

PIU44121 — Self-Refutation Arguments

Module Information	
Module Code	PIU44121
Module Title	Self-Refutation Arguments
Department	Philosophy
Year Group	Senior Sophister
Module Personnel	Dr. James Levine
Academic Year	2026-27
Credit Weighting	10 ECTS
Semester	1
Contact Hours	2 hours per week

Module Content	
Module Description	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 consider a number of sources—some relatively recent, such as Donald Davidson (“On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme”), Thomas Nagel (<i>The View from Nowhere</i>, <i>The Last Word</i>), Paul Boghossian (<i>Fear of Knowledge</i>), Barry Stroud (<i>Engagement and Metaphysical Dissatisfaction</i>), Graham Priest (<i>Beyond the Limits of Thought</i>), Thomas Hofweber (<i>Idealism and the Harmony of Thought and Reality</i>) as well as earlier writings from Parmenides, Plato, Berkeley, Sextus Empiricus, Kant, Russell, Wittgenstein, A. N. Prior, J. L. Mackie, and John Anderson.

Module Content	
	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 consider will, I hope, be determined to some extent by student interest.
Module Learning Aims	To understand the structure of, and issues raised by, self-refutation arguments. To understand the role that self-refutation arguments have played in the history of philosophy.
Learning Outcomes	By the end of the module, students will be able to: • Identify similarities and differences among 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 the history of philosophy.
Indicative Reading / Resources	An extensive and detailed reading list will be made available at the start of the module, and readings will be made available on Blackboard. But in the first weeks, we'll look at Berkeley's "master argument" for idealism (see <i>Principles of Human Knowledge</i>, §§23-24 and a comparable argument in the first of his <i>Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous</i>), some interpretations of Berkeley's argument, and J. L. Mackie's paper "Self-Refutation—A Formal Analysis", <i>Philosophical Quarterly</i>, 1964, Vol. 14, No. 56, pp. 193-203.

Assessment	
Assessment Components	2 essays (20% each) In-person final exam (50%) Reading questions (10%)
Assessment Details	Word-limit for each essay: 2,000 words.



Assessment

	Final exam: Two hours. Submit four sets of reading questions (750 word-limit for each).
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Additional Information

Prerequisites	None.
Co-requisites	None.
Any other information	Taking PIU22023 in second year would be helpful for this course.