



INTRODUCTION TO METAPHYSICS

Seminar Leader: DANIEL PENNER; House Leader: MIZUHO HASHIMOTO

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Course Description

Metaphysics is the study of the “fundamental nature of being and the world” (Wikipedia). While we can answer a lot of our questions about the world through physics, there are a number of questions that go beyond anything we can answer through observation: What *are you*, and what distinguishes you from everything else? Are we in control of our actions, or are they only consequences of the past? What is knowledge, and what exactly does it mean to acquire it? Is there a God? How do we know that what we perceive every day is even real? We will take a look at how some of these questions have been approached by various philosophers through history, by reading excerpts of their writings and discussing them as a group. By the end of the seminar, students should have a basic understanding of how philosophy is done, and of some of the fundamental questions philosophers consider, as well as a new appreciation for how intricate some of the concepts we take for granted really are.

Message from the Seminar Leader

Hi everyone, my name is Daniel Penner, and I’m a graduating senior at Princeton studying mathematics, and will have finished my second year of Japanese at the time of the seminar. I’m really excited to share this material with you — I took a class on metaphysics at Princeton a few years ago, and found it to be a very fun and mind-bending experience. It was definitely more abstract than the reading I had been exposed to in high school, and I wish that I had been exposed to this type of reading earlier. In my free time, I listen to, write, and play lots of music (primarily rock), attempt to cook, and play old Nintendo games. I’m looking forward to meeting all of you and having some really interesting discussions! If you have any questions, feel free to send an email to answer them.

Message from the House Leader

Hello! My name’s Mizuho (call me Miz!), I’m 21 and am going to start my undergraduate course in Human, Social, and Political Sciences at the University of Cambridge this autumn. I’ve spent my life going back and forth between Japan and the UK, and am really excited to visit Ishikawa this summer, as I’ve never been there before! I briefly did philosophy at high school in the UK – the great thing about the subject is that once you start thinking about a topic, it’s impossible to stop! I hope you’ll enjoy this seminar as an introduction to the discipline, or even just to get thinking about the deeper questions in life. Aside from studying, I’m really into comedy and the performing arts and spend a lot of time writing and being in



plays. I can't wait to meet you all, and if there's anything you want to talk about do drop me a line even if it's just to say hi.

Pre-Assignments

- Read excerpt from 変身 and complete worksheet (see Day 1)
- Read excerpt from Parfit and complete worksheet (see Day 1)
- Read excerpt from Lewis and complete worksheet (see Day 2)
- Read excerpt from Strawson and complete worksheet (see Day 2)
- Read summary from Inwagen and complete worksheet (see Day 3)
- Read summary from Ayer and complete worksheet (see Day 3)
- Choose a paper to present for day 4, read it, complete worksheet (see Day 4).

Course Schedule

Day 1: *Who are we? An introduction to Metaphysics*

We will begin by discussing what it means to be one person over time; what it means for people to change, and what makes a changed person still the same person.

Pre-Seminar readings:

- 変身(東野圭吾) — excerpt (pp. 49-61)
- Fill out worksheet about 変身
- Derek Parfit: excerpts from “Reasons and Persons” (pp. 4-8)
 - This paper discusses the different ways we can conceive of ourselves existing over time. The author makes the case that, because being replaced by a clone is better than simply dying, personal identity is not what matters when we ask the question “Who are we?”

Seminar plan:

- Discussion: 変身
- Video: John Weldon's “To Be”
- Introduction to philosophical analysis: analyzing Parfit's paper

Day 2: *The problem of personal identity*

We will continue to study the idea of a person existing over time; what it means to be the same person today as yesterday; and what happens to me when I am split into two people, or when I am put into a teleportation machine. We will examine two different views of what matters in determining our continued existence, and see where their arguments differ.

