

Philosophy 485, *Selected Issues in Philosophy of Language*

Spring 2008, 6-9 pm Wednesdays in BSS 408
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Office hours: Mon 1-3, Wed 1-2, and by appt. office: 502C BSS.

Description: During the last century, philosophy of language has emerged as a central subdiscipline in philosophy. How we treat problems of knowledge, ethics, logic, being and mind are now seen to crucially depend on how we treat insights from philosophy of language. And some insights from philosophy of language, applied to some of those problems in other areas, reveal that a great deal of traditional philosophical work has been terribly off the mark or burdened by mistaken assumptions about how words work, what concepts are. For example, the assumption that good was a label or a sign for some entity which needs to be defined sent legions of ethicists off on quests for definitions, for theories of goodness, and for reasons why we ought to be good. The analogous chase for a willow-the-wisp definition of knowledge is still a going business, as though epistemologists were like the astronomers half a century after Copernicus' death still trying to reconcile the Ptolemaic model to what they saw when they opened their eyes. In both ethics and epistemology there have been startling seeming-successes which have made it more difficult to achieve real progress.

There are a couple of remarkable things about philosophy of language of which we have to take account in our investigations. First, even though philosophers cannot agree about what rationality is or whether writing is a good or an evil or better or worse than speaking, there is an amazing near-consensus about what language is, up at least to a certain point. We'll start by reading some philosophers who cannot agree about anything else but who agree on the basic story about language. Now, one might be tempted to think, that if everybody, or rather every philosopher, says it's so, then it's almost certain that it is not so. One would be right. At any rate, that is the first thing, that philosophers agree about something, agree about a great deal regarding language, and that in their agreement they are dead wrong.

The second thing is that there is a revolution going on, a Copernican revolution spreading out from within philosophy of language, which threatens to turn almost all philosophy inside out. It begins with heightened scrutiny of (not answers but) issues or problems and then findings that at least some of them arise out of oversimplifications and begged questions. The revolution, however, is not a done deal. Indeed, most respected journals and authorities seem to have written it off. We'll read some commentary, both play by play and color.

These two circumstances make doing a balanced investigation into philosophy of language difficult. We will cope by stressing fundamentals and working on some central, classic problems which remain of interest to current scholars. What is language, really? What is the meaning of a word? How do words refer to the world? How do we do things with words? With each of these we will read classic and contemporary sources, including challenges to the standard view. We will then take a look at how linguistic analysis might help (or harm) our philosophical work in other areas of philosophy, such as ethics and epistemology.

Text and Materials: Readings will come from three sources: an anthology of readings, more readings posted on Moodle (the University's web-based course materials system), and classroom handouts.

1. The anthology is edited by Andrea Nye: *Philosophy of Language: The Big Questions*. It is in the University Bookstore for a little less than \$50.00. It is not likely you will find local used copies, but it's been around for half a dozen years and online sites such as Amazon, ABEbooks, and Powell's Books may have used copies. The first readings will come from Moodle, giving you time to find one used. I'll refer to this anthology as Nye. (An instance not of a word referring but rather a person referring.)

2. Several of the most basic background readings will be on Moodle, as well as some of the most controversial of the contemporary works. Moodle is available from any computer with a Web browser as a link from the HSU website's "Quick Links" pull-down menu. You will need to log in using your HSU username and password. *Anyone who has trouble with access should immediately let me know—e-mail jwp2. I can send all Moodle readings to you via e-mail until access is straightened out.*

3. A few of the readings will be handed out in class on clay tablets or paper. If you miss a class, check to see if you have missed handouts.

Grading and Graded Assignments: There will be four graded assignments, all weighted the same except that a poor first grade may be dropped as explained below.

- a. An essay emphasizing exposition of one of our readings.
- b. A class presentation, either an oral 20 minute lesson with a one-page handout, or a 3000 word paper e-mailed to the class by Sunday before the class discusses it. I can provide topics, or

- students can follow up on their own interests within the issues addressed in the course.
- c. Two 2000-2500 word essays chosen from topics distributed in class. The topics will be in the form of arguments, each addressing an issue from the class, and students will write a three-part essay, doing exposition, arguing the student's own position on the same issue, and then anticipating and discussing objections. More directions regarding the three-part structure and the grading criteria will be posted on Moodle.

