

PH4242 Issues in Philosophy of Language

Contextualism, Relativism, and Expressivism

Meeting time: Mondays, 9-12

Venue: AS3-0309

Modular Credits: 5

Prerequisites: Completed 80MC, including 28 MCs in PH, with a minimum CAP of 3.2 or be on the Honours track

Instructor: Bob Beddor

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Office Hours: Mondays, 1pm-2pm, and by appointment
(My office is in the Philosophy Department, located in AS3, fifth floor.)

Description: Some declarative language aims to describe objective facts – for example, when I tell you, “grass is green”, or “The earth orbits around the sun.” But is all declarative language like this? In this course, we will examine three areas of discourse that some philosophers and linguists have classified as “nonfactual”: *taste predicates* (e.g., “tasty”, “delicious”, “disgusting”), *moral discourse* (e.g., “right”, “wrong”, “good”, “bad”, etc.), and *epistemic modals* (e.g., “might”, “probably”). We will focus on three different semantic accounts of these classes of linguistic expressions: contextualist accounts (which analyze the relevant expressions as making claims about the speaker, or the speaker’s community), relativist accounts (which analyze the relevant expressions as having relative truth-values), and expressivist accounts (which analyze the relevant expressions as directly expressing certain features of the speaker’s mental states). Throughout, the course will emphasize integrating philosophical methods with the formal and experimental approaches adopted in contemporary linguistics.

Format and Reading Availability:

Since this is a small class, it will be largely discussion-based. Each week we will focus on a particular topic. You will be expected to have read the assigned texts in advance. Readings will be made available on **IVLE**.

(*Note:* We will be reading a few chapters from Mark Schroeder’s *Noncognitivism in Ethics*. (2010, Routledge.) Students who prefer to have a hardcopy of relevant texts may thus wish to order a copy.)

Grading:

The grade will consist of five components, summarized below.

Attendance/Participation (15%)

Participation is vital for a small honors level seminar – I certainly don’t want to have to lecture for three hours every meeting! While I understand that some students are reluctant

to speak in class, my aim is to create a welcoming and encouraging environment where everyone feels comfortable contributing.

In order to encourage participation, part of the participation grade is to post a weekly question/comment on the reading in a discussion forum on IVLE. The question/comment does not need to be long, but it should involve some sort of engagement with the material – e.g., asking about something that is confusing, raising an objection, or pointing out a connection with some other material we’ve covered – rather than just summarizing the reading. You are also free to respond to others comments/questions. (The idea behind this is to offer different venues for participation, as well as ensuring that people are keeping up with the reading, and allowing me to get a sense of what issues are on people’s minds.) To get credit, please email me your question at least 1 hour before class starts. (Note that there is no expectation to post in the discussion forum when on weeks when a different assignment, such as a paper or a short response, is due.)

Short Homework Exercises (10%)

Much of the material in this course presupposes some familiarity with formal semantics. To that end, the course will start with a mini-unit giving a crash course in possible worlds semantics. In order to check whether students have mastered the relevant semantic knowledge, I will assign two sets of short homework exercises early on in the course.

One Short Written Response (20%)

You will also be expected to write a short response to a specific aspect of one of the readings. The response should be focused on a particular argument in one of the papers – you should briefly summarize the argument, and then engage with it critically, by either offering an original criticism of it, or extending the argument in some way. The response should only be 500 words (750 words max).

Presentation (15%)

You will also be expected to pick a topic from the syllabus to present on. Presentations can be devoted to a single reading on the topic, or they can be devoted to multiple readings relating to a topic. You should aim to present for about 10-15 minutes, and then field questions from the class for another 5-10 minutes. *You are expected to prepare a short handout to accompany your presentation, and you should email the handout to me at least three days (72 hours) before the presentation.* (Completing the handout and sending it in advance is part of the presentation grade.) You are encouraged to think of the presentations as warm up for the final paper: they’re an opportunity to read papers on a topic with particular care, and develop original questions and objections in response to those papers.

Final Paper (40%)

The largest component of the grade is the final paper. Your final paper gives you the opportunity to research a particular topic in depth, culminating in a paper that develops a sustained argument and demonstrates a mastery of the relevant literature.

General Expectations:

You are expected to attend every class on time. If you do miss a class, it is your responsibility to catch up on any material that was covered, as well as any readings or work that was assigned.

Please also avoid using cell phones or computers during class. (If you are convinced that you learn best while using a computer, please talk to me – I may be willing to make an exception. However, studies suggest that most students are less productive when they bring their computers to class.)

