

PHILOSOPHY 3280

TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY PHILOSOPHY

Fall 2010

MacKinnon 232

MWF 1:30-2:20

Instructor: Peter Loptson
MacKinnon 363
ploptson@uoguelph.ca

Office hours: Tues. & Thurs. 1:30-2:30 pm, and other times by appointment.

Texts: (1) Gary Gutting, *What Philosophers Know: Case Studies in Recent Analytic Philosophy*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.

(2) Mark Johnston, *Saving God: Religion after Idolatry*. Princeton University Press, 2009.

Note: our authors refer to or discuss some writings which you may want to consult in conjunction with particular chapters in Gutting or Johnston. Most of these writings are readily available, online or in the library. The ones discussed most extensively appear in Gutting. They include:

- (i) W. V. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism"
- (ii) Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*.
- (iii) Edmund Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?"
- (iv) Alvin Goldman, "What Is Justified Belief?"
- (v) David Lewis, "Elusive Knowledge"
- (vi) Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (second edition)
- (vii) John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*
- (viii) Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*

Work for the course: (1) midterm test—Friday 22 October (15% of grade for the course); (2) presentation (5%); (3) two term papers, 8-10 pages each, typed, double-spaced—due Friday 8 October and Friday 19 November, respectively (50%) [note: essays submitted after the due date will be subject to a 1% per day late penalty]—topics for the essays will be given out three weeks prior to the due dates; (4) final examination (30%).

Note: For the presentation you are asked to pair up with one other student in the class. If you do not know someone to join with, I will choose the pairing. Ten of the pairs will be asked to do a

presentation on Gutting, and ten on Johnston. You will see from the schedule of readings when the presentations will occur (*). Each presenter will have five minutes (not more—so you will need to be focused and succinct!). You will be expected to talk about the reading assigned for the day on which you present. You should meet with your presentation partner prior to the class, and make a division of labour, so you don't overlap in the topics you discuss. The aim will be to mention one key idea or argument that appears in the selection, explain it and why it seems interesting or important for the author, and to decide whether, in your view, that idea or argument is successful or would deserve still to be on the philosophical scene in 2100.

Rather often, philosophy courses focus on ideas, and readings, from what may be quite a few years ago. This is entirely appropriate when the course is in some period or aspect of the history of philosophy. And some texts of the more recent past clearly have become classics, at any rate seminal, trend-setting pieces of philosophical work, which it is important to come to know about. But it is natural and appropriate to want to explore what is going on in the discipline *right now*. The aim of this course is to respond to that very reasonable desire; to investigate some texts which have only recently appeared on the horizon, specifically, in or since the year 2000, which are not (just) new studies of famous dead philosophers, and which look interesting, and, perhaps, promising.

Philosophy has its many special fields, and subspecializations. In different years in which this course is offered recent work in different parts of philosophy will be explored. In this offering of the course the focus will be on two distinct topics: where philosophy, especially contemporary analytic philosophy, is currently at; and some interesting new work in the philosophy of religion.

Our first book, by Gary Gutting, may be thought not quite to live up to our course's billing, since it offers a kind of review of major work—supposed results—in analytic philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century. Aren't we supposed to be engaging with ideas put together after 2000? Yes, but—of course—new wine is made from old grapes (or something like that). Gutting is attempting to distil some of this previous work with an eye on what has been achieved or accomplished that carries forward into the new millennium, importantly informing what is now being done, and aimed at. We will see whether we agree.

After Gutting we will go on to the Johnston book. Topics and inquiries related to God and the fundamental ideas and possible justifications for religious convictions are of course among the oldest, and most enduring, of philosophical issues. The twentieth century saw (among other developments in the philosophy of religion) the idea of so-called demythologized religion. Prominent in some very recent discussions in the public forum have been some very emphatic rejections of theism in any form. Drawing in part on both these currents, Mark Johnston takes up and elaborates, and argues for, his own version of a so-called naturalistic religion—not to be confused with natural religion! Here too we will see what we think, and whether we are persuaded. Although our central texts are relatively short, both involve a number of background ideas, which will be explored and discussed as we go along. Our goal will be to discuss in their own right some of the issues our authors investigate, at least as much as to study the two books in their details.

There will be two short essay assignments for the course, in addition to the midterm, presentation, and final examination. I will give you a set of topics for each essay at least three weeks before it is due. The first essay is to be on a topic raised by Gutting's book, the second on a theme in Johnston.

It will be very important not to miss classes, to read the assignments from our books for each class, and to participate in class discussion. The essence of philosophical investigation is reflective conversation—sometimes just with oneself, but at least as often with others who are also trying to understand and reach conclusions about fundamental issues.