

Metaphysics: Living Philosophy in Contemporary Times

WHO AM I?

WHAT MAKES ME, ME?

15 September 2019 at Carindale Library Meeting Room

Thanks to mid-twentieth century existentialism, the question of being and identity is possibly the most basic of the philosophical questions in our contemporary popular culture.

REFERENCES

(The works listed are not a complete coverage of the contemporary field but to provide the best known and most significant in contemporary discussions. Apologies if anything important has been missed)

The Key Texts

Simon Blackburn. *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (Oxford University Press, 1993).

This volume collects some influential essays in which Simon Blackburn, one of our leading philosophers, explores one of the most profound and fertile of philosophical problems: the way in which our judgments relate to the world. This debate has centered on realism, or the view that what we say is validated by the way things stand in the world, and a variety of oppositions to it. Prominent among the latter are expressive and projective theories, but also a relaxed pluralism that discourages the view that there are substantial issues at stake. The figure of the "quasi-realist" dramatizes the difficulty of conducting these debates. Typically philosophers thinking of themselves as realists will believe that they alone can give a proper or literal account of some of our attachments--to truth, to facts, to the independent world, to knowledge and certainty. The quasi-realist challenge, developed by Blackburn in this volume, is that we can have those attachments without any metaphysic that deserves to be called realism, so that the metaphysical picture that goes with our practices is quite idle. The cases treated here include the theories of value and knowledge, modality, probability, causation, intentionality and rule-following, and explanation. A substantial new introduction has been added, drawing together some of the central themes. The essays articulate a fresh alternative to a primitive realist/anti-realist opposition, and their cumulative effect is to yield a new appreciation of the delicacy of the debate in these central areas.

Simon Blackburn. *Truth: A Guide for Perplexed* (Penguin, 2005)

Blackburn is an eminent thinker who is able to explain philosophy to the general reader. Now he offers an exploration of what he calls "the most exciting and engaging issue in the

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whole of philosophy"--The age-old war over truth. The front lines are well defined: on one side are those who believe in plain facts, rock-solid truths that can be found through reason and objectivity--that science leads to truth, for instance. Their opponents see the dark forces of language, culture, power, gender, class, ideology and desire--all subverting our perceptions of the world, and clouding our judgment with false notions of absolutes. Beginning with an early skirmish--when Socrates confronted the sophists in ancient Athens--Blackburn offers a penetrating look at the longstanding battle. Among the questions he considers are: is science mere opinion, can historians understand another historical period, and indeed can one culture ever truly understand another.

Tyler Burge. *Origins of Objectivity* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

Tyler Burge presents a substantial, original study of what it is for individuals to represent the physical world with the most primitive sort of objectivity. By reflecting on the science of perception and related psychological and biological sciences, he gives an account of constitutive conditions for perceiving the physical world, and thus aims to locate origins of representational mind. The book illuminates several long-standing, central issues in philosophy, and provides a wide-ranging account of relations between human and animal.

John Hawthorne. *Metaphysical Essays* (Clarendon Press, 2006).

Hawthorne offers original treatments of fundamental topics in philosophy, including identity, ontology, vagueness, and causation.

Peter van Inwagen. *Material Beings* (Cornell University Press, 1990).

According to Peter van Inwagen, visible inanimate objects do not, strictly speaking, exist. In defending this controversial thesis, he offers fresh insights on such topics as personal identity, commonsense belief, existence over time, the phenomenon of vagueness, and the relation between metaphysics and ordinary language.

Hilary Putnam. *Naturalism, Realism, and Normativity* (Harvard University Press, 2016)

The essays collected here cover a range of interconnected topics including naturalism, commonsense and scientific realism, ethics, perception, language and linguistics, and skepticism. Aptly illustrating Putnam's willingness to revisit and revise past arguments, they contain important new insights and freshly illuminate formulations that will be familiar to students of his work: his rejection of the idea that an absolute conception of the world is obtainable; his criticism of a nihilistic view of ethics that claims to be scientifically based; his path-breaking distinction between sensations and apperceptions; and his use of externalist semantics to invalidate certain forms of skepticism. Above all, *Naturalism, Realism, and Normativity* reflects Putnam's thinking on how to articulate a theory of naturalism which acknowledges that normative phenomena form an ineluctable part of human experience,

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thereby reconciling scientific and humanistic views of the world that have long appeared incompatible.

Richard Rorty. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton University Press, 1979)

Rorty argues that philosophy has unduly relied on a representational theory of perception and a correspondence theory of truth, hoping our experience or language might mirror the way reality actually is. In this he continues a certain controversial Anglophone tradition, which builds upon the work of philosophers such as Quine, Sellars, and Donald Davidson. Rorty opts out of the traditional objective/subjective dialogue in favor of a communal version of truth. For him, "true" is simply an honorific knowers bestow on claims, asserting them as what "we" want to say about a particular matter.

