



Self-Refutation Arguments | PIU44123

Year	Senior Sophister
ECTS Credits	5
Contact Hours	22
Pre-requisite	None
Semester	1
Module Leader & Lecturer	James Levine
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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 consider a number of sources—some relatively recent, such 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*), Graham Priest (*Beyond the Limits of Thought*), Thomas Hofweber (*Idealism and the Harmony of Thought and Reality*) as well as earlier writings from Parmenides, Plato, Berkeley, Sextus Empiricus, Kant, Russell, Wittgenstein, A. N. Prior, J. L. Mackie, and John Anderson.

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.

Assessment:

1 Essay (end of module) 40%; 1 (in-person) Examination (end of module) 50%; Some answers to reading questions/presentation 10%



Recommended Reading List:

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 *Principles of Human Knowledge*, §§23-24 and a comparable argument in the first of his Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous), some interpretations of Berkeley's argument, and J. L. Mackie's paper "Self-Refutation—A Formal Analysis", *Philosophical Quarterly*, 1964, Vol. 14, No. 56, pp. 193-203.