Your grade for the course will be an average of your grades on the assignments, except that the first grade will be dropped if it harms your average. Also, **attendance is required**—roll will be taken for most classes; missing more than three classes (out of the fifteen total) will drop your grade by one letter, and missing more than five will drop your maximum grade to a C.

A grading criteria outline & checklist is at <http://www.humboldt.edu/~jwp2/gradingx.pdf>.

A Preview Example: Consider as an example an insight about language which has implications for philosophy of mind, ethics, metaphysics, as well as many pop philosophy positions. That insight goes as follows. When a word is used in a conversation, it makes the sense it does partly because of what other words could have been used in place of it. Colors make an easy example: saying a car is blue makes the sense it does (note we are leaving the truth of this out for now) partly by virtue of the other words which could have been substituted for blue. Saying a car is blue is, in effect, saying the car is not red or champagne or white or black etc. If cars were limited by law to only blue and black, then saying a car is blue would not make the same sense it does make for us though it would still make the same *kind* of sense. But now try to imagine the world consisting only of things which are blue, that is, no other colors exist, only, let's say, lighter and darker shades of blue. The first result is that there would be no reason for anyone ever to say that something was blue, but more subversive than that is the insight that blue would no longer be blue as we know it.

Skipping over the honest work of nailing down the arguments, suppose some truth to these claims and consider implications: One is that we may be slipping into incoherence or nonsense when we say something which attempts to deny or to eliminate the alternatives which make sense of the words we affirm. This calls into question those claims when people say that all people, really, are only (perhaps because of their genes) completely selfish; or, everything is subjective; or, reality or knowledge is all constructed; or everything is relative; or all acquisition of linguistic competence is innate, or Descartes' evil genius could deceive us about everything, or nothing is certain (you might want to do an inventory to check whether you are tempted by any abstract claims which raise these issues). Philosophers have articulated these points in different ways. Depending on your background, you may have run into talk about totalizing concepts, or about pragmatics as limiting semantics, about logical space or the grammar of concepts, about (usually these put their claims in negative terms blind to their own self-sabotage—see Richard Rorty, Sandra Harding, Foucault) the evils of dualisms, about problems vs. pseudoproblems in philosophy, or about alternation as a structural limit on intelligibility. One rather unseemly place to find some of these ideas at work is the cemetery where philosophers line up pissing on the graves of the logical positivists. Another implication is that these insights have to be handled with respect if we wish our work even with them to escape their corrosiveness. There are comical and scary instances of Siegfried-and-Roy-type forgetting this danger. Some philosophers have tried to conceive of different ways of making sense which would escape the necessity for invoking dichotomies and alternation, a kind of new or nondichotomous consciousness, doomed at the start by the level of abstraction in their work—what's nondichotomous consciousness *mean*??—well, you know, the kind of consciousness which is not dichotomous, oooops.

(I seem to see the shades of philosophers raising their hands to ask that I acknowledge their contributions to these insights, which play roles in several parts of the contemporary philosophical world. An abbreviated list: Chuang Tzu, Nietzsche, de Saussure, Derrida, Wittgenstein, J. L. Austin, O.K Bouwsma.)

I mention these matters in the syllabus as an example, and to show that though these matters are not settled, they still serve notice that there are some stakes in these controversies. They raise the possibility that your work in philosophy, if you don't approach it in fear and trembling with all your critical faculties intact, if you don't give it your full attention, will wind up on the same rubbish heap with scholastic debaters about whether Jesus could have been the Messiah had He come to earth in the shape of a flea, with verificationists slaughtered by their own two-edged swords, with possible-world theorists, and with the believers in logically private languages in which you cannot have my pain and so you can never know really what it is like.

Schedule: (This schedule is false. Most of the readings in Nye are not noted here.)