Bernard Williams. *Problems of the Self. Philosophical Papers 1956-1972* (Cambridge University Press, 1973).

A volume of philosophical studies, centred on problems of personal identity and extending to related topics in the philosophy of mind and moral philosophy.

Bernard Williams. *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton University Press, 2002).

Bernard Williams offers different psychological and social forms that these virtues have taken and asks what ideas can make best sense of them today. The work presents a powerful challenge to the fashionable belief that truth has no value, but equally to the traditional faith that its value guarantees itself.

And with important connections to other areas of philosophy:

Metaphysics and Meta-Philosophy

Michael Dummett. *The Nature and Future of Philosophy* (Columbia University Press, 2010).

The logician Drummett has a particular view of the philosophy discipline to present. Departments all over the world are divided among analytical and continental schools, Heidegger, Hegel, and Drummett other major thinkers, challenging the growth of the discipline and obscuring its relevance and intent.

John McDowell. *Having the World in View: Essays on Kant, Hegel, and Sellars* (Harvard University Press, 2009)

John McDowell builds on his much discussed *Mind and World*—one of the most highly regarded books in contemporary philosophy. McDowell, who has long commanded attention for his fresh approach to issues in contemporary epistemology, philosophy of language, and philosophy of mind, shocked some mainstream analytic philosophers in *Mind*

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and World [listed below] by drawing inspiration not only from analytic philosophers but also from continental philosophers, most notably Hegel. McDowell argues that the roots of some problems plaguing contemporary philosophy can be found in issues that were first discerned by Kant, and that the best way to get a handle on them is to follow those issues as they are reshaped in the writings of Hegel and Sellars.

Peter Unger. *Ignorance: A Case for Skepticism* (Oxford University Press, 1975).

Peter Unger argues for the extreme skeptical view that, not only can nothing ever be known, but no one can ever have any reason at all for anything. A consequence of this is that we cannot ever have any emotions about anything: no one can ever be happy or sad about anything. Finally, in this reduction to absurdity of virtually all our supposed thought, he argues that no one can ever believe, or even say, that anything is the case.

Peter Unger. *Empty Ideas: A Critique of Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

Peter Unger's provocative new book poses a serious challenge to contemporary analytic philosophy, arguing that to its detriment it focuses the predominance of its energy on "empty ideas." In the mid-twentieth century, philosophers generally agreed that, by contrast with science, philosophy should offer no substantial thoughts about the general nature of concrete reality. Leading philosophers were concerned with little more than the semantics of ordinary words. For example: Our word "perceives" differs from our word "believes" in that the first word is used more strictly than the second. While someone may be correct in saying "I believe there's a table before me" whether or not there is a table before her, she will be correct in saying "I perceive there's a table before me" only if there is a table there. Though just a parochial idea, whether or not it is correct does make a difference to how things are with concrete reality. In Unger's terms, it is a concretely substantial idea. Alongside each such parochial substantial idea, there is an analytic or conceptual thought, as with the thought that someone may believe there is a table before her whether or not there is one, but she will perceive there is a table before her only if there is a table there. Empty of import as to how things are with concrete reality, those thoughts are what Unger calls concretely empty ideas.

Metaphysics and Ethics

Christine Korsgaard. *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

Christine Korsgaard sets out to demonstrate how people determine their own actions. A dialogue with Immanuel Kant takes place throughout the book.

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David Oderberg. *The Metaphysics of Good and Evil* (CRC Press, 2019)

The *Metaphysics of Good and Evil* is the first, full-length contemporary defence, from the perspective of analytic philosophy, of the Scholastic theory of good and evil – the theory of Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, and most medieval and Thomistic philosophers. Goodness is analysed as obedience to nature. Evil is analysed as the privation of goodness. Goodness, surprisingly, is found in the non-living world, but in the living world it takes on a special character. The book analyses various kinds of goodness, showing how they fit into the Scholastic theory. The privation theory of evil is given its most comprehensive contemporary defence, including an account of truthmakers for truths of privation and an analysis of how causation by privation should be understood. In the end, all evil is deviance – a departure from the goodness prescribed by a thing's essential nature.

Bernard Williams. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Harvard University Press, 1985).

Bernard Williams delivers a sustained indictment of systematic moral theory from Kant onward and offers a persuasive alternative. Williams's goal is nothing less than to reorient ethics toward the individual. He accuses modern moral philosophers of retreating to system and deserting individuals in their current social context. He believes that the ethical work of Plato and Aristotle is nearer to the truth of what ethical life is, but at the same time recognizes that the modern world makes unparalleled demands on ethical thought. In Williams' argument, Kant's ideas involved a view of the self we can no longer accept. Modern theories such as utilitarianism and contractualism usually offer criteria that lie outside the self altogether, and this, together with an emphasis on system, has weakened ethical thought. Why should a set of ideas have any special authority over our sentiments just because it has the structure of a theory? How could abstract theory help the individual answer the Socratic question "How should I live?"

