Contemporary Analytic Philosophy

PHIL/MAPH 31414

University of Chicago
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MW 1:30–2:50
Young Memorial Building, Room 106

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Course Description

This course is designed to provide MAPH students—especially those interested in pursuing a PhD in philosophy—with an introduction to some recent debates between philosophers working in the analytic tradition. The course is, however, neither a history of analytic philosophy nor an overview of the discipline as it currently stands. Instead, we will focus on three (or, time permitting, four) different debates, spending about three weeks on each (excepting the fourth, on which we will spend only a week). Each of these debates, as well as the individual contributions to them that we will be reading, have been chosen either because they constitute an important point of reference for philosophers working in the relevant sub-field, or because they are (as it seems to the instructor) presently relatively "hot" topics.

In our first unit, then, we will read selected papers on freedom and responsibility, taken from a debate—or, more precisely, a couple of closely related debates—begun by Harry Frankfurt. We will address the connection between freedom of the will and moral responsibility, and between responsibility and the ability to do otherwise, as well as the role of caring—and of love—in human life and action.

Our second unit addresses the recent proliferation, especially in epistemology but also elsewhere, of so-called "disjunctivist" accounts of various phenomena. The basic idea—which some philosophers think will save us all, and which others think will destroy us—is that certain mental states are to be understood as having a disjunctive—either/or—nature. For example, on one proposal, being in a perceptual state with the content *that there's a squirrel on the fence* is to be understood as disjunctive between *seeing that there's a squirrel on the fence* and (for example) *being under the illusion that there's a squirrel on the fence*. Our aim will be to understand the general strategy, see how it applies in various different cases, and assess its plausibility, both in individual cases and—to the extent that this is possible—in general.

The topic of our third unit is a debate between *pragmatists* and *evidentialists* about believing (thinking that something is so). According to the pragmatist, it's possible to believe, say, that George W. Bush is still president in 2014 because—for the reason that—someone will give you a million dollars if you do. According to the evidentialist, on the other hand, you can believe something for a reason only if the reason constitutes *evidence* that your belief is true; so it's impossible to believe for pragmatic (or more generally practical) reasons. We will consider some of the recent evidence for and against each of these views, and consider what each view implies about the nature of belief.

Time permitting, we will also briefly consider some recent issues concerning the normativity of rationality, by reading a couple papers in a lengthy, and ongoing, exchange between John Broome and Niko Kolodny. The general issue is whether you have, or even could have, reason to be rational. In discussing these papers, we will also have an opportunity to discuss some more general issues concerning the nature of rationality, i.e., what it is to *be* rational (whether you have reason to be or not).

Requirements

Participation

Class discussion will be a central component of our work together this quarter. Good discussions are the fruit of careful reading: if you put in the work to read and digest the material (which might require re-reading), our discussions will be rewarding. If you fail to do such work, our discussions will be much less rewarding. So everyone should come to class ready with questions, concerns, objections, and new ideas. The harder we all work on our own outside of class, the more we'll all learn together in class. Because participation in class is so important, attendance at all classes is required, and will be a factor in determining your final grade.

Weekly Response Papers

Each week (with the exception of weeks in which longer papers are due), you will write one short (1–2 page) response paper, in which you may discuss either an issue in one of the readings or an issue raised in class. Response papers will be due by email by 5:00pm each Thursday, and will be returned in class the following Monday.

Presentations

You will also, in rotation with your classmates, occasionally give a short in-class presentation. Your presentation should be designed to initiate discussion: so you should avoid mere summary of the reading, and instead raise a question left unanswered by the text, an objection to an argument given or a view taken in the text, a suggestion about how to improve on or go beyond the idea presented in the text, and so forth. This is, I recognize, not always an easy task. I encourage you, therefore, to visit me during my office hours and use me as a sounding board. Even more than that, I encourage you to talk to each other about the readings outside of class—sometimes you don't realize that you have views about something you've read until you hear someone else taking an opposing view.

Papers

Finally, you will write two longer papers, both on topics of your choice. The first, of 1500–2000 words (about 6–8 pages), will be due on Friday, October 31, at 5:00pm. The second, of 2500–3000 words (about 10–12 pages), will be due on Thursday, December 11, at 5:00pm. Topics must be cleared by the instructor at least one week in advance of the due date.

Grading Policies

Weekly response papers will be graded on a check–minus, check, check–plus system: a check indicates that your response meets expectations, a check–minus that it falls short, and a check–plus that it exceeds them. Presentations will not be graded, except as a part of your general participation grade. Your two papers will be graded according to the criteria laid out at the end of this syllabus.

