

**Philosophy 309: Contemporary Philosophy**  
Fall 2011 - Syllabus

**Professor:** Dr. Larry A. Herzberg

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**Time/Location:** Tuesdays & Thursdays, 3:00-4:30, Polk Library 19.

**Office Hours:** Tues/Thurs 4:45-5:45, W 1:30-2:30; **Office Location:** Clow Faculty Offices 416.

**Required Texts:** Ayer, A. J., *Language, Truth & Logic*, New York: Dover, 1952; Kripke, Saul, *Naming and Necessity*, Oxford: Blackwell and Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980.

**Course content** - The 20<sup>th</sup> century was an incredibly rich period in philosophy. Dissatisfied with both traditional approaches to philosophical problems and the traditional distinctions on which those approaches depended, many of the most influential thinkers sought to reform their discipline. For instance, in 1952 A. J. Ayer tried to develop what he believed to be a precise and scientifically respectable criterion of linguistic meaning, one that implied that much of what had previously passed as philosophy was *literally nonsense*. Ayer's reformist zeal may have blinded him to problems with his presuppositions, but by extending his views quite succinctly to many of the main topics of philosophy, *Language, Truth & Logic* became one of the most popular and provocative introductions to contemporary philosophy.

Later 20th century philosophers took a more modest – and in some ways more successful – approach to philosophical reform. In the early 1970s, Saul Kripke developed new ways of understanding of such fundamental philosophical distinctions as *necessary versus contingent truth*, *accidental versus essential properties*, *a priori versus a posteriori knowledge*, and *actual versus possible worlds*. If you are unfamiliar with these distinctions, this class should fill a significant gap in your philosophical knowledge. If you have already been introduced to them through the works of earlier philosophers, you should find Kripke's alternative views particularly interesting. In *Naming and Necessity*, a transcription of three lectures given in 1972, Kripke uses the reformed distinctions to criticize both a traditional view of how proper names refer to their bearers, and a still popular view in the philosophy of mind concerning the nature of pain.

Besides their reformist tendencies and the wide influence they and their followers have had on contemporary philosophy, what these two philosophers share is a conviction that to be relevant, philosophy must be concerned not directly with the natural world, nor with any supernatural or transcendent reality, but rather with the workings of *language*. In this they both exemplify what has become known as the “linguistic turn” in twentieth century analytic philosophy.

**Grading** – There will be **two take-home essay exams and an in-class cumulative final exam**, each worth 25% of your grade for the course. The remaining 25% will be based on your regular attendance *and thoughtful participation in class discussion*. “Thoughtful participation” includes asking relevant questions, answering others' questions, and making cogent comments.

**Desire2Learn** – I will be posting assignments, exam dates, and handouts that you should print out prior to each class on our D2L site, which you can log on to at <http://www.uwosh.edu/d2l>.

**What should go without saying** – Web-surfing, emailing, and texting in class are distracting to everyone in the vicinity and are not permitted. Daydreaming is permitted but not encouraged. ;-)