Pre-Seminar readings:



- David Lewis: “Survival and Identity” (pp. 57-70)
 - This paper challenges Derek Parfit’s conclusion we discussed on day one. Lewis instead argues that Parfit’s assumptions should lead us to conclude that personal identity is only a psychological state, instead of leading us to reject it as a meaningful concept.
- Galen Strawson: “On Free Will” (pp. 1-2 required; pp. 3-7 recommended)
 - This paper introduces the basic concepts of free will and determinism, as well as the debate as to whether or not the two beliefs can coexist.

Seminar plan:

- Analysis of Lewis’ paper
- Comparison of Lewis’ and Parfit’s views on personal identity
- Introduction to free will/determinism: what are they? Why do we care?
- Introduction to compatibilism and incompatibilism: Strawson’s paper

Day 3: *The problem of free will*

Are we in control of our actions? Can we decide our future, or is everything that will ever happen already decided for us? We will look at some philosophers’ answers to these questions, and will examine an interesting debate as to whether the two situations can both be true or not.

Pre-Seminar readings

- Peter van Inwagen: “The Consequence Argument” (2-page summary)
 - This paper lays out a strong argument for incompatibilism, the thesis that if our actions are determined by the laws of nature and the distant past, then we do not have any genuine free will.
- A.J. Ayer: “Freedom and Necessity” (2-page summary)
 - This paper mounts a defense of compatibilism, the thesis that humans can have free will even if all actions are predetermined, against van Inwagen’s compelling consequence argument. In particular, it argues that the incompatibilists misunderstand what it means to act freely.

Seminar plan:

- Discuss van Inwagen’s consequence argument
- Discuss Ayer’s defense of compatibilism
- Discuss an alternate defense of compatibilism by reinterpreting free will
- Presentation prep time; one-on-one consultation with Daniel and Miz



Day 4: Presentations

Each student will make a presentation on one of the papers listed below, and will lead a short discussion. The presentation should follow the structure of our analyses of the previous three days. If you wish to present on another paper not listed below, that is fine – just send it to Daniel and Miz.

Pre-Seminar readings

- Read the paper assigned to you beforehand
- Fill out the ‘analysis worksheet’ for your assigned paper

Presentation paper options (each student chooses only one from this)

- Rene Descartes – Meditations, chapter 2
 - In this paper, the author formulates the thesis of skepticism: that we have no reason to trust any of our senses or our acquired knowledge about the world. Source of the famous phrase, ‘I think, therefore I am.’
- George Moore – Proof of an External World
 - This paper sets up a simple, but effective defense of our senses, and a refutation of Descartes’ skepticism. Source of the (somewhat less) famous phrase, ‘Here is a hand. Here is another.’
- John Vogel – Skepticism and Inference to the Best Explanation
 - This paper rejects Moore’s refutation of skepticism, and battles skepticism by creating a philosophical framework for us to accept the best explanation we are given.
- Bas van Fraassen – Inference to the Best Explanation: Salvation by Laws?
 - This paper rejects the standard inference to the best explanation model, while proposing yet another solution to the problem of skepticism, reinterpreting the inference approach using probabilities.
- John Perry – Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality
 - One of the more entertaining pieces here, this paper takes the form of a conversation between a dying philosopher and her friends, discussing the nature of personal identity as it relates to death.
- Anselm of Canterbury – The Ontological Argument
 - This paper argues that there has to be a God (specifically a ‘being than which none greater can be imagined’) by using a simple contradiction
- William Rowe – The Cosmological Argument
 - This paper argues that there has to be a God since all things must have an external origin
- William Paley – The Argument from Design



- This paper argues that there has to be a God by appealing to the intricacy of the universe to show that it must have a ‘maker’
- John Mackie – Evil and Omnipotence
 - This paper presents a challenge to believers in an all-powerful, perfectly good God, claiming that such a God cannot coexist with evil.
- Richard Swinburne – Why God Allows Evil
 - This paper defends the idea of an all-powerful, perfectly good God against the problem of evil, attempting to explain why having evil around is actually a good thing.