

Syllabus: Social Philosophy of Language and Pragmatics

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1 Overview

In talking about “social” philosophy, we will mean philosophy that is concerned with social, political, and cultural issues. This class, then, concerns social, political, and cultural issues that have significant *linguistic* elements. These are, of course, ubiquitous now; indeed, many if not most issues of major social, political, or cultural importance have significant linguistic dimensions. We thus have to narrow our attention somehow. Beyond an introduction to the relevant issues, we will focus on the following topics: the role of truth and lying in politics, media neutrality norms, and policies of linguistic reform. Though these might seem topical, they are in fact perennial. That said, it will also be a goal of the course that students come to understand their own world a little better.

2 Prerequisites

I will assume the ability to read and learn some rather difficult philosophy; thus, you should have the kinds of skills that come with having taken around three prior philosophy courses, including one in logic. This is flexible, though! A background in linguistics should suffice, and political theory would be helpful, too.

3 Aims

- Give students basic tools in the philosophy of language and pragmatics.
- Get students to reflect on specifically linguistic elements of social life, and how these interact with non-linguistic elements.
- Encourage respectful discussion and disagreement about very sensitive topics.

4 Schedule¹

We will start with a crash-course introduction to the philosophy of language and pragmatics. Then we'll move on to each of our three topics.

4.1 Introduction to the Philosophy of Language and Pragmatics

Here we'll go over important, basic distinctions in the philosophy of language and pragmatics. The point will be to learn them as *tools*, and not necessarily as ends in their own right. We'll begin with truth-conditional semantics, then turn to implicature—conversational and conventional—and finally end with presupposition and notions of the common ground.

- Heim and Kratzer, *Semantics in a Generative Grammar*, chapters 1 and 2
- Grice, “Logic and Conversation”
- Potts, “Into the Conventional-Implicature Distinction”
- Stalnaker, “Pragmatic Presuppositions”
- Roberts, “Information Structure: Towards an Integrated Formal Theory of Pragmatics” (selections)

4.2 Truth and Lying, Generally and in Politics

In this section we'll look at the role of truth and lying in politics. We'll begin with Plato's discussion in the *Republic* of his famous “noble lie” and his discussion of immoral stories about the gods. Then we'll get more precise about what, exactly, a lie *is* (though this is very controversial). Then we'll get a little deeper into the issues around sincerity, propaganda, and their relation to electoral politics.

- Plato, *Republic* (selections, mostly book two)
- Stokke, “Lying, Deceiving, and Misleading”
- Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, chapter eleven
- Estlund, *Democratic Authority*, chapter two
- Stanley, *How Propaganda Works* (selections, two classes)
- Hahl et al, “The Authentic Appeal of the Lying Demagogue: Proclaiming the Deeper Truth about Political Illegitimacy”
- Mendelberg, *The Race Card: Campaign Strategy, Implicit Messages, and the Norm of Equality* (selections)
- Williams, “Truth, Politics, and Self-Deception”

¹ I am assuming a roughly thirteen-week course with thirteen meetings, where each bullet point represents a week.

4.3 Media Neutrality

When we say that news reporting ought to be “objective” or “unbiased”, what exactly are we saying? In fact it is very difficult to say what does or would constitute bias in reporting. Are there *themselves* neutral/apolitical criteria with which to judge neutrality? In this section of the course we’ll look into a couple ideas and see if any of them ultimately work.

- Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (selections)
- Guttman and Thompson, “Why Deliberative Democracy?”, chapter 1
- Ettema, “Journalism as Reason-Giving: Deliberative Democracy, Institutional Accountability, and the News Media’s Mission”
- Lewis, “Academic Appointments: Why Ignore the Advantage of Being Right?”
- MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity*, chapter 7
- Haslanger, “‘But Mom, Crop-Tops Are Cute’ Social Knowledge, Social Structure, and Ideology Critique”
- Putnam, “The Collapse of the Fact/Value Distinction”
- Geller, “The Fairness Doctrine in Public Broadcasting: Problems and Suggested Courses of Action”

4.4 Linguistic Reform

Some philosophers, theorists, and activists recommend *reforming* language, often language that is demeaning or otherwise harmful. In this last section, we’ll consider these proposals in detail.

- Burgess and Plunkett, “Conceptual Ethics I & II”
- Haslanger, “Gender and Race: What (Are) They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be”
- Lepore and Anderson, “Slurring Words”
- Dembroff and Wodak, “He/She/They/Ze”
- Cappelen, “Fixing Language” (selections)

5 Assignments

Class participation is worth a fixed 15%, and attendance is mandatory. Beyond that, there are *three possibilities*. Each will be worth 55% of the rest of the grade.

1. You and another student might decide you are or will be most interested in one particular topic. Then you may both write a 5–7 page paper, followed by a 3–5 page *reply* to your friend's paper in which you raise the strongest objections you can, followed by a 3–5 page *response* to your friend's objections.
2. You may write *four small papers* (3–5 pages) on an issue raised in each section.
3. Finally, you may pick a social topic that we *did not discuss* and apply tools from the philosophy of language and pragmatics to discuss it. The paper should be around 15 pages. Please talk to me and get my approval before you start on this option!

The final exam will be worth 30% of the grade and will ask short essay questions about all the material from the class.

6 Odds and Ends

Regarding plagiarism and other sorts of academic dishonesty, [insert the university's academic dishonest policy here]. Regarding disability accommodation, [insert the university's disability accommodation policy here].

This class will require *respectful* participation; in discussion, you will be expected to respond politely to one another and engage one another's points in an open and intellectually honest way. Any sort of insulting or demeaning language will not be tolerated. You will also be expected to pay attention. For some, that means not using laptops, and for others it doesn't. Because I don't want to single anyone out either way, I will rely on your self-knowledge to know which class you're in, and to not distract anyone else in class with them.

And please do come to me with any questions or concerns you have at any point, either by email or by office hours!