

PIU44121 and PIU33123 | Self-Refutation Arguments

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| Credits: | PIU44121 (10 ECTS); PIU33123 (5 ECTS) |
| Contact Hours: | 22 |
| Pre-requisite: | Some JS modules in Philosophy (or equivalent) |
| Semester: | Michaelmas Term |
| Module Leader: | James Levine |
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| Room Number: | 5004, Arts Building |
| Office Hours: | (To be determined after the timetable is fixed) |

Module Outline:

Throughout the history of philosophy, the charge has often been made that a given position is “self-refuting” or that it cannot be coherently thought or stated. Such a criticism is often made, for example, against certain forms of relativism; but it is also made by Berkeley against the “realism” he opposes, as well as by critics of Kant, who claim it is “self-refuting” for him to hold that we can know nothing about things “as they are in themselves”.

The purpose of this seminar is to examine such “self-refutation” arguments—in particular, to consider if they have a common structure and to examine what, if anything, they establish. To do so, we will look at a number of sources, including recent writings of such philosophers as Donald Davidson (“On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme”), Thomas Nagel (*The View from Nowhere*, *The Last Word*), Paul Boghossian (*Fear of Knowledge*), Barry Stroud (*Engagement and Metaphysical Dissatisfaction*) and Graham Priest (*Beyond the Limits of Thought*) as well as earlier writings from Parmenides, Plato, Berkeley, Sextus Empiricus, Kant, Russell, Wittgenstein, A. N. Prior, J. L. Mackie, and John Anderson, the influential Australian philosopher.

Some of the readings we will look at will attempt to articulate the structure of self-refutation arguments; others either use such arguments against others or defend themselves against the charge that their own position is self-refuting. The topic is a large one and runs throughout the history of philosophy; which readings we focus will, I hope, be determined to some extent by student interest.

Learning Outcomes:

At the end of this course students will be able to:

- Identify similarities and differences in different uses of self–refutation arguments.
- Critically assess whether metaphysical conclusions can be drawn from self–refutation arguments.
- Describe and assess the role of self–refutation arguments in this history of philosophy

Recommended Reading List:

To be announced in class

Assessment:

- Two essays, each worth 25% of the overall mark
- Two-hour final exam, worth 40% of the overall mark
- 6 sets of reading questions, worth 10% of the overall mark