

Self-Refutation Arguments | PIU44121

Year	Senior Sophister
ECTS Credits	10
Contact Hours	22 (11 x 2-hour seminars)
Pre-requisite	None
Semester	1
Module Leader & Lecturer	James Levine
Contact Email	jlevine@tcd.ie

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 has been 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”, and issues involving self-refutation play a central role in the different ways in which Russell and the early Wittgenstein approach the issue of solipsism.

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 on will be determined to some extent by student interest.

In addition to the philosophers mentioned above, some readings we may look at include 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, Sextus Empiricus, A. N. Prior, J. L. Mackie, and John Anderson, the influential Australian philosopher.

Assessment:

2 Essays (one after reading week, one at the end of module) 50%; 1 Examination (end of module) 40%; 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.