

Philosophy 230, Spring 2024: Metaphysics

Specific topic: Strawson's Metaphysics

This seminar will be devoted to a close and careful reading of P.F. Strawson's *Individuals* and *The Bounds of Sense*. In particular we will read Chapters 1, 2, and 3 (and maybe 4) of *Individuals*, and *Bounds of Sense* Part I, Part II, and Part III up to p. 174. The latter chapters of *Individuals* are pitched in a way that makes them less directly relevant to contemporary audiences, and also makes the discussion less applicable to understanding his views on Kant as expressed in *BoS*. And some of the latter parts of *BoS*, on the Dialectic, are less connected to the metaphysical scheme developed in *Individuals*. The first(-ish) 2/3 or so of the two books are closely thematically related, and so form a good pair.

Class structure

We will meet once a week, and each week we will cover about 35-45 pages of material. The basic rhythm will be i) read the readings; ii) a few days of online discussion; and iii) in person discussion; iv repeat for the next week. More detail on all this below.

There won't be any final papers for this class. I believe that seminar papers inculcate the habit of writing bad philosophy quickly. But though there will be no final paper, there will be a good deal of writing.

Class meets on **Tuesday**. No later than the **Saturday night** before class meets (12 midnight PST) everyone will post to the google group **two** questions/comments on the readings (more on the google group in a minute).

Everyone should read everyone else's questions/comments. And no later than **Sunday night (12 midnight)**, everyone should post two replies to any of the comments/questions. You can post more than two if you like, but do at least two (replies to your own questions/comments don't count).

In addition to helping all the participants get into the discussion before we meet, the posts and replies will be useful because we will use them as a guide for our seminar discussion. Typically the questions/comments cluster around four to six topics. Monday morning I will find those clusters and name them, and we will go through those topics in our discussion. From time to time I may start our in-person discussion with something more like a brief lecture if I think it will be helpful.

So to summarize, the structure will be this:

1. Do the readings early enough that you can get two questions/comments posted by Saturday night (midnight)
2. By Sunday night read everyone's comments/questions, and post two replies.
3. Read all the replies, and be prepared for the seminar discussion.

Note that while posting questions/comments and also posting replies to others' questions/comments are both course requirements, there is no requirement to the effect that participants make verbal contributions to the discussion in the seminar. I encourage everyone to participate in the verbal discussion, but it is not a requirement.

More detail about the online discussion

All online discussion will be on the course **google group**, which is [HERE](#). If you plan to enroll in the class, subscribe to the group now. You can always leave it if you don't enroll. The readings directory is accessible to members of the group. If you have any problems joining the group, let me know.

Face

No later than Saturday night at midnight you should post two questions/comments to the google group.

- Each question/comment should be posted as a new message/thread to the group. Replies to that question/comment will be posted as replies to that post.
- The subject line of your question/comment should have the following form:

[Your Surname] [Q1 or Q2]: [short descriptive phrase]

So, *your* last name, Q1 or Q2 (to distinguish your 2 questions/comments), and a brief description of your comment. Something like:

Grush Q1: Is hypothetical reasoning a type of pretense?

Grush Q2: An attempt to spell out what Strawson means by 'ontologically prior'

The brief description should be something that will allow people who've read all of the 10-16 questions/comments for that week to recall the content of that question/comment, *so put a little thought into that*. Descriptions like 'A problem with Strawson's argument', or 'What's the deal with space?' are vague. When in seminar we want to be able to say things like "That's like what Smith said in [short descriptive phrase]" and have the description be enough that everyone will remember the gist of that question/comment.

Everyone should be aiming for a **minimum** of around 1,000 words per week, total including the two questions/comments and all replies to others' questions/comments. While around 1000 is a *minimum*, think of about 2000 as a rough *maximum*. If there are, say, 6 participants writing a total (questions and replies) of 2000 words a week, that would be 12,000 words a week we all have to read! Not the end of the world, but I do want to keep our workload manageable. So shoot for between 1000 and 2000 words a week total, hopefully on average around 1200-1400 or so. This will result in 12,000-14,000-ish words of writing for each participant for the quarter, which is comparable to a final paper.

OK, so the above remarks were about how and when to post, and some rough guidelines on quantity. I want to turn now to a couple of issues about the content of the posts.

