Philosophy 674
Fall 2014
Ifs, Ands, Buts---The Relevant, the Real and the True

Instructor: David DeVidi
Time & Place: Thurs 9:30-12:00 HH357
Office Hours: Tues 1:00-2:00, or by appointment

(Email inquiries (to ddevidi@uwaterloo.ca) will be answered within 36 hours during the week, by Monday evening if sent on the weekend.)

This will be a survey course, designed to give students familiarity with a cluster of related debates. What relates them is that they are all issues where formal philosophy spills over into nearby areas of metaphysics, epistemology and philosophy of language.

The name of the course is a somewhat cryptic guide to a few of the issues we will consider. Conditional claims (“ifs”) are essential to proper philosophizing, whether as the fundamental tool (reasoning) in the fundamental activity philosophers engage in (argument), or as a key concept in philosophical explanations of puzzling phenomena (e.g., subjunctive conditionals in accounts of causation). But there is bad news for the plausibility of our claims to know what we’re doing (though perhaps this is good news for keeping philosophers gainfully employed) --- conditionals are puzzling in many ways. Anyone who has taken a first course in formal logic should be aware of reasons to suppose the “material conditional” in classical logic is rather problematic if it’s supposed to be a stand-in for “if ... then ...” in English, whether indicative of subjunctive. We’ll consider attempts to explain away these reasons using distinctions between logical and pragmatic features of language use (“ands” and “buts” are often said to be the same logically, though they differ in what they “implicate”). We’ll also consider attempts to provide formal treatments of conditionals, both logical and probabilistic, which are supposed to better capture the notions of “if”. The course, though, is not a course in formal philosophy but a course about formal philosophy, so we will investigate the formal accounts only deeply enough that we’ll be able to understand the metaphysical and epistemological questions that the accounts raise.

The second main area of investigation will be to tangle with two quintessentially philosophical concepts: truth and reality. One area where it is clear that the advent of better logical tools has advanced philosophical inquiry over the past 135 years is in discussions of truth. We will look at some attempts to make similar gains in discussions of what is real and what is not, and in the end will see how these two enterprises come together. This section of the course will prove relevant to any area of philosophy in which questions about the reality of some entities or processes or events is in question ... which is to say, it is relevant to all of them.
Goals:

The **primary goals** of this course are to introduce students to a range of philosophical issues and approaches to philosophical problems that may be new to them, and to provide them with an opportunity to hone some of the skills necessary to professional success in philosophy.

Philosophy is both a solitary and a communal activity. Most philosophy papers, whether in journals or at conferences, carry the name of a single author, so the assignments for the course will take you through the process of producing a conference-style paper. But professional philosophers hone their ideas in a communal process involving many sorts of feedback from colleagues. Being a good professional philosopher therefore also involves being able to provide useful feedback in discussion and as a referee or commentator, so the course will provide opportunities for students to practice doing this, too. (And, for what it’s worth, few skills are more portable than these.)

Outcomes:

By the end of the course, students should be able to:

- *Provide brief, accurate expositions* of the views (and reasons) of key authors in the debates we will consider.
- *Identify* strengths and weaknesses in the arguments offered by other philosophers
- *Articulate* feedback in clear, easily digestible ways, *paying due attention* to the requirements of different contexts (e.g., in conversation, in a seminar, in a referee report).
- *Formulate* an interesting thesis that contributes to one of the debates covered in the class and *defend* the thesis is a well-organized, clearly articulated way.

Note: Since we are paying attention to the “communal” aspects of philosophy, it is important right from the start that we pay due attention to the tone of the discussions in our meetings. We want an atmosphere of mutual respect in which everyone feels comfortable contributing. We also want to allow the conversation to be fun and freewheeling whenever possible. What this requires is that we listen respectfully to what people have to say, monitor ourselves to make sure we’re not filling too much more than our appropriate share of airtime, and ensure that our comments, especially when critical, are clearly directed at the *content* of what a person says. It also helps if, when we’re on the receiving end of feedback, we do our best to hear it as constructive and try not to take things more personally than necessary.

Class Format:

The class will be a bit of a hybrid. Most sessions will mostly be in seminar format. This means that the participants in the discussion must lead and sustain the discussion. This will only happen if people arrive at the class prepared. Occasionally a chunk of the class will be given over to some lecturing. This will happen when I feel that it is important to fill in some
logical background presumed by the readings but which are not likely to be well-known to almost everyone in the class.

Readings and Schedule:

Since the timelines for preparing this class were short, the list of readings is obviously still incomplete. There is an obvious down side for those who love to read ahead. On the up side, if there are readings you are particularly interested in that fall within these topics, you can feel free to suggest them and I will consider adding them. For now, please not that this reading list is a work in progress, and updated versions will be posted from time to time on the course Learn page. I will do my best to ensure that all readings are readily available by electronic course reserve---to which there will be a link from the course Learn page, and which can be accessed directly from the Library web site.

Week 1 (Sept 11): Introduction of the course topics; background for Part 1. No readings.

Part 1: Conditionals.

(Sept 18): Conditionals, pragmatics and the Ramsey test

(Sept 25): Are (indicative) conditionals true or false?

(Oct 2): Counterfactuals and worlds (1)
Robert Stalnaker, “Possible Worlds,” Nous 10

(Oct 9): Counterfactuals and worlds (2)
(Oct 16): Conditionals and relevance---new logics?

