OCRA1: Critical Reading and Argumentation

Course Description
In addition to its exploration of a unique set of problems and questions, the practice of philosophy involves a variety of intellectual tools and argumentative strategies that are widely applicable to both academic and informal inquiry. This course aims to help students develop these resources through a careful analysis of exemplary pieces of philosophical argument. To this end, the first semester of the course draws on philosophical thinking about scientific and religious concepts and modes of reasoning. The second semester, in turn, focuses on debates at the traditional core of philosophical inquiry, including discussions of the nature and limits of knowledge, the nature and content of ethics, and the mind’s relation to the world.

While the course emphasizes the cultivation of the tools and strategies of reading and argument, the materials we’ll be looking at in the process will also give us a chance to reflect on some of the more abstract characteristics and assumptions of arguments in the disciplines of science, religion, and philosophy itself. Along the way, then, we’ll try to formulate some theses about these assumptions, and then evaluate their soundness. In addition, finally, to both these argumentative tools and substantive claims about argument itself, we will be on the lookout for themes or lessons from the actual philosophical debates that may point towards particularly fruitful or fallacious lines of argument.

Readings include Plato, Aristotle, Anselm, Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Frege, James, Husserl, Moore, Wittgenstein, Popper, Kuhn, Goodman, Gould, Wright, Sandel, Mackie, Dworkin, Smart, Nagel, Searle, Block.

Learning Objectives
In this course, students will practice the skills and techniques of analytical argument through the study of exemplary philosophical texts. This process will involve the development of the following competencies:

Tools of Comprehension and Analysis:
- decompose sophisticated philosophical and theoretical arguments, exposing their structure, strategy, and key concepts
- situate and evaluate arguments within their conceptual and theoretical contexts
- formalize textual arguments
- evaluate arguments for soundness and validity
  - identify and avoid important fallacies
  - understand and apply rudimentary predicate logic
- formulate and evaluate criticisms and remedies to criticism

Understanding of Argumentative Forms:
- acquire familiarity with important and influential modes of argument in the works of their key proponents and developers, including:
  - deduction and induction
Knowledge of Content:

- acquire familiarity with the problems and practices of several major philosophical fields or disciplines, including philosophy of science, philosophy of religion, epistemology, aesthetics, and value theory
- develop an understanding of some of the key concepts and problems within those fields, including function, consciousness, belief, knowledge, truth, certainty, objectivity and subjectivity, relativism, and normativity
- develop a schematic understanding of major periods, movements, and figures in modern and contemporary philosophy

Major Course Topics

- Philosophy of Science: induction, biological functions, and bioethics
- Philosophy of Mind/Psychology: the mind-body problem, consciousness
- Philosophy of Religion: the existence of God, problem of evil, and reason and faith
- Moral Relativism and Objectivity
- Personal Identity and Responsibility
- Aesthetics / Philosophy of Art: the nature of art, the standard of taste
- Epistemology: knowledge through perception, knowledge of the external world
- The Genealogical Method
- Philosophy of Language: reference and meaning

Required Work

- Attendance and participation in lecture and discussion sections, including responsibility as an ‘expert’ in several discussion sections.
- Periodic assignments, including quizzes, reading questions, essay tests, and current event applications.
- Papers (~3 major per semester)
Sample Assignment

Write a 5-6 page paper responding to the following prompt:

• In our readings and discussions, we’ve encountered numerous instances of argument by counterexample. Select one instance, whether it is part of a reading, was raised in discussion, or is of your own design. Succinctly explain the position that the counterexample is intended to undermine before developing the counterexample itself. Pay particular attention to how the counterexample works (e.g. what type of exception does it constitute?), why the argument is vulnerable to this type of counterexample, and what the counterexample might reveal about the view it opposes. Then pursue what you take to be the best avenue of response to the example for a proponent of the original view. Note that you are permitted to conclude that the strategy of response you propose is ill-fated.

Texts

Steven M. Cahn. (2002)

Selected online texts.

*On the Genealogy of Morals.*
Friedrich Nietzsche. (1887) For Spring.
I recommend either of the following editions:
Walter Kaufmann, editor.
Ansell-Pearson and Carol Dieth, editors.