Approach for the discussion

I think academic philosophy has a number of serious problems. Two closely related problems are i) academic philosophy rewards quick criticism and objections over patient charitable understanding, and ii) academic philosophy rewards adversariality over cooperation. It is very important that we avoid both of these. Here are some bullet points:

- The questions/comments, replies, and verbal discussion are **not** opportunities for you to demonstrate how smart you are.
- They are **definitely not** opportunities for you to demonstrate how smart you are by thinking of some (possibly) clever counter-example or objection to some other position or argument.
- Rather, take your goal to be to arrive at as solid and charitable an understanding as possible of the week's readings (or question/comment you are replying to).
- This is a cooperative enterprise, and so the goal of understanding should be conceived by you as including helping other seminar participants understand things they are grappling with, and also asking for and receiving help from other participants in their attempts to assist you.
- Of course when you read someone's position or argument, you might think of an objection or counterexample. That is fine. But here is the crucial thing. Sometimes the objection you thought of is i) an actual objection that presents a real problem for the position you are addressing, but sometimes it isn't, it is really ii) something that seems like an objection because you didn't really understand the position. In your own reading and thinking, and also in our discussion, try to keep in mind that (ii) is much more likely

than (i). And approach it that way. Your approach should be “Here is something that seems to me to be an objection to view X. Is there something I’m not getting about view X that is giving me this impression. Anyone have any ideas?” Your approach should not be “Here is an objection to X. So X is lame, and I’m super clever.”

- Think of your questions/comments as conversation starters. Which they are. They should be reflections of your attempts to fully and deeply understand the position in question. And your replies should likewise be attempts to join in the collective enterprise of understanding.
- Of course criticism is important. But the standard approach in philosophy is criticize first and try to understand later (if at all). You’ll get plenty of emphasis on criticizing views in other grad seminars and beyond. But at least in this one seminar, we are going to focus on careful reading and understanding.

Honing your writing skills

As I said above, I believe seminar papers inculcate the habit of writing bad philosophy quickly. But that doesn’t mean we won’t use the seminar to help you become a better writer. Writing good philosophy papers, articles, and books (etc.) requires a host of skills. Here are some: an ability to express an idea in a way that other people will get it; an ability to clearly and charitably present or summarize someone else’s view in a condensed way as a preliminary to discussing it; an ability to present multiple ideas in an order or manner that makes their interconnections most salient; an ability to construct examples that illustrate the core element of a complex situation in a compelling way; and so on.

A specific example of how you can hone your craft is in the subject lines you use for your questions/comment posts. I discussed this above. Being able to capture maximum information about a complex idea in various levels of condensation is an incredibly important skill. Think of summaries, abstracts, elevator pitches, loglines, and taglines, summarizing a complex position in a couple pages; or half a page; or two sentences; or one sentence.

I will not be grading the questions/comments or replies (other than just tracking that participants consistently do them, of course, since doing them is a course requirement). There are a number of reasons for this, one being I don’t want people to be inhibited in their writing. But I will be reading them, obviously. And I will provide feedback when appropriate on them with an eye to helping everything hone their craft. The point is, take the writing seriously as an opportunity to improve as a writer. Here’s an analogy: we won’t be playing any games of tennis, but you will have plenty of opportunity to practice your serve, and also your backhand. So that when you do play an actual game, you’ll be a better player.

Verbal Discussion etiquette

In the seminar (whether in person or remote) we will make a point of practicing good discussion etiquette. Among other things this means:

- A. No interrupting the person who is speaking.
- B. The flip side of A is if you are talking, try to not dominate the discussion too much, or talk longer than the point you are making warrants. These are things that make people feel like they have to interrupt.
- C. When the current speaker is finished, we will take a mandatory pause of like a full second, and then determine who talks next based on some vague but civilized method. Basically, the next speaker ISN'T determined by whoever can burst in first and most forcefully when the current speaker is finished (or winding down).

I'll be monitoring/moderating the discussion of course, but it helps if everyone also monitors/moderates themselves.

Auditors

Part of the goal of the seminar is good in-depth discussion, and this works best, in my experience, when there is a consistent group of people who get used to each other's ways of doing things. A sort of conversational trust (for lack of a better phrase) builds up that makes for better philosophical discussion. Having people pop in and out works against this. The upshot is, auditors are fine, but they need to commit to showing up all the time, and contributing questions/comments etc. like everyone else.

Schedule:

All readings are available in a shared directory, accessible to members of the course google group. Join the group and you should have access. The link to the directory is the first (and as of now) post to the group.

Week 1. April 2

Individuals, Chapter 1

Week 2. April 9

Individuals, Chapter 2

Week 3. April 16

Evans (1980). Things without the Mind: A commentary upon Chapter 2 of Strawson's *Individuals*
Sections I and II

Week 4. April 23

Evans (1980). Things without the Mind: A commentary upon Chapter 2 of Strawson's *Individuals*
Sections III and IV

Week 5. April 30

Individuals, Chapter 3

Week 6. May 7

Individuals, Chapter 4

Taking stock (everything in Weeks 1-5)

Week 7. May 14

Bounds of Sense, pages 15-71

Week 8. May 21

Bounds of Sense, pages 72-117

Week 9. May 28

Bounds of Sense, pages 118-152

Week 10. June 4

Shoemaker (1968) Self-reference and self-awareness.

Bounds of Sense, pages 155-174

