

Philosophy 309: Contemporary Philosophy
Fall 2008 - Syllabus

Professor: Dr. Larry A. Herzberg

E-mail address: herzberg@uwosh.edu

Time/Location: MW, 3:00-4:30, Polk 21.

Office Hours: MW 4:30-5:30, F 1:00-2:00, Polk 69.

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 twentieth century was an incredibly rich period in philosophy. Some of its most influential philosophers, dissatisfied with both traditional approaches to philosophical problems and the traditional distinctions on which those approaches depended, sought to reform their discipline. A.J. Ayer, for instance, attempted 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 blinded him to the limits of his own approach, and to problems with his presuppositions. However, because his target was so broad, Ayer's *Language, Truth & Logic* touches on many of the central issues traditionally of philosophical interest. For this reason, as well as for its interesting mixture of both insight and intellectual *hubris*, this text has become a classic in contemporary philosophy.

Later twentieth century philosophers took a more modest – and in many ways more successful – approach to philosophical reform. Saul Kripke, for instance, developed (with a few others) new understandings of such fundamental philosophical distinctions as *necessary* versus *contingent* truth, *accidental* versus *essential* properties, and *a priori* versus *a posteriori* knowledge. If you are unfamiliar with these distinctions, this class will fill a significant gap in your philosophical background. If you have already been introduced to them in previous courses, you should find Kripke's take on them particularly interesting. In *Naming and Necessity*, a transcription of three lectures, Kripke uses the reformed distinctions first to criticize a traditional view of the meaning of proper names, and then to suggest a new one. As an important sidelight, he also uses them to criticize an influential view in the philosophy of mind.

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 – in rather different ways – what has come to be 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, as well as making cogent comments. Students will periodically be *required* to come to class prepared to ask at least one question or make at least one comment.

Desire2Learn –I will be posting assignments, exam dates, handouts and the like on our class D2L site, which you can log on to at <http://www.uwosh.edu/d2l>.