

CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY

FALL SEMESTER 2023-2024

ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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Office Hours: MWF 12:00-1:00 @ LBR 1309

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, rational choice, and economic and political power: for example, how the laws of logic gain their necessity, how logic, language, and thinking are related, whether scientific progress is rational, and why private corporations have the power they do. 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—and in how we understand our responsibilities as citizens, consumers, and workers.

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. We want to understand the stories that have made us who we are.

One of our stories 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 physics, 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. One question we'll consider is how to stake out a viable, pragmatic, middle ground.

In addition, 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. Reading Wittgenstein is probably Type 2 fun but we'll try to get to the point where it's more Type 1.

Finally, and in the spirit of this being a class on *contemporary* philosophy, we'll read a very recent book by Elizabeth Anderson on the nature of work, the work ethic, and how private corporations have the power and responsibilities we'd normally associate with governments. She offers an historically-informed account of how we got to where we are, how both conservative and neo-liberal policies undermine democracy, and what the alternative might look like.

Texts

Here are the books we'll be reading. You shouldn't have trouble buying, ordering, or downloading these wherever books are sold. All other course readings are downloadable from myCourses.

A.J. Ayer: *Language, Truth and Logic*

T.S. Kuhn: *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*

Ludwig Wittgenstein: *The Blue and Brown Books*

Elizabeth Anderson: *Hijacked: How Neoliberalism Turned the Work Ethic Against Workers and How Workers Can Take It Back*

Recommended: A.C. Grayling: *Wittgenstein: A Very Short Introduction*

Expectations

Discussion-Oriented

1. I believe philosophy is a group activity that depends on conversation and discussion. We can't tell if we're covering all our bases if we're not checking in with each other. For this reason my classes are normally discussion-intensive, which means they have a lower enrollment cap.* In order for this class to function well I need to be confident that everyone's doing the reading: no free-riding, please. I don't expect everyone (or, in some cases, anyone, myself included) to understand the reading: that's what class and our discussions are for. But I do expect everyone to make a good faith effort to do the reading, get at least some idea of what it's about, and come up with a couple questions or interesting points to share. I expect regular attendance (though please don't come to class if you're feeling unwell!). I will do everything I can so that everyone feels comfortable participating in our conversations.

2. I may also periodically assign short take-home or in-class writing assignments: these will be factored into the attendance and participation grade. I normally only resort to these when I lose confidence that we're doing the reading, or when overall attendance is suffering. So please do the reading and come to class.

Attendance and participation are worth 20% of your final grade.

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. That way we can work out our own thoughts and exercise some 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 be more comfortable with a more lecture-oriented course I'll be happy to recommend some. They're not hard to find.

Writing Assignments

4. There will be four short (4 page) writing assignments scattered throughout the semester. In these I'll ask you to reflect critically on particular themes of the readings and the course. All together these will count toward 50% of your final grade.

Discussion Facilitation

5. I'm asking everyone to facilitate two class discussions. Here's what I have in mind:

(a) 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.

* Capps, J. 2018. The case for discussion-intensive pedagogy. APA Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy 17(2): 5-11. <https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.apaonline.org/resource/collection/808CBF9D-D8E6-44A7-AE13-41A70645A525/TeachingV17n2.pdf>

(b) Please bring a one page handout (or, better, e-mail it to me and I'll bring copies). 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.

(c) 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.

(d) A good handout is usually a 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 how the author builds their argument.

(e) I've also noticed that good facilitators usually don't read their handout but rather talk through the main ideas. The handout is not a script.

The two facilitations are worth 30% of the final grade.

General Policies and Additional Information

6. I think philosophy in general and Contemporary Anglo-American Philosophy in particular is really wonderful and important. That means 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.

8. In the interest of good communication please 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. myCourses sometimes calculates grades in strange and disturbing ways, and I can provide more useful information.