(Oct 23): Truth and truthmakers: slingshots and arrows

(Oct 30): Realism, Antirealism and Logic: Dummett’s program

(Nov 6): Realism, Antirealism and Pluralism: Truth and Objectivity

(Nov 13): Realism, Antirealism and Pluralism, since then.

(Nov 20): Student Presentations

(Nov 27): Student Presentations

Prerequisites:

While this class is in some ways about logic (and there will be some probability theory discussed along the way), this is not a logic class (nor a class in probability theory). Since almost everyone in the class has at least an honours degree in philosophy, almost everyone in the class will have taken an introduction to formal logic. That, together with the bit of lecture in our meetings, will be enough background to handle the material in the course. However, if there are technical topics in the discussions or the readings that you don’t understand, ask about them!

Requirements and Evaluation:

As noted, the goals of the course involve developing two aspects of your philosophical ability---the solitary, writing side, and the interactive, feedback side. The writing side involves taking an idea from the proposal stage to “final product,” improving it in light of feedback. That’s where the bulk of the marks lie. But you’ll also be providing feedback to others along the way.

1. Each week (between Sept 25 and Nov 13), you will submit a question about (some aspect of one of) that week’s readings before the start of class. This might be a genuine request for information or it might be an implicit comment or criticism of one of the authors. These will be used to shape our discussion. You’ll submit these questions on the Learn site. [These should be easy to get marks: you get 1 mark for each of the questions you submit, provided it’s a genuine question that shows you’ve actually done at least one of the readings. And you get two bonus marks for completing all 8.] 10 marks total.
2. Abstract/Paper proposal. For many conferences, it is not the paper you produce that is refereed, but an abstract in which you describe what you intend to say. The assignment will ask you to submit an abstract and bibliography. This will give me a chance to provide you with feedback and suggestions about your topic. Due Oct 9. **10 marks**

3. Preliminary paper. You will have written up a short paper developing the idea described in the abstract, taking into account the feedback you've received from me. This will be the basis of your presentation to the class. Due Nov 6. **20 marks.**

4. Referee report and presentation commentary. The paper you submit Nov 6 will go to two readers: me and one other member of the class, matched at random. Which implies that you’re also the reader of a classmates paper. You will write a referee report providing useful feedback for your classmate, and this will form the basis of a brief reply which you will deliver after your classmate’s presentation. Both referee reports and replies to papers are common features of life as a professional philosopher. **10 marks.**

5. “Conference style presentation.” You’re already being marked on the quality of the philosophy in item 3. But philosophers also need to be able to make their views intelligible and interesting to others. That’s what you’ll do in a short, conference-style presentation in which your classmates will serve as your audience. **10 marks.**

6. Final paper. This is a conference-style paper, so it won’t be really long---rather it will be focused, clear, punchy. You will be marked not only on the quality of the final product, but also on how well you’ve taken into account whatever useful feedback you’ve received along the way from your classmates or from me. Due Dec 10. **40 marks.**

**Late Policies:**

Deadlines are deadlines, so late work will not be accepted unless a student can supply documentation proving he or she has a legitimate excuse.

Extensions must be arranged with the instructor as soon as it becomes clear to the student that a piece of work will be late and the excuse is legitimate. In all cases, including serious illness, appropriate documentation establishing the truth of the excuse is required—-the reason for this rule is simply to remove the need for me to make judgements about whether I believe a particular student or not, and so risk unfairly demanding proof from some students but not others. For illness, normally a doctor’s note or similar documentation is required (and not, as one student once produced for me, a letter from your mom).

The Faculty of Arts requires that the information below appear on all course outlines. Please be sure you are familiar with it.

**Cross-listed course:**

Please note that a cross-listed course will count in all respective averages no matter under which rubric it has been taken. For example, a PHIL/PSCI cross-list will count in a Philosophy major average, even if the course was taken under the Political Science rubric.
**Academic Integrity:** In order to maintain a culture of academic integrity, members of the University of Waterloo are expected to promote honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility.

** Discipline:** A student is expected to know what constitutes academic integrity, to avoid committing academic offences, and to take responsibility for his/her actions. A student who is unsure whether an action constitutes an offence, or who needs help in learning how to avoid offences (e.g., plagiarism, cheating) or about “rules” for group work/collaboration should seek guidance from the course professor, academic advisor, or the Undergraduate Associate Dean. When misconduct has been found to have occurred, disciplinary penalties will be imposed under Policy 71 – Student Discipline. For information on categories of offenses and types of penalties, students should refer to Policy 71 - Student Discipline, http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy71.htm

**Grievance:** A student who believes that a decision affecting some aspect of his/her university life has been unfair or unreasonable may have grounds for initiating a grievance. Read Policy 70 - Student Petitions and Grievances, Section 4, http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy70.htm

**Appeals:** A student may appeal the finding and/or penalty in a decision made under Policy 70 - Student Petitions and Grievances (other than regarding a petition) or Policy 71 - Student Discipline if a ground for an appeal can be established. Read Policy 72 - Student Appeals, http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy72.htm

**Academic Integrity website (Arts):** http://arts.uwaterloo.ca/arts/ugrad/academic_responsibility.html

**Academic Integrity Office (UW):** http://uwaterloo.ca/academicintegrity/

**Accommodation for Students with Disabilities:**

Note for students with disabilities: The Office for Persons with Disabilities (OPD), located in Needles Hall, Room 1132, collaborates with all academic departments to arrange appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities without compromising the academic integrity of the curriculum. If you require academic accommodations to lessen the impact of your disability, please register with the OPD at the beginning of each academic term.