Bernard Williams. *Shame and Necessity* (University of California Press, 1993).

Bernard Williams's original and radical book questions a picture of Western history which assumes that the ancient Greeks had primitive ideas of the self, of responsibility, freedom, and shame, and that now humanity has advanced from these to a more refined moral consciousness. While we are in many ways different from the Greeks, Williams claims that the differences are not to be traced to a shift in these basic conceptions of ethical life. We are more like the ancients than we are prepared to acknowledge, and only when this is understood can we properly grasp our most important differences from them, such as our rejection of slavery. At the center of his study is the question of how we can understand Greek tragedy at all, when its world is so far from ours. Williams explains how it is that when the ancients speak, they do not merely tell us about themselves, but about ourselves.

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Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Language

Saul Kripke. *Naming and Necessity* (Harvard University Press, 1972).

Kripke's three lectures constitute an attack on descriptivist theories of proper names. Kripke attributes variants of descriptivist theories to Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein and John Searle, among others. According to descriptivist theories, proper names either are synonymous with descriptions, or have their reference determined by virtue of the name's being associated with a description or cluster of descriptions that an object uniquely satisfies. Kripke rejects both these kinds of descriptivism. Kripke adumbrated a causal theory of reference, according to which a name refers to an object by virtue of a causal connection with the object as mediated through communities of speakers. He points out that proper names, in contrast to most descriptions, are rigid designators: A proper name refers to the named object in every possible world in which the object exists, while most descriptions designate different objects in different possible worlds.

Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind

John Hawthorne and Junani Yli-Vakkuri. *Narrow Content* (Oxford University Press, 2018)

David Chalmers refers to the book as a third act in what might be called the Twin Earth Wars.

“...the internalist empire slumbers in dogmatic confidence that the meanings of our words and the contents of our thoughts depend only on what is in the head. In the first act the externalist rebels Hilary Putnam and Tyler Burge deploy Twin Earth thought experiments to argue that meaning and content often depend on matters outside the head. The rebels succeed so well that at this point the externalists become the empire. In the second act, internalist rebels strike back: David Lewis, Frank Jackson, and others argue that even in light of Twin Earth, there is a kind of narrow content that depends on what is inside the head alone. In this third act, the next-generation externalists Juhani Yli-Vakkuri and John Hawthorne aim to strike down internalists on behalf of the empire once and for all, deploying the awesome weapon Mirror Man to give an argument that narrow content is impossible.” From review by David Chambers at the Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews (<https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/narrow-content/>).

Jaegwon Kim. *Essays in the Metaphysics of Mind* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

Jaegwon Kim tackles questions such as: How should we understand the concept of "emergence", and what are the prospects of emergentism as a doctrine about the status of minds? What does an agent-centered, first-person account of explanation of human actions look like? Why aren't there strict laws in the special sciences - sciences like biology, psychology, and sociology? The volume includes three new essays, on an agent-centered first-person account of action explanation, the concepts of realization and their bearings on

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the mind-body problem, and the nonexistence of laws in the special sciences. Among other topics covered are emergence and emergentism, the nature of explanation and of theories of explanation, reduction and reductive explanation, mental causation and explanatory exclusion.

John McDowell. *Mind and World* (Harvard University Press, 1994).

John McDowell amply illustrates a major problem of modern philosophy—the insidious persistence of dualism—in his discussion of empirical thought. Much as we would like to conceive empirical thought as rationally grounded in experience, pitfalls await anyone who tries to articulate this position, and McDowell exposes these traps by exploiting the work of contemporary philosophers from Wilfrid Sellars to Donald Davidson. These difficulties, he contends, reflect an understandable—but surmountable—failure to see how we might integrate what Sellars calls the “logical space of reasons” into the natural world. What underlies this impasse is a conception of nature that has certain attractions for the modern age, a conception that McDowell proposes to put aside, thus circumventing these philosophical difficulties. By returning to a pre-modern conception of nature but retaining the intellectual advance of modernity that has mistakenly been viewed as dislodging it, he makes room for a fully satisfying conception of experience as a rational openness to independent reality. This approach also overcomes other obstacles that impede a generally satisfying understanding of how we are placed in the world.

Thomas Nagel. *The View From Nowhere* (Oxford University Press, 1986).

