. One of the ways in which naturalist moral realists have responded to this argument is to invoke the paradox of analysis. This week we aim to examine this argument and this response to in order to understand in more detail both the nature of conceptual analysis and the paradox of analysis.

Class Reading


Secondary Reading


Week 5 – Moral Twin Earth

Terence Horgan and Mark Timmons transplant Hilary Putnam’s famous twin earth thought experiment to the moral case. This thought experiment asks us to imagine a twin of our earth where everything is exactly the same except that twin earthlings use ‘good’ to refer to different things in the world than we do. The intuitions we have about this case are supposed to make problems for various views about the nature of morality. This week we examine this thought experiment and the role of intuitions in detail.

Class Reading


Secondary Reading


Week 6 – Galileo’s Falling Bodies, Newton’s Bucket, and Einstein’s Elevator

Thought experiments have played an important role in the history of science, especially in clarifying the implications of difficult concepts. But how can mere speculation about counterfactual possibilities inform us about the world as it is? We examine several historically important thought experiments through the lens of John Norton’s claim that they should be understood as arguments. Understood as arguments, thought experiments may justify theoretical conclusions, explore novel phenomena, and (crucially) expose and clarify presuppositions.
Class Reading


Secondary Reading


Primary Sources

Galileo’s falling bodies argument occurs late on the first day of his *Dialogue Concerning Two New Sciences*:  
http://galileo.phys.virginia.edu/classes/109N/tns61.htm

Newton’s “bucket argument” occurs in the Scholium to the Definitions at the start of his *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica*:  

Definitions (around 81)


Week 7 – Artificial Intelligence and the Chinese Room Argument

Philosophical thought experiments face the same epistemological challenges as scientific thought experiments; they also, however, rely heavily on intuitions and appeal to contentious concepts. Searle’s “Chinese Room” thought experiment, which has been enormously influential in philosophy of cognitive science, provides a case study for these issues. From its first statement there have been questions about how the Chinese Room should be interpreted, what tacit assumptions are required to turn it into a rigorous argument, and whether its appeal to intuition is legitimate. Responses at initial publication by commentators from philosophy, cognitive science, and computer science illustrate how these different forms of criticism may be levelled against a thought experiment in an interdisciplinary context.

Class Reading


Plus these responses (also in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, vol. 3, 1980):

• Rorty, R. “Searle and the special powers of the brain,” 445–6.

Secondary Reading

Read the full set of responses and Searle’s reply, BBS 3(3): 417–57.


Online Resource

http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/chinese-room/

Week 8 – Functionalism, Inverted Qualia and Blockhead

In weeks 8 and 9 we will be looking at famous thought experiments which challenge the functionalist account of the mind. This week we will look at Ned Block’s challenges to functionalism along with some possible responses to them. We will also look at Sydney Shoemaker’s version of the ‘inverted qualia’ thought experiment, and discuss its strength as an ‘intuition pump’ for the claim that qualia cannot be functionally reduced.

Class Reading


Secondary Reading


**Week 9 – Physicalism and Zombies**

Philosophical or phenomenal zombies are creatures that are physically identical to us, but lack conscious experience. David Chalmers is well known for his defence of the use of conceivability arguments against materialism, and for the possibility of such ‘zombie worlds’. In this session we will take a close look Chalmers’ argument, and whether he is right to think that we can infer metaphysical possibility from conceivability. This argumentative move has played a key role in the history of philosophy in arguments for dualism.

**Class Reading**


**Secondary Reading**


Week 10 – Descriptivism about Proper Names

Descriptivism in philosophy of language is the traditional view that the meaning of a referring term is given by associated definite descriptions such that its reference is determined by satisfaction of those descriptions. For instance, the proper name ‘David Cameron’ picks out whoever is the current Prime Minister of Britain, and the natural kind term ‘water’ picks out whatever is the clear potable liquid that falls from the sky and fills the oceans. Descriptivism offers a simple, natural and intuitively plausible picture of how we can use language to represent reality.