Readings and Assignments

	08.28.23	Introductory Remarks
	08.30.23	Introductory Remarks (continued; read over this syllabus)
	09.01.23	Mary Midgley: "Philosophical Plumbing"
	09.04.23	Labor Day — No Class
	09.06.23	A.J. Ayer: <i>Language, Truth and Logic</i> , Preface and Chapter 1
	09.08.23	A.J. Ayer: <i>Language, Truth and Logic</i> , Chapter 2 + pp. 59-62
Verificationism and Logical Positivism	09.11.23	A.J. Ayer: <i>Language, Truth and Logic</i> , Chapter 4
	09.13.23	A.J. Ayer: <i>Language, Truth and Logic</i> , Chapter 5
	09.15.23	A.J. Ayer: <i>Language, Truth and Logic</i> , Chapter 6
	09.18.23	A.J. Ayer: <i>Language, Truth and Logic</i> , Chapter 8
Early and Middle Wittgenstein	09.20.23	Ludwig Wittgenstein: <i>Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus</i> , Preface, 1-3.26
	09.22.23	Ludwig Wittgenstein: <i>Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus</i> , 5-7 Writing Assignment #1 Due
	09.25.23	Frank Ramsey: "Philosophy" + "Truth and Probability" pp. 52-70
	09.27.23	Frank Ramsey: "Truth and Probability" pp. 86-94 + "Epilogue"
	09.29.23	Ludwig Wittgenstein: <i>The Blue Book</i> , pp. 1-6
	10.02.23	Ludwig Wittgenstein: <i>The Blue Book</i> , pp. 6-15
	10.04.23	Ludwig Wittgenstein: <i>The Blue Book</i> , pp. 15-28
	10.06.23	Ludwig Wittgenstein: <i>The Blue Book</i> , pp. 28-39
	10.09.23	Fall Break — No Class
	10.11.23	Ludwig Wittgenstein: <i>The Blue Book</i> , pp. 39-50
	10.13.23	Ludwig Wittgenstein: <i>The Blue Book</i> , pp. 50-61
	10.16.23	Ludwig Wittgenstein: <i>The Blue Book</i> , pp. 61-74
Ordinary Language Philosophy	10.18.23	J.L. Austin: "Performative Utterances"
	10.20.23	J.L. Austin: "Other Minds" Writing Assignment #2 Due
Kuhn and Scientific Revolutions	10.23.23	T.S. Kuhn: <i>The Structure of Scientific Revolutions</i> , Chapters 1-4
	10.25.23	T.S. Kuhn: <i>The Structure of Scientific Revolutions</i> , Chapters 5-6
	10.27.23	T.S. Kuhn: <i>The Structure of Scientific Revolutions</i> , Chapters 7-8
	10.30.23	T.S. Kuhn: <i>The Structure of Scientific Revolutions</i> , Chapter 9
	11.01.23	T.S. Kuhn: <i>The Structure of Scientific Revolutions</i> , Chapter 10
	11.03.23	T.S. Kuhn: <i>The Structure of Scientific Revolutions</i> , Chapter 11

	11.06.23	T.S. Kuhn: <i>The Structure of Scientific Revolutions</i> , Chapters 12-13
	11.08.23	T.S. Kuhn: <i>The Structure of Scientific Revolutions</i> , Postscript
Late Wittgenstein	11.10.23	Ludwig Wittgenstein: <i>Philosophical Investigations</i> , 105-155
	11.13.23	Ludwig Wittgenstein: <i>Philosophical Investigations</i> , 179-224
	11.15.23	Ludwig Wittgenstein: <i>On Certainty</i> (selections)
Political Economy and the Work Ethic	11.17.23	Elizabeth Anderson: <i>Hijacked</i> , Chapter 1 Writing Assignment #3 Due
	11.20.23	Elizabeth Anderson: <i>Hijacked</i> , Chapter 2
	11.22.23	Thanksgiving Break — No Class
	11.24.23	Thanksgiving Break — No Class
	11.27.23	Elizabeth Anderson: <i>Hijacked</i> , Chapter 3
	11.29.23	Elizabeth Anderson: <i>Hijacked</i> , Chapters 4-5
	12.01.23	Elizabeth Anderson: <i>Hijacked</i> , Chapter 6
	12.04.23	Elizabeth Anderson: <i>Hijacked</i> , Chapter 7
	12.06.23	Elizabeth Anderson: <i>Hijacked</i> , Chapter 8-9
	12.08.23	Elizabeth Anderson: <i>Hijacked</i> , Chapter 10
	12.11.23	Concluding Remarks
	12.18.23	Writing Assignment #4 Due @ 1:15 PM