Human beings have the unique ability to view the world in a detached way: We can think about the world in terms that transcend our own experience or interest, and consider the world from a vantage point that is, in Nagel's words, "nowhere in particular". At the same time, each of us is a particular person in a particular place, each with his own "personal" view of the world, a view that we can recognize as just one aspect of the whole. How do we reconcile these two standpoints--intellectually, morally, and practically? To what extent are they irreconcilable and to what extent can they be integrated? Thomas Nagel's ambitious and lively book tackles this fundamental issue, arguing that our divided nature is the root of a whole range of philosophical problems, touching, as it does, every aspect of human life. He deals with its manifestations in such fields of philosophy as: the mind-body problem, personal identity, knowledge and skepticism, thought and reality, free will, ethics, the relation between moral and other values, the meaning of life, and death. Excessive objectification has been a malady of recent analytic philosophy, claims Nagel, it has led to implausible forms of reductionism in the philosophy of mind and elsewhere. The solution is not to inhibit the objectifying impulse, but to insist that it learn to live alongside the internal perspectives that cannot be either discarded or objectified. Reconciliation between the two standpoints, in the end, is not always possible.

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Hilary Putnam. *Representation and Reality* (MIT Press, 1988).

Hilary Putnam, who may have been the first philosopher to advance the notion that the computer is an apt model for the mind, takes a radically new view of his own theory of functionalism in this book. Putnam argues that in fact the computational analogy cannot answer the important questions about the nature of such mental states as belief, reasoning, rationality, and knowledge that lie at the heart of the philosophy of mind.

Metaphysics and Social Science

Amie Thomasson. *Social Metaphysics* (Routledge, 2016)

Two major questions have dominated Amie Thomasson's work on the metaphysics of social groups: first, Are there any? And second, What are they?

Religion and Science

John Heil. *The Universe as we Find It* (Oxford University Press, 2012)

From a review of Chad Carmichael, Indiana University-Purdue University in the Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews:

“In this ambitious work, John Heil presents a fundamental ontology (chapters 1-8) consisting of finitely many substances and their properties (which he thinks of as particular, trope-like things), together with an account of causation, truthmaking, and a chapter on relations generally. He then applies this ontology (chapters 9-12) to a number of outstanding problems about reductionism, kinds, essences, emergence, consciousness, cognition, and much else. A final chapter reprises the main points about fundamental ontology from the first chapters.”

Peter van Inwagen. *God, Knowledge & Mystery: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Cornell University Press, 1995)

Peter van Inwagen begins with a provocative new introduction exploring the question of whether a philosopher such as himself is qualified to address theological matters. The chapters that follow take up the central problem of evil in a world created and sustained by God.

J.P. Moreland. *Universals* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1985).

Universals begins with a taxonomy of extreme nominalist, moderate nominalist, and realist positions on properties, outlining the way each handles the phenomena of predication, resemblance, and abstract reference. The debate about properties and philosophical naturalism is also examined. Different forms of extreme nominalism and minimalist realism are critiqued. Later chapters defend a traditional realist view of universals and examine the objections to realism from various infinite regresses, the difficulties in stating identity

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conditions for properties, and problems with realist accounts of knowledge of abstract objects. The debate between Platonists and Aristotelians is examined in the context of the relationship between properties and an adequate theory of existence. The book's final chapter explores the problem of individuating particulars. Universals makes a difficult topic accessible while maintaining the sophistication of argument required by a more advanced readership, providing an authoritative treatment of the subject for both students and scholars.

Metaphysics and Politics & Society

Hilary Putnam. *Realism with a Human Face* (Harvard University Press, 1990).

Putnam's goal is to embed philosophy in social life. Putnam rejects the contemporary metaphysics that insists on describing both the mind and the world from a God's-eye view. In its place he argues for pluralism, for a philosophy that is not a closed systematic method but a human practice connected to real life. Philosophy has a task, to be sure, but it is not to provide an inventory of the basic furniture of the universe or to separate reality in itself from our own projections. Putnam makes it clear that science is not in the business of describing a ready-made world, and philosophy should not be in that business either.

Helen Steward. *A Metaphysics for Freedom* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

Helen Steward argues that determinism is incompatible with agency itself--not only the special human variety of agency, but also powers which can be accorded to animal agents. She offers a distinctive, non-dualistic version of libertarianism, rooted in a conception of what biological forms of organisation might make possible in the way of freedom.

Helen Steward. *Agency and Action* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

One of the most exciting developments in philosophy in the last fifty years is the resurgence in the philosophy of action. The concept of action now occupies a central place in ethics, metaphysics and jurisprudence. This collection of original essays, by some of the most astute and influential philosophers working in this area, covers the entire range of the philosophy of action. Topics covered include the nature of actions themselves; how the concepts of act, agent, cause and event are related to each other; self-knowledge, emotion, autonomy and freedom in human life; and the place of the concept of action in criminal law. The volume concludes with a major essay by one of America's leading authorities in the philosophy of law on 'the 3.5 billion dollar question': was the destruction of the World Trade Center one event or two?