Class Reading


Secondary Reading


Online Resources

http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/reference/

http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/names/

http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descriptions/

Week 11 – Kripke’s Epistemic, Semantic, and Modal Arguments

In *Naming and Necessity* Kripke presented a number of intuitively compelling arguments against descriptivism. These arguments often relied on rational intuitions about possible cases. For instance, if the name ‘Gödel’ refers to whoever proved the incompleteness of arithmetic, then ‘Gödel’ refers to Schmidt if it turns out very surprisingly that Schmidt rather than Gödel proved that theorem. And if the name ‘Aristotle’ refers to whoever taught Alexander the Great, then ‘Aristotle’ refers to Plato in a non-actual, possible world in which Plato rather than Aristotle taught Alexander the Great.

Class Reading

Secondary Reading


Online Resources

http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/reference/
http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/names/
http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descriptions/

Resources

Reading list materials are available via the course LEARN site. Please ensure you have completed the library induction tutorial. Should you have any problems accessing any of the materials for the course please contact the course librarian, Mrs Anne Donnelly: anne.donnelly@ed.ac.uk

Assessment

This course has three components of assessment:

- Participation in the discussion forum in terms of writing discussion notes and commenting on others’ notes. While the content as such is not assessed, failure to actively contribute posts during the semester will result in marks of up to 5% being deducted from your total grade.
- 500 word essay plan due Tuesday 13th November 2018 by 12 noon GMT. This is 15% of your mark for this course (see below for more details; see also separately uploaded essay outline form).
- 2,500 word final essay due Tuesday 18th December 2018, 12 noon GMT. This is 85% of your mark for this course (see uploaded video for more details about the final essay).

You will also have the opportunity to submit a formative essay, prior to your assessed paper, which is due on Thursday 25th October 2018, 12 noon GMT.

For more details regarding formative essays, general advice for writing etc. please see the Programme Handbook.

Essay Plan

This method of assessment consists in writing a plan for the final essay. The plan should begin with a short summary, describing your essay topic, the conclusion that you will aim to establish, and the arguments you will use to support that conclusion. This summary should be approximately two paragraphs in length (maximum 500
words). The plan should also include a list of the sections and subsections of the essay and a bibliography, listing the papers and books that you will draw upon and discuss in the essay.

The essay plan will be marked out of 100. Feedback will be provided, with a particular view to making helpful suggestions and pointers for the preparation of the essay. Markers will be looking for a definite and clearly stated conclusion and for evidence of a sound and well planned argumentative structure that is feasible within the word limit. Markers will also look for a substantial and relevant bibliography that shows evidence of extensive reading into the topic.

**Marking and feedback**

Both your essay plan and your final essay will be marked using the grade descriptors for the Postgraduate Common Marking Scheme.

The relevant lecturer will mark your essay plan and leave some brief comments and suggestions for improvements for you to reflect on and incorporate before you submit your final essay.

Both your essay plan and your final essay will be marked out of 100. Your final grade for the course will be determined on the basis of all three components of assessment.

**Penalties for failure to participate**

A student may miss one week’s participation in the discussion forum during the semester without penalty. However, if a student fails to participate in 10 or more weeks, then they will be deducted 5% from their grade. Students will be deducted 1% for missing 2 weeks, 2% for missing 4 weeks, 3% for missing 6 weeks, and 4% for missing 8 weeks. If a student has a good reason why they have been unable to post to the forum (e.g. serious illness), they can contact their Personal Tutor to apply for Special Circumstances.

**Discussion forums**

There are discussion forums for each week of the course. This is your space to post any questions or comments you had about the week’s topic. The course instructor will monitor the forum and join in with the discussion. Participation in the discussion forums is assessed for this course as per above, and we encourage you to take part as discussion is a crucial aspect of doing philosophy!