The overall breakdown of your course grade will be as follows:

Mid-Term Paper: 30
Final Paper: 45
Weekly Response Papers: 10

Participation: 15

A note on Weekly Response Papers: if you receive all, or nearly all, checks, your overall score on the WRPs will be 10/10. Exceeding expectations (receiving check–pluses) can potentially raise your final grade, e.g., from a B+ to an A- if you have a high B+. Failing to meet expectations (receiving check–minuses), on the other hand, will simply lower your score on the WRP component of your grade.

Letter grades will be determined as follows: 97–100 is an A+, 93–96 is an A, 90–92 is an A-, 87–89 is a B+, and so on.

Accommodations

The University of Chicago is committed to ensuring the full participation of all students in its programs. If you have a documented disability (or think you may have a disability) and, as a result, need a reasonable accommodation to participate in class, complete course requirements, or benefit from the University's programs or services, you are encouraged to contact Student Disability Services as soon as possible. To receive reasonable accommodation, you must be appropriately registered with Student Disability Services. Please contact the office at 773-834-4469/TTY 773-795-1186 or gmoorehead@uchicago.edu, or visit the website at disabilities.uchicago.edu. Student Disability Services is located in Room 233 in the Administration Building located at 5801 S. Ellis Avenue.

If you require any accommodations for this course, please—as soon as possible—provide me with a copy of your Accommodation Determination Letter (provided to you by the Student Disability Services office) so that we can discuss how to implement your accommodations.

Schedule of Readings

All readings will be made available on the course Chalk site.

Introduction

September 29	What is analytic philosophy?

Freedom and Responsibility

October 1	Harry Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility"
October 6	Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person"
October 8	Peter Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment"
October 13	Gary Watson, "Responsibility and the Limits of Evil"
October 15	NO CLASS
October 20	Harry Frankfurt, "The Importance of What We Care About"
October 22	Susan Wolf, "The True, the Good, and the Lovable: Frankfurt's Avoidance of Objectivity"

Disjunctivism

October 27	Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, Chapters I and V
	Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, §§IV and V
October 29	John McDowell, "Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge"
November 3	Simon Blackburn, "Julius Caesar and George Berkeley Play Leapfrog"
	John McDowell, "Reply to Blackburn"
November 5	Tyler Burge, "Disjunctivism Again"
November 10	Jennifer Hornsby, "A Disjunctivist Conception of Acting for Reasons"
November 12	Jonathan Dancy, "Acting In Ignorance"

Belief, Evidence, and Normativity

November 17	Bernard Williams, "Deciding to Believe"
November 19	Richard Foley, *Working Without a Net*, Chapter 1
November 24	Pamela Hieronymi, "The Wrong Kind of Reason"
November 26	NO CLASS – Thanksgiving
December 1	Nishi Shah, "A New Argument for Evidentialism"
December 3	Andrew Reisner, "The possibility of pragmatic reasons for belief and the wrong kind of reasons problem"

The Normativity of Rationality

TBD?	John Broome, "Does Rationality Give Us Reasons?"
TBD?	Niko Kolodny, "How Does Coherence Matter"

Criteria for Grading Papers

100–90
Papers that score in this range do several important things. They demonstrate a clear grasp both of the issues in the text they are discussing and, more generally, of the arguments and various positions that arise in the debate they're discussing. They are written clearly and gracefully, and possess an overall structure that helps the reader follow the argument of the paper. And they say something interesting and to some degree original: they express an ambitious point, some new angle on the material, that was not explicit in the text under consideration; but they do so by engaging carefully with the text and its arguments. (In other words, they do not make fanciful and speculative leaps of thought that are not grounded in the text being discussed.) After reading such papers, one's understanding of the main text, and its issues, is now advanced in interesting ways.

89–83
Papers in this range show a generally good grasp of the issues in the text under consideration.They are written relatively clearly and gracefully, and possess a meaningful structure that helps the reader follow the argument. While these papers go beyond simply summarizing the arguments of the text they engage with, they fail to say something really interesting and so do not engage with the text in a manner that reveals interesting and original thought.

82–77
Papers in this range (1) fail to demonstrate a strong grasp of the central issues in the text (they may misconstrue its points, or focus their attention on peripheral issues without making a case for their importance), (2) suffer from significant moments of unclear writing and argumentation, (3) fail to have a sufficiently clear focus or thesis, or (4) do no more than summarize the main points of the text.

76–70
Papers in this range either show significant deficits in comprehension of the centrals issues in the text or demonstrate serious problems in terms of clarity of writing and overall argumentation.

Below 70
Papers in this range show significant deficits in comprehending the text they discuss and have serious problems with respect to clarity of expression.