

Philosophy 363 — Syllabus

David Sanson — — Spring 2015

My office is Stevenson 341. My email is desanso@ilstu.edu. My office hours for this term are Tuesday and Wednesday, 3:30-4:30, and by appointment.

Course Description

The title of this course is “Topics in Metaphysics and Epistemology.” Each time I teach it, I choose a different topic to focus on. This term, our focus will be on the metaphysics of properties.

Things have *properties*. A candle, for example, has a certain shape, mass, and smell. Another candle might have the same shape, a different mass, and the same smell. Philosophers call things like shapes, masses, and smells properties.

What are properties? Some philosophers—the so-called realists—think that, when two candles have the same shape, there is a single entity that they both have, and call this a *universal*. Some realists, following Plato, think of universals as abstract entities that exist outside of space and time. Others, following Aristotle, think of universals as multiply located entities that are wholly present in each of their instances. Other philosophers—the so-called nominalists—attempt to provide an account of what it means to say that two candles have “the same shape” that doesn’t involve any appeal to universals. So one of the things we will do is spend some time looking at the debate between realists and nominalists, sorting out the various arguments and objections on each side.

What properties are there? On one conception of properties—the *abundant* conception—for any collection of objects, there is a corresponding property. On another conception—the *sparse* conception—the only collections that correspond to properties are collections that “cut nature at the joints.” But what does it mean to “cut nature at the joints”? And what properties do this? One common view is that science reveals the joints of nature, so the natural properties are the properties that figure in our best scientific theories. So we will spend some time looking at proposals for how to mark this distinction, and thinking about what they tell us about what properties there are.

Finally, we will look at recent work on the metaphysics of race and gender. *being black* and *being a woman* appear to be properties. But they don’t seem to “cut nature at the joints”. So perhaps they are among the abundant properties, but not the sparse properties. But if we say that, we run the risk of being unable to explain the role that race and gender play in shaping society and our lives. So we will spend some time thinking about what race and gender are, and thinking about how that might influence what we want to say about properties more generally.

Books

I have ordered three books for this course.

- Armstrong, David M. 1989. *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Haslanger, Sally. 2012. *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*. Oxford University Press.

- Ney, Alyssa. 2014. *Metaphysics: An Introduction*. Hoboken: Taylor; Francis.

Additional readings, in the form of journal articles and excerpts from books, will be posted as PDF files on ReggieNet. The literature on properties is huge. You are also encouraged to search for books and articles on topics that catch your interest. A good place to start is [PhilPapers.org][].

Assignments

Your grade will be based upon

- homework exercises (10%),
- “levels papers” (50%),
- a final paper (40%),
- attendance (see below).

Homework exercises will be assigned occasionally throughout the term as appropriate and graded pass/fail. “Levels papers” are explained in detail below. The final paper will be a longer paper on a topic of your choice, determined in consultation with me.

Levels Papers¹

The “levels papers” are modeled after video game mechanics. There are three levels for you to progress through, and you are allowed to progress to the next level only after you have completed the previous level. Just as with levels in video games, the idea here is to insure that you are always working on a task that is challenging enough to be interesting, but not so challenging that it is frustrating. Each of the levels will help prepare you to write the final paper for the course (writing the final paper is kind of like the “boss battle” for this course).

Your “levels grade” is determined by how far you progress through the levels. You have a maximum of five attempts at the levels, each due on a specific day (see schedule). After attempting a level, you will receive one of four evaluations: “not much progress”, “good effort”, “almost”, or “complete”. Each attempt must be written on one of the readings covered since the last attempt was due (hence, each attempt will be on a new topic—you will not be rewriting the previous attempt). Your levels grade will be determined by how far through the levels you progress, and which evaluation you get on the last level you attempt, according to the following scale:

Level 3 Complete = A, Almost = A-, Good Effort = B+, Not much progress = B

Level 2 Complete = B-, Almost = C+, Good Effort = C, Not much progress = C-

Level 1 Complete = D, Almost = D-, Good Effort = F, Not much progress = F

The complete instructions for each level are as follows:

Level 1. Expository paper, between 150 and 300 words. Choose one particular argument from the readings and explain that argument in a very short paper. We will be doing some exercises during the first couple of weeks of class that will prepare you to write this paper.

¹I borrow the “levels system” (and much of the following description) from Dustin Locke.

Level 2. Expository paper, between 400 and 600 words. This paper will be just like level 1, except that you will explain two arguments from the reading that have some important relationship to one another. For example, you might choose to discuss an argument and then another argument that is an objection to the first. Alternatively, you might choose a second argument that builds on the first argument. There are other possibilities as well — the only requirement is that the two came from the readings and have some interesting relationship to one another. (When you write your paper, you should make it clear just what the relationship is.) As this paper now has a bit of complexity, make sure to include an introductory paragraph that briefly explains what your paper is going to be about and how it will proceed.

Level 3. Expository and critical paper, between 700 and 1000 words. This will be just like level 2, except that you will also argue that one of the arguments you discuss is unsound (i.e., that it either has a false premise or a bad inference). Your criticism here must be original, and you should be sure to defend your criticism against potential objections.

You have a maximum of five attempts at the levels. The deadlines for those five attempts are:

Attempt 1 Feb 17th

Attempt 2 March 3rd

Attempt 3 March 24th

Attempt 4 April 11th

Attempt 5 May 2nd

Attendance

Attendance is required. You are allowed up to five unexcused absences without penalty. After that, each absence will result in the loss of a full letter grade in the course. So if you have six unexcused absences, the highest grade you can get in a B; if you have seven, a C; eight, a D; nine, an F.

Course Website

I will use ReggieNet to post announcements and additional readings. This syllabus and the schedule of assignments and readings can be found on my personal website.

ReggieNet <https://reggienet.illinoisstate.edu>

Syllabus and Schedule of Readings <http://www.davidsanson.com/363f2015>

Getting in Touch

Email is the best way to reach me when I am not in my office. I am not always online and I cannot always respond immediately. If I have not responded in 24 hours please email me again, letting me know it is your second email (I won't take this as harassment). Include "363" in the subject line of your email and your full name somewhere in the body of your email, so I know who you are(!), and that the email is related to this class.

Disabilities

Any student needing to arrange a reasonable accommodation for a documented disability should contact Disability Concerns at 350 Fell Hall, 309-438-5853, <http://www.disabilityconcerns.ilstu.edu>.

Other Sources of Support

Life at college can get very complicated. Students sometimes feel overwhelmed, lost, experience anxiety or depression, struggle with relationship difficulties or diminished self-esteem. Many of these issues can be effectively addressed with a little help. Student Counseling Services (SCS) helps students cope with difficult emotions and life stressors. Student Counseling Services is staffed by experienced, professional psychologists and counselors, who are attuned to the needs of college students. The services are free and completely confidential. Find out more at <http://counseling.illinoisstate.edu> or by calling 309-438-3655.

Academic Misconduct

Academic integrity is expected and required. Students are expected to be honest in all academic work. A student's placement of his or her name on any academic exercise shall be regarded as assurance that the work is the result of the student's own thought, effort, and study.

If you have questions, refer to the Code of Student Conduct, B1 (Academic Integrity), which outlines unacceptable behaviors in academic matters, or talk to me. In certain circumstances (such as cheating or plagiarism) I may be required to refer a student to Community Rights & Responsibilities for a violation of Illinois State University's Code of Student Conduct.