

PHIL 29601
INTENSIVE-TRACK SEMINAR
University of Chicago, autumn 2014

Course Instructor: Jason Bridges (bridges at uchicago)

DESCRIPTION

In this seminar we will examine the relationship between two central concerns of Western philosophy: language and skepticism.

20th century philosophy had a deep interest in language. This orientation reflected a broader cultural preoccupation—often labeled “Modernism”—with scrutinizing the forms by which human beings structure and represent their thought and activity. In the case of philosophy, the interest was largely funded by the conviction that understanding language was the key to solving, perhaps even dissolving, perennial philosophical puzzles about the relationship between thought and reality.

Philosophical skepticism was one such puzzle. Skeptical arguments purport to establish the impossibility of wide swaths of human knowledge—up to and including everything we might think we know about the world outside our minds. The most famous and influential skeptical argument is in René Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy*, and we will begin by examining that text.

In the remainder of the course, we will examine three attempts to solve the problem of philosophical skepticism through reflection on the nature of language. The first is *logical empiricism*, which aimed to show that purported statements of skepticism or of other sweeping philosophical doctrines are meaningless. The second is *ordinary-language philosophy*, according to which arguments for skepticism depend upon distortions of our ordinary practices of offering and assessing claims of knowledge. The third is the contemporary movement of *contextualism*, which traces the skeptical threat to a failure to grasp the pervasive context-sensitivity of meaning. We will ask in each case whether the claims made about the nature of language can be sustained, and whether they really do have the power to defeat the skeptical challenge.

READINGS

One book is required, available for purchase through the Seminary Coop Bookstore:

Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford University Press, 1999)

A physical copy of the Descartes text will be on reserve at Regenstein: if you want to get your own copy, make sure the edition is:

Descartes, Rene, *Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies*,
Cottingham (ed.), Rev. Edition, Cambridge University Press, 1996, ISBN: 0521552524

The remainder of the course readings will be on the Chalk site on the Library Course Reserves page.

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

There will be one paper, 12-15 pages in length, due at the end of the quarter. Short assignments, preparatory to this paper, will be due at earlier stages in the quarter.

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS

Part I. The challenge of philosophical skepticism

<u>Meeting</u>	<u>Topic</u>	<u>Reading</u>
1	Introduction	
2	Cartesian skepticism about the external world	Descartes, <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i> , Books 1 and 2

Part II. First solution: logical empiricism

3	The reality of the external world as a pseudoproblem	Carnap, excerpt from <i>Pseudoproblems in Philosophy</i> Carnap, "Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology"
4	Meaning and the experiential given	C.I. Lewis, "The Pragmatic Element in Knowledge" C.I. Lewis, <i>An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation</i> , chapter 8
5	The problem of holism	Chisholm, "The Problem of Empiricism" Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism"

Part III: Second solution: the appeal to ordinary use

6	Skeptical vs. ordinary claims about knowledge, part 1	J.L. Austin, "Other Minds"
7	Skeptical vs. ordinary claims about knowledge, part 2	Hume, <i>Treatise of Human Nature</i> , §1.4.7 Cavell, <i>The Claim of Reason</i> , excerpts from chapters 6 and 8

Part IV. Third solution: contextualism

8	Epistemological contextualism	DeRose, "Contextualism and Knowledge Attributions" Bezuidenhout, "Truth-Conditional Pragmatics"
9	Knowledge and deliberation	Williamson, "Knowledge, context and the agent's point of view" and (optional) "Contextualism, subject-sensitive invariantism and knowledge of knowledge"
10	Meaning and objectivity	