

## PHILOSOPHY 15: Contemporary Philosophy (Section 3307)

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**Course Description:** This course takes students to the cutting edge of main currents in contemporary philosophy. It shows them what has become of the traditional philosophical issues after the “linguistic turn” and most importantly presents the opportunity to see how each of the philosophers we cover can speak to their own lives in such a way that it liberates thinking and transforms the way we participate in the world, which is to say, transforms our meaningfulness. The course will introduce students to some of the major figures in contemporary continental and Anglo-American philosophy. In the so-called “continental” tradition, these include the lineage from Nietzsche to Heidegger, Derrida, and Foucault; in phenomenology from Husserl to Merleau-Ponty; in hermeneutics, Gadamer and Ricoeur, as well as the lineage from Hegel and Marx to Critical Theory and Habermas. In the American and Anglo-American Analytic traditions this lineage goes from Frege, to Russell and Wittgenstein, and converges with Dewey and American Pragmatism in the works of Quine, Davidson and Rorty. It also includes moral philosophy from Kant and deontological moral theory, Mill and utilitarianism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to Rawls and contemporary Justice theory. All contemporary philosophy is a development from or reaction to the 2500 year tradition of western philosophy. There are many great philosophers in this tradition but the most important are generally accepted to be Plato (and Socrates), Aristotle, Hume, and Kant. We will therefore begin with a very brief overview of Western philosophy, followed by an overview of the three major contemporary western approaches to philosophy. The rest of the semester will be focused on several major representatives of these movements whose works have been influential in the last 30 years: Gadamer, Rorty, Davidson, and Habermas. All these thinkers in various ways are centrally concerned with language and meaning as central to not only to any philosophical understanding, but to any understanding at all.

**What is Philosophy?:** Philosophy literally means love (philos) of wisdom (sophia). Wisdom is not knowledge, but as the word wisdom indicates, “seeing,” in the metaphorical sense of seeing into things. Philosophy cannot be simply defined, but it concerns the activity of thinking very carefully and critically about such fundamental issues as self, society, reality, truth, meaning, value, reason, and philosophy itself. Our beliefs and our world views that guide our actions are rooted in Western philosophical, religious, and cultural traditions. This course can improve your ability to think more clearly, critically, and with more perspective about your beliefs and the cultural, conceptual, linguistic tradition from which they emerged. Philosophy is typically arranged into these areas: 1) Metaphysics (theories of reality), 2) Epistemology (theories of knowledge and truth), 3) Axiology (theories of value, including moral philosophy or ethics, and aesthetics) 4) Logic (study of the properties of consistent inference). Philosophy can also be divided according to topics, such as, philosophy of... art, science, language, law, politics, etc. All labeling is for convenience and no label is precise or fully adequate. Any philosophical question in some way presupposes or implies many others. Philosophy is the activity of very carefully and rigorously questioning our most basic assumptions in order to either better understand things for its own sake, or in order to live a better life. In this sense, philosophy can be seen either as the pursuit of truth for its own sake or the pursuit of importance that makes a difference in human life. For many philosophers it was both.

**Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics** exemplifies this in its concern for immediate human experience of finitude (that we are always limited in our perspective and understanding). It is the study of interpretation and understanding at its most basic level as the one feature that is universal to human being. Literally, the term *hermeneutics* means the art of making what is hidden manifest, traditionally, the art of revealing the meaning of a text by investigating the factors crucial to this, for example, its cultural and linguistic milieu. Biblical hermeneutics, for example, provided guidelines for interpreting ancient religious texts. Philosophical hermeneutics refers to the rigorous attempt to understand understanding and interpretation themselves as basic to all human meaningfulness.

**Davidson** is in the *Analytic* tradition, which has also come to be centrally concerned with language, meaning, and interpretation. Analytic philosophy is a movement and style of philosophy that began in Britain and America in the early 20th century and continues to dominate academic philosophy in the English-speaking world. *Analytic philosophy* has typically been more abstract and concerned with truth and understanding for its own sake. It has been concerned with very careful and precise analysis of the concepts we use to speak about and make sense of the world, rather than a concern with importance and the question of immediate human life. **Davidson** brought this tradition to a point that not only in many ways moved beyond and away from the assumptions of the early analytic thinkers, but to a point of convergence with continental thought, especially philosophical hermeneutics, in his central concern with language and meaning and, for example, in his “Principle of Charity” as a central strategy for interpretation. He has contributed greatly to the analysis of truth, meaning, interpretation, and action with surprising and compelling insights developed in a very analytic style.