Preliminary Schedule (subject to revision)

Readings Marked with an Asterisk () Involve Some Formal Semantics*

Unit 1: Foundational Issues in Possible Worlds Semantics

Week 1 – August 13th

Introduction to the course, overview of possible worlds semantics

Week 2 – August 20th (1st short homework assignment due)

The semantics of context-sensitive expressions

Required Reading:

Kemp, *What is this thing called philosophy of language?*, chp. 5 (“Possible Words: Semantics, Context, and Indexicality”)

- focus on sections 1-4.

Speaks, J. “Double-Indexing and the Kaplan semantics for Indexicals”, available at:

http://www3.nd.edu/~jspeaks/courses/2007-8/93914/_HANDOUTS/double-indexing-Kaplan.pdf

Further Reading:

Kaplan, “Demonstratives”, sections 1-8.* (warning: very influential, but also very dense!)

Braun, “Indexicals”, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, section 3.1-3.4, available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/indexicals/>

Unit 2: Contextualism vs. Relativism

Week 3 – August 27th

Taste Predicates, context-sensitivity, and the relativist challenge

Required Reading:

Lasersohn, “Context Dependence, Disagreement, and Predicates of Personal Taste”*

- focus on pp.643-663

Sundell, “Disagreements about Taste”

Further Reading:

MacFarlane, *Assessment-Sensitivity*, Chapter 1, sections 1.2-1.3

Stephenson, “Judge Dependence, Epistemic Modals, and Predicates of Personal Taste”*

Week 4 – September 3rd (second short homework assignment due)
De Se Thought

Required Reading:

Lewis, “Attitude *De Dicto* and *De Se*”

Magidor, “The Myth of the *De Se*”

Further Reading:

Torre, “*De Se* Thought and Communication: An Introduction”

Week 5 – September 10th

Taste Predicates and the *De Se*

Required Reading:

Egan, “Disputing about Taste”

Marques, “Doxastic Disagreement”

Further Reading:

Dinges, “Relativism and Assertion”

Pearson, “A Judge-Free Semantics for Predicates of Personal Taste”*

Week 6 – September 17th

Further challenges to relativism

Required Reading:

Ross and Schroeder, “Reversibility or Disagreement”

Further Reading:

Spencer, “Disagreement and Attitudinal Relativism”

Ross and Schroeder, “On Losing Disagreements: Spencer on Attitudinal Relativism”

Short Response Paper due Friday, September 21st (Boo!)

Recess week, September 24th-28th (Yay!)

Unit 3: Expressivism

Week 7 – October 1st

Introducing Expressivism

Required Reading:

Schroeder, *Noncognitivism in Ethics*, Chapters 1 & 4.

Further Reading:

Dreier, "Internalism and Speaker Relativism"

Egan, "Relativist Dispositional Theories of Value"

Plunkett and Sundell, "Disagreement and the Semantics of Normative and Evaluative Terms"

Week 8 – October 8th

The Frege-Geach Problem

Required Reading:

Schroeder, *Noncognitivism in Ethics*. Chapters 3 & 6

Optional Reading:

Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, Chp. 6.

Geach, "Assertion"

Week 9 – October 15th

More on the Frege-Geach Problem (and Related Challenges)

Required Reading:

Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, Chapter 5 ("Normative Logic")

Schroeder, *Noncognitivism in Ethics*. Chps, 5 & 7.

Further Reading:

Dreier, "Relativism (and Expressivism) and the Problem of Disagreement"

Dorr, "Noncognitivism and Wishful Thinking"

Week 10 - October 22nd

Hybrid Approaches

Required Reading:

Schroeder, *Noncognitivism in Ethics*. Chapter 10.

Ridge, "Ecumenical Expressivism: Finessing Frege"

Further Reading:

Hornsby, "Meaning and Uselessness: How to Think About Derogatory Words"

Schroeder, "Hybrid Expressivism: Virtues and Vices"

Unit 4: Further Applications

Week 11 - October 29th

Epistemic Modals

Required Reading:

Egan, "Relativism about Epistemic Modals"

Yalcin, "Nonfactualism about Epistemic Modality"*

Further Reading:

DeRose, "Epistemic Possibilities"

von Fintel and Gillies, "CIA Leaks"*

von Fintel and Gillies, "Might made right"*

MacFarlane, "Epistemic Modals are Assessment-Sensitive"*

Dowell, "A Flexible Contextualist Account of Epistemic Modals"

Week 12 – November 5th

Contextualism, Relativism, and Expressivism: Empirical Perspectives

Required Reading:

Knobe and Yalcin, "Epistemic Modals and Context: Experimental Data"

Khoo, "Modal Disagreements"

Further Reading:

Khoo and Knobe, "Moral Disagreement and Moral Semantics"*

Beddor and Egan, "Might do Better: Flexible Relativism and the QUD"

Khoo and Phillips, "New Horizons for a Theory of Epistemic Modals"*

Week 13 – November 12th (Final Paper Due)

Review/Catch-up.