

PHILOSOPHY 550 TOPICS IN PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE: UNDERDETERMINATION

Thursdays 2:30–5:00, in 1164 Angell Hall

CONTACT INFORMATION

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Office hours: generally Fridays 12–2, and by appointment.
When I have to change my office hours I'll email.

FOCUS OF THE COURSE

David Lewis writes that “The reason it’s vague where the outback begins is not that there’s this thing, the outback, with imprecise borders; rather there are many things, with different borders, and nobody has been fool enough to try to enforce a choice of one of them as the official referent of the word ‘outback.’” On this sort of view, vagueness is a sort of underdetermination of semantic content. One might similarly see underdetermination in theories, credence, context, conditionals, causation, persistence, de re attitudes, and so on. Indeed, it’s hard to do much philosophy without running into possible cases of underdetermination. As a result it’s important to have a good working knowledge of the treatments of possible underdetermination that are available to us, and it’s important to be able to assess their costs and benefits in particular applications.

This seminar will introduce students to a wide range of possible cases of underdetermination and to many of the extant relevant treatments. It will thus be especially useful to graduate students who want to master philosophical tools with which they are unfamiliar, and to graduate students who are interested in exploring areas of overlap between subfields. The seminar will also give us the opportunity to consider some interesting higher-level questions: (1) Should we seek a relatively unified treatment of all cases of possible underdetermination? (2) If not, how should we decide what treatment to apply to a given case? (3) Can tools developed to handle possible underdetermination in one case illuminate other cases of possible underdetermination?

GRADING

The distribution of credit is as follows:

- *Active* participation in the seminar: 25%.
- Weeklies: 25%. (A weekly is at least 300 words worth of questions about and engagement with the reading, emailed to me the day before the seminar. Graded effort/no effort. You can miss one with no penalty.)
- Two ~7 page papers *or* one ~14 page paper, due dates TBD: 50%.

I encourage you to discuss the material with your classmates, but all work you turn in must be your own: see <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/academicintegrity>.

Any student who may need an accommodation for any sort of disability should talk with me during office hours.

COURSE WEB SITE

<http://ctools.umich.edu>

REQUIRED BOOKS

Martinich, *The Philosophy of Language* (5th ed.) ISBN: 0195188306.

Possibly others, depending on the interests and needs of the class.

SCHEDULE

We'll make decisions about exactly what to read as the semester progresses.

Today we'll begin discussing:

Hempel, "Empiricist Criteria of Cognitive Significance"

Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism"

Quine, "Translation and Meaning" (a substantial excerpt from *Word and Object*)

All these readings are in Martinich.

Our second meeting has been rescheduled to Sunday, January 22 from 1 to 3:30 in this room (1164 Angell Hall). We will discuss

Grice, "Meaning"

Davidson, "Truth and Meaning"

Davidson, "Belief and the Basis of Meaning"

Again, all these readings are in Martinich.