**Habermas**, who comes out of the German Frankfurt School, has been centrally concerned with grounding ethics in the conditions for the possibility of human discourse or speech acts. Habermas, however, also considers himself to be in the tradition of Dewey and is concerned with practical outcomes for social justice purportedly grounded in his *discourse ethics*. To be unethical is to violate the very conditions for the possibility of communicating that we all have tacitly agreed to.

**Rorty**, who emerged from the analytic tradition, likewise sees himself as a *pragmatist*. He has challenged analytic philosophy, in fact all philosophy as Heidegger did, saying it has come to an end and must be replaced with *conversations* about those things that concern us most, such as achieving greater social justice and individual well-being, by minimizing the humiliation and harm of others. There are no grand truths to sustain us, only our own courage and creativity, in the face of uncertainty, to achieve a humane society.

Our concern in the course will be 1) to gain some understanding of the works of these philosophers 2) to understand their significance for human life and understanding in general and 3) to experience a transformation in our own understanding that can change the way we live and think about things.

### **Grading:**

The course will not presuppose any background other than college level ability to read and write. Reading material will be carefully discussed in class. Attendance will be required for a grade. Writing: Personal journal, two take home essays, take home discussion questions. The journal and some written responses to discussion questions will be an on-going assignment.

- Note:**
1. If you drop the class, do so officially or you could receive an F automatically that is beyond the control of the professor.
  2. You are subject to automatic exclusion if you miss 2 weeks of class.
  3. Late arrival or early departure: sit in rear seats that will be left empty and notify Professor of arrival and departure time.
  4. **Beepers/cell phones** should be turned off before entering class.
  5. Please see me first for help or complaints. This is stated as a polite request, but is intended as a requirement.
  6. This outline is a basic guide and is subject to revision. Carefully follow announcements in class or online of any changes.

### **Course Texts:**

#### **Primary Readings:**

1. Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Berkeley: Univ. of Calif., 1977.
2. Rorty, Richard., *Philosophy and Social Hope*. Penguin, 1999.
3. Ludwig, Kirk, ed., *Donald Davidson*. Cambridge, 2003.
4. Baillie, James. *Contemporary Analytic Philosophy*. Prentice Hall, 1997. (*Recommended*, will use two articles)
5. May, Todd. *Twentieth Century Continental Philosophy*. Prentice Hall, 1997. (*Recommended*, will use three articles))
6. Pickard, D. "The problem of Reflexivity in Habermas." *Auslegung* 19 (1993): 1-21. (*Handout*)
7. "Nietzsche vs Habermas: Emancipation, Truth, & Ethics" *New Nietzsche Studies*, Winter, (1997):85-109. (*Handout*)
7. *Wadsworth Philosophy Series: On Gadamer, On Davidson, On Rorty, On Habermas*. Wadsworth/Thompson Learning

<b>Date</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Reading</b>
2/8	Background & Intro to Western Philosophy	To be announced
2/15	Intro to Contemporary Western Philos: Analytic Philos & Hermeneutics	
2/22	Rorty: Philosophy and Social Hope	
3/1	Rorty	
3/8	Rorty	
3/15	Gadamer	
3/22	Gadamer	
3/29	Spring Vacation	
4/5	Current Debate on Hermeneutics: Gadamer, Habermas, Derrida	
	<b><u>FIRST JOURNAL and ESSAY DUE</u></b>	
4/12	Habermas and Discourse Ethics	
4/19	Habermas	
4/26	Habermas	
5/3	Davidson & Analytic Philosophy	
5/10	Davidson	
5/14	Davidson	
5/17	Gadamer, Rorty, Davidson, & Habermas	
5/24	<b><u>FINAL JOURNAL &amp; ESSAY DUE</u></b>	