THE PHILOSOPHY OF FICTION (PHIL10153)

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COURSE AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This course will introduce and examine a number of philosophical issues raised by fiction, covering topics at the intersection of aesthetics, epistemology, metaphysics, and the philosophies of language and mind. For instance: What can be made of emotional responses to fiction: are these responses themselves a kind of make-believe, or are they authentic? Can it ever be rational to respond emotionally to characters and narratives we know to be fictitious? What are the interrelationships between fiction, aesthetic value, and ethics? Are, for instance, morally abhorrent works of fiction ipso facto aesthetically flawed? How can we understand truth in fiction (e.g. the truth that Sherlock Holmes is a detective)? Do truths about non-existent objects require there to be non-existent objects, about which our claims can be true? How can we learn from fiction; how can descriptions of what is unreal furnish us with knowledge of what is real? It is increasingly acknowledged that fictions can play an important role in scientific theorising? Do fictions in science obstruct or enhance scientific understanding? Finally, philosophers have explored the possibilities that areas of practice and discourse such as mathematics, morality and religion can be best understood as themselves kinds of fiction. We explore mathematical, moral, and religious fictionalism.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

On completion of this course, the student will be able to:

1. Demonstrate core skills in philosophy, including interpreting and critically engaging with philosophical texts, evaluating arguments and theories, and developing one’s own ideas in response to the issues discussed
2. Acquire knowledge of the main theories of the nature of fiction, central philosophical issues surrounding fiction, and important varieties of fictionalism
3. Analyze the strengths and weakness of these theories and responses

ASSESSMENT

This course will be assessed by two pieces of writing: a midterm essay of 1500 words, due in October (worth 40% of the total grade), and a final essay of 2500 words (worth 60% of the total grade). More information, including dates and topics, will be announced during the course.
CONTACT TIME

The course content will be delivered by a weekly two hour seminar, which will run for eleven weeks. You are expected to read the set texts in advance of the seminars, and to be prepared to discuss them in detail. In addition to the seminar, I will be available to answer any questions about the course or the readings at my office hour. If meeting during my office hour is not possible, please feel welcome to arrange another time to talk.

TOPICS AND READINGS

WEEK 1 | What is fiction?

Essential reading


Further reading


Deep dives


WEEK 2 | The paradox of fiction

Essential reading


Further reading


Deep dives

Kendall Walton, 1990, Mimesis as Make-Believe, Harvard University Press.

Jenefer Robinson, 2005, Deeper Than Reason: Emotion and Its Role in Literature, Music, and Art, OUP.

WEEK 3 | Aesthetic value and ethical value in fiction

Essential reading


Further reading


Deep dives

Berys Gaut, 2007, Art, Emotion and Ethics, OUP.

WEEK 4 | The semantics and metaphysics of fiction (I)

Essential reading


Further reading


Deep dives


WEEK 5 | The semantics and metaphysics of fiction (II)

Essential reading


Further reading


Deep dives


**WEEK 6 | Learning from fiction**

**Essential reading**


**Further reading**


**Deep dives**


Gibson, John (2007). *Fiction and the Weave of Life*. OUP.

**WEEK 7 | Fictions in science**
Essential reading


Further reading


Deep dives


WEEK 8 | Mathematical fictionalism

Essential reading

Long, Mary (2010), ‘Mathematics and Make-Believe’, in Mathematics and Reality, OUP.

Further reading


Deep dives


Leng, Mary (2010), Mathematics and Reality, OUP.

WEEK 9 | Moral fictionalism

Essential reading
Joyce, R. (2016). ‘Moral Fictionalism.’ In Essays in Moral Skepticism., OUP.

Further reading


Deep dives


WEEK 10 | Religious fictionalism

Essential reading


Further reading


Deep dives

WEEK 11 | Choose your own adventure

Revision week.

Please note the syllabus may be subject to minor changes.

FURTHER READINGS AND ESSAY WRITING

In completing this course you will learn to become effective researchers. To this end, while readings are supplied each week, it is up to you to conduct your own research and seek out further secondary sources that will aid you in understanding these topics. Four sources may be particularly useful:

DiscoverEd

DiscoverEd is the Library's discovery service. Use it to search the Library's collections: this includes books, e-books, journal titles, journal articles, databases and more. Use EASE to sign into your Library Account and manage loans, renewals, requests and fines.

The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

This provides introductory encyclopaedia articles, written by experts, on many topics in philosophy. As well as providing a useful introduction to the topics at hand, the readings lists at the bottom of each article can be used to guide further research. The IEP is freely accessible online.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

Like the IEP, the SEP also provides encyclopaedia articles, written by experts, on many topics in philosophy. These tend to be slightly longer and more detailed, but also more difficult, than IEP entries. As before, the reference list at the bottom of each article can be used to guide further research. The SEP is freely accessible online.

Oxford Bibliographies

Oxford Bibliographies provides research guides in the form of annotated bibliographies compiled by experts in their given field. This is available online through the library tab in MyEd.