Week One: *What Is Language?* The consensus view and the underlying picture of human beings. Hunter. Augustine, "Ad Magisterium" Locke, from *An Essay on Human Understanding*, Book III, Chaps. 1-4. Plato

on names (in Nye). Quotes from Morris, Carnap, Katz,

Two: *WIL?* cont. Presentations on Katz; Locke; Mosedale on instrumentalist views of language.

Three: *What is Meaning?* Locke. Russell. Carnap. Quine. Katz. Nye.

Four: *WIM?* cont. Beetle in a box sections from *Philosophical Investigations*

Five: *WIM?* LW, from *The Blue Book*. Ebersole, from “Meaning and Use.”

Six: *Names and Referents*. Plato (from *Cratylus*). Russell. Frege. Kripke.

Seven: *Reference* cont.

Eight: *Reference* cont. Ebersole, “Names”

Nine: *How To Do Things with Words*. Austin, “A Plea for Excuses,” and “Three Ways of Spilling Ink.”

Ten: *HTDTwW* cont. Austin, “Truth.” Searle, from *Speech Acts*.

Eleven: *Alternative Conceptions of Language*. Richard Rorty, from *The Linguistic Turn*. Heraclitus, from the *Fragments*. Harry Nielsen, “How Language Exists: Questions for Chomsky”

Twelve: *Alts* cont. Witherspoon on Navajo language, and Farella on Witherspoon’s projected Manicheism from Chapt. Two of *The Main Stalk*.

Thirteen: *Student-chosen topics*

Fourteen: *Ineffability and the Limits of Language*. Russell on logical fixes for language. Bouwsma, “The Terms of Ordinary Language Are . . . “jwp, “Mightn’t Language Be Inadequate?”

Fifteen: *Progress* Backing up from Answers to Problems to Pictures to Examples.

Goals and Objectives: What do we plan to accomplish in this course? There is an interesting push nowadays for teachers to articulate goals and objectives in hopes that higher ed will be more accountable. This course, which has a relatively narrow focus and for which there are well-established traditions and a clear canon, would seem to be a good candidate for such an exercise in laying out in precise terms what we are after, what we will achieve by the end of the course. The following, then, are proposed goals for the course.

We will become literate regarding the traditions in philosophy of language. We will read and understand some of the documents which have been taken to be central to problems and insights in philosophy of language.

We will practice tools of analysis and evaluation by assessing strengths and weaknesses of those documents. Now, while you can lead a scholar to thought you cannot make it think, we will be able to look as though we can analyze and evaluate.

Following up on some recent crucial work, we will also assess the issues or problems to which those documents are addressed. This requires practice in comparing abstractions against examples, and imaginative but critical work to construct examples. We will be able to sort problems from pseudoproblems in philosophy of language.

We will develop awareness of our own weaknesses and strengths in philosophy. We will develop awareness of origins of philosophical problems. We will have views on problems’ origins.

Objectives are more precise measures of whether goals have been met. Here are some:

Each student will articulate the standard view of what language is, to the extent that it is shared by, for example, Augustine, Locke, Carnap, Fodor, Searle, Derrida.

Each student will characterize the main accounts of meaning and reference and cite their sources.

Each student will articulate crucial challenges to the views above.

Each student will argue her/his own positions regarding those challenges, and will anticipate and reply to objections. Each student, then, will develop defensible views on the main issues in philosophy of language.

Each student will draw implications for other philosophical problems and for their own approaches to those.

Readings:

Plato, from *Cratylus*, from *Theaetetus*.

Aristotle, from *Categories*, from *De Anima*

Charles Morris, from *Signs, Language, and Behavior*; Carnap, from *An Introduction to Semantics*.

J.F.M. Hunter, "On How We Talk," from *Essays After Wittgenstein*

Derrida, from *Limited, Inc* (and from *Of Grammatology*, section leading up to "nothing is not text")

Grice, "The Causal Theory of Perception" "Logic and Conversation"

W., beginning of *The Blue Book*; Beetle in a box sections from *Philosophical Investigations*

Quote assignment—poem, song lyrics, regarding words or language

jwp readings:

Preface

read the whole thing?

"In and Out of Language"

"TVIL"

Contextualism and Its Discontents Keith DeRose, & responses to him.