

Contrastivism: Metaphysics, Epistemology, & Language

(Course 55-162.51)

Mi. 12:15-13:45

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Office hours: by appointment

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Description

The past two decades have seen the rise of contrastivist positions in several areas of philosophy. For example, a recent turn in the debate about the nature of causation has been to think of causation as contrastive; that is, to hold that causal claims need to be relativized to implicit contrasts. Relatedly, a contrastive conception of knowledge has been steadily emerging. According to this view, there is a sense in which I have ordinary knowledge of the world around me, in that I do know that I am holding a coffee cup rather than a wine glass, but there is also a sense in which the sceptic is correct in claiming that I cannot rule out possibilities of error, such that I don't know that I am holding a coffee cup rather than merely dreaming. Thus this contrastive view claims to explain how ordinary knowledge and sceptical doubt are compatible. Finally, one can also adopt a contrastivist view in the philosophy of language, according to which language is guided by implicit 'questions under discussion'. This idea – that the structure of language can be cashed out in terms of question-and-answer inquiry – is radically new, and offers unique solutions to familiar puzzles of language.

This class is divided into four sections, each of which focuses on four areas in theoretical philosophy where contrastivist approaches have begun to flourish: in debates about (i) the nature of explanation, (ii) knowledge, (iii) causation, and (iv) metaphysical grounding.

Upon completion of this course, students will be well-versed in each of these debates (and thereby able to begin independent research therein), but will also have the requisite background to fruitfully participate in the upcoming Fifth Hamburg Summer School, led by Professor Jonathan Schaffer

Objectives

This course provides students with the opportunity to examine in depth issues that lie at the heart of contemporary discussion regarding the nature of explanation, knowledge, causation, and grounding. This will be achieved through close readings of recent articles, student-led discussion, and the completion of weekly short-answer assignments.

Outcomes

Students taking this course will

1. Acquire knowledge regarding several major issues in theoretical philosophy, including knowledge in metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of science.
2. Engage closely & critically with cutting-edge literature in these areas.
3. Develop their ability to think & write philosophically.
4. Be prepared for participation in the upcoming Fifth Hamburg Summer School.

Requirements

- *Reading.* Students are expected to read all specified material *prior* to attending class. You *must* have read the required readings before class; otherwise you won't be able to follow/participate in the

discussion. Readings will general be approximately 20-30 pages; sometimes more, sometimes less. All readings will be made available on the course webpage (details below).

- *Attendance.* University regulations state that students are expected to attend a majority of a course's meetings in order to receive credit for participation (maximum 3 classes missed). As such, attendance is mandatory. However, if you know you're going to miss class, contact one of the instructors to clear it beforehand.
- *Quizzes.* Each class will begin with a short, 'open-book' quiz on the week's reading. *All* students (including those only taking the course as an elective) must complete the quiz.
- *Participation.* Students are expected to participate in in-class discussion (or email contact with the instructor in case you're shy about talking in class). With discussion, seminars can be lots of fun; without discussion, seminars are boring. Let's have fun, rather than be bored!
- *Hausarbeit.* Paper topics, as well as final submission dates, must be discussed and settled by week 7; see the relevant university regulations regarding required paper length. Note that a list of suggested topics will be posted by the end of week 4; though these are only suggested topics – feel free to pick something that interests you! Please contact Nathan if you're planning on writing a paper for this course.

Texts

Throughout the course, we will read a variety of journal articles, chapters from books, and sections from monographs. Readings for the course will be distributed via the course webpage:

<https://goo.gl/UQnjZw>

Readings will be uploaded as pdf's to the associated 'Readings' page, which is password protected. Note that the password is _____. Should you lose the password, please contact the course organizers for a reminder!

Preliminary Schedule

(Note: the following is subject to change. Always check the webpage for up-to-date listings!)

Week 1 (6 April) Introduction & Organizational Matters

§ I. EXPLANATION

Week 2 (13 April) Lipton, P. (1990). 'Contrastive Explanation'.

Week 3 (20 April) Hitchcock, C. (1995). 'Salmon on explanatory relevance'.

Week 4 (27 April) Salmon, W. (1997). 'Causality and explanation: a reply to two critiques'.

§ II. KNOWLEDGE

Week 5 (4 May) Lewis, D. (1996). 'Elusive knowledge'

Week 6 (11 May) Schaffer, J. (2004). 'From contextualism to contrastivism'; Schaffer, J. (2005). 'Contrastive knowledge'.

Week 7 (18 May) Neta, R. (2008). ‘Undermining the case for contrastivism’.

§ III. CAUSATION

Week 8 (25 May) Paul, L.A. and Hall, N. (2013). ‘Introduction’ in *Causation: a User’s Guide*.

Week 9 (1 June) Schaffer, J. (2005). ‘Contrastive causation’.

Week 10 (8 June) Steglich-Petersen, A. (2012). ‘Against the contrastive account of singular causation.’

[NOTE: NO CLASS 15 June]

§ IV. METAPHYSICAL GROUNDING

Week 11 (22 June) Correia, F. and Schnieder, B. (2012). ‘Introduction’ in *Metaphysical Grounding*.

Week 12 (29 June) Schaffer, J. (2016). ‘Grounding in the image of causation’.

Week 13 (6 July) Koslicki, K. (2016). ‘Where grounding and causation part ways’; Javier-Castellanos, A. (2014). ‘Some challenges to a contrastive treatment of grounding’

Week 14 (13 July) Wrap-up discussion about connections between the four topics