

SKEPTICISM & RELATIVISM, PHIL 109T
Fall 2013

Professor Joe Cruz
Department of Philosophy & Chair, Cognitive Science
jcruz@williams.edu

This tutorial will introduce philosophy by engaging two familiar and central issues, the nature and limits of skepticism, and the possibility that all truth is relative.

All tutorial meetings will be in Stetson Hall 503.

Schedule of Readings

Week One

Plato, Apology

There is no writing assignment for our first tutorial meeting. Please read the Russell carefully and come prepared to discuss it. We will also spend part of the first meeting discussing how to write a tutorial essay and commentary.

Week Two

Plato, The Theatetus
Maria Baghramian, Relativism in Classical Philosophy

Essay Topic: Is it true that there is no such thing as truth?

You must include in your essay a substantial discussion of Plato's Theatetus. You may focus on any aspect of the dialogue that you wish to. You are not required to do any outside research or additional reading, though you are not forbidden from doing so.

Week Three

Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*
Keith Lehrer, "Why Not Skepticism?"

Essay Topic: Does complete skepticism undermine itself?

You must include in your essay a substantial discussion of Sextus Empiricus' Outlines of Skepticism or Keith Lehrer's "Why Not Skepticism?". You may focus on any aspect of the readings.

Week Four

Nagarjuna, *Madhyamaka*
Jay Garfield, Introduction to the Commentary and Examination of Conditions

Essay Topic: Select any two chapters of the Madhyamaka except for the first one and (1) reconstruct the argument that Nagarjuna is giving, emphasizing the reasons he brings to bear, with careful attention to interpreting the text and (2) analyze the argument, stating whether you agree with it or not. If you do agree with it, be sure to defend the argument by going beyond what Nagarjuna has said. If you do not agree with it, give your own counter argument.

Week Five

René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditations I&II and selected Objections and Replies
George Berkeley, Sections 1-33 of *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*
Joe Cruz, "Is There Reason for Skepticism?"

Essay topic: Can you be certain about your own existence? And can you reasonably believe in (let alone be certain of) the existence of the external world?

Week Six

Nagarjuna, Chapter XVIII of the *Madhyamaka*, Examination of Self and Entities
John Locke, Chapter XXVII of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*
David Hume, selections from *A Treatise of Human Nature*

Robert Nozick, Chapter one of *Philosophical Explanations*, The Identity of the Self

Essay Topic: Is there such a thing as a self? If so, what is it? If not, how can we make sense of beliefs we have that seem to rely on the self, such as beliefs about moral responsibility?

Week Seven

Friedrich Nietzsche, Preface, First Chapter, and Fourth Chapter, *Beyond Good and Evil*
Simon Blackburn, Chapter 4 of *Truth: A Guide*, Nietzsche: the Arch Debunker

Select any two sections of *Beyond Good and Evil* and (1) reconstruct the argument that Nietzsche is giving, emphasizing the reasons he brings to bear, with careful attention to interpreting the text (2) relate the argument to several (2-5) of the “Apophthegms and Interludes” (3) analyze the argument, stating whether you agree with it or not. If you do agree with it, be sure to defend the argument by going beyond what Nietzsche has said. If you do not agree with it, give your own counter argument.

Week Eight

J. L. Mackie, Chapter 1 of *Ethics*
Alan White, “One Way to Be a Moral Relativist”

Essay topic: Is it reasonable to believe that there is objective moral value? If so, why? If not, why not?

Week Nine

Russ Shafer-Landau, Chapters 19, 20, and 21 of *The Fundamentals of Ethics*

Essay Topic: Respond to at least three of Shafer-Landau’s replies to the arguments against moral objectivity in Chapter 21 either by agreeing with and elaborating in detail Shafer-Landau’s response, or disagreeing and criticizing Shafer-Landau’s response.

Week Ten

Benjamin Whorf, “The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language”
Geoffrey Pullum, Chapter Nineteen of *The Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax*

Steven Pinker, Chapter 3 of *The Language Instinct*
Peter Gordon, “Numerical Cognition Without Words: Evidence from Amazonia”
Lera Boroditsky, “How Language Shapes Thought”

Essay Topic: To what extent is it reasonable to believe that language determines thought? What does it mean to say that language determines thought? Be sure to address at least two of the readings for this week.

Week Eleven

Thomas Kuhn, Excerpt from *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*
Ernan McMullin, “A Case for Scientific Realism”

Essay Topic: Is it reasonable to believe that science, at least some of the time, reveals the truth? If so, why? If not, why not?

Week Twelve

Albert Einstein, “What is the Theory of Relativity?”
Peter Kosso, Chapters 3, 4 and 5 of *Appearance and Reality*

Essay Topic: What, if anything, does relativity theory in physics tell us about relativism? (To answer this question, you may wish to state early in your paper what you take relativism to be.)

Week Thirteen

Niels Bohr, “Discussions with Einstein on Epistemological Problems in Atomic Physics”
Albert Einstein, “Reply to Criticisms”
Peter Kosso, Chapters 6 and 7 of *Appearance and Reality*
Niels Bohr, Letter to the Editor, “Quantum Mechanics and Physical Reality”

Essay Topic: What, if anything, does quantum mechanics (especially the Copenhagen interpretation) in physics tell us about relativism? As you will notice, Einstein tackles this question directly. (For your answer to this question, you may wish to state early in your paper what you take relativism to be.)