Perspectives, Perspectivism and Relativism

Instructor: David Weberman (webermand@ceu.edu), office hours: TBA

4 Credits, 8 ECTS Credits, MA Elective

Winter 2018, W, Th 13:30-15:10

Description: The idea of a perspective originally comes from visual experience, but we use it much more widely, both in philosophy and in common speech. But can it be so easily extended and if so, what precise meaning, if any, does it continue to have? We will begin with its most famous deployment in philosophy, namely by Nietzsche, and critically examine his “perspectivism.” After that, we’ll look at some other ideas about perspective and perspectivism. This will lead us to reconsider relativism, where relativism is not simply the view that anything goes, but the view that knowledge always issues from and is relative to various frameworks or positions or perspectives. We will move on to recent philosophy and the development of what has been dubbed New Relativism. The exact plan will take students’ preferences into consideration.

Course Goals: i) To get a clearer understanding of the notion of a perspective, Nietzsche’s theory of perspectivism and the various theses and arguments at issue in debates on contemporary relativism. ii) To gain skills for assessing competing views and to develop some views of one’s own on the matter that are well-informed responsive to other sides of the position.

Learning Outcomes: By the end of the course, students should i) have a better grasp of Nietzsche and of relativism’s meaning, strengths and weaknesses; ii) have the tools for better assessing the arguments at issue and; iii) have increased at reading and assessing both older and newer texts.

Requirements and grading: For all students, regular attendance, punctual reading and participation in discussion is required. All students will be required to make one 15-20 minute presentation. For those students taking the course for a grade, a 4000-word paper is required. The grade is largely based on the paper (with a shift of a third of a grade possible based on discussion performance). ‘B+’ requires a clear structure and clear writing, a good thesis and good supporting arguments sensitive to the strengths of the opposing thesis. ‘A-’ shows all of the above as well as hard and independent thinking. ‘A’ does the aforementioned and results in truly original and important insights.


Schedule (teaching format is mainly seminar-style discussion)

Week 1 Jan 10, 11 Introduction; early Nietzsche on perspectivism– read Beyond Good and Evil (extracts)

Week 2 Jan 17, 18 N later Nietzsche on perspectivism, Nietzsche on truth – read Will to Power (extracts); Hales/Welshon Chap. 1

Week 3 Jan 24, 25 Nietzsche on ontology - read Hales/Welshon Chap. 3
Week 4 Jan 31, Feb 1 Nietzsche on epistemology – read Hales/Welshon Chap. 5, conclusion

Week 5 Feb 7, 8 Feminist social epistemology and standpoint theory – read essays by Lorraine Code and Sandra Harding in Alcoff and Potter

Week 6 Feb 14, 15 Bernard Williams on relativism – read Williams, “An inconsistent form of relativism” and “The Truth in Relativism” in Krausz and Meiland

Week 7 Feb 21, 22 Characterizing relativism – read Kolbel, Rovane in Companion (for a good overview of contemporary relativism see “Relativism” in online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

Week 8 Feb 28, Mar1 Characterizing relativism – read Boghossian in Companion

Week 9 Mar 7, 8 Truth and Language – read Lynch and Brogaard in Companion

Week 10 Mar 14, 15 (make up to be arranged) Truth and Language – read Taylor in Companion

Week 11 Mar 21, 22 Epistemic Relativism – read Siegel and Pritchard in Companion

Week 12 Mar 28, 29 Moral Relativism – read Bilgrami in Companion

(The last four weeks may shift and alter depending on students’ interests.)
Counter-Enlightenment

Instructor: David Weberman (webermand@ceu.edu), office hours: TBA

2 Credits, 4 ECTS Credits, MA Elective

Winter 2018, Th 15:30 - 17:10

Description: “Counter-Enlightenment” is a retrospectively-generated term made famous by Isaiah Berlin to refer to certain strains in 18th and 19th century thought that react against the idea of the enlightenment process as found in 18th century Enlightenment thinkers. While there is a political dimension to the Counter-Enlightenment, this course focuses more on its skepticism about the place and nature of reason as well as its attention to cultural diversity as the basis for differences among humans in conceiving, knowing and judging. We will begin by reading Berlin on Counter-Enlightenment which serves as an overview and provocation. We will then spend most of the rest of the time reading J.G. Herder on the philosophy of language and especially his thinking in This Too a Philosophy of History (M. Forster’s translation of Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte). The exact plan will take students’ preferences into consideration.

Course Goals: i) To get a clearer understanding of some criticisms and reservations that arose in the 18th century to Enlightenment thought and of the philosophy of Herder; ii) To gain skills for assessing counter-Enlightenment ideas and arguments and to develop some views of one’s own on the matter that are well-informed responsive to other sides of the position.

Learning Outcomes: By the end of the course, students should i) have a better grasp of the ideas and arguments in 18th century European thought and in Herder’s philosophy; ii) have the tools for better assessing the arguments at issue and; iii) have increased at reading and assessing both older texts (Herder) and more recent texts on developments in the history of thought (Berlin).

Requirements and grading: For all students, regular attendance, punctual reading and participation in discussion is required. All students will be required to make one 15-20 minute presentation. For those students taking the course for a grade, a 2000-word paper is required. The grade is largely based on the paper (with a shift of a third of a grade possible based on discussion performance). ‘B+’ requires a clear structure and clear writing, a good thesis and good supporting arguments sensitive to the strengths of the opposing thesis. ‘A’ shows all of the above as well as hard and independent thinking. ‘A’ does the aforementioned and results in truly original and important insights. Because a 2000-word paper is short, it will have to leave enough space to develop its original and important insights.

Readings: Essays by Isaiah Berlin are drawn from different collections of his writing. Hamann’s writings are taken from a volume, What is Enlightenment? Edited by James Schmidt. Herder’s writings are from Herder, Philosophical Writings, ed. and translated by Michael Forsere, Cambridge University Press (for the English version, please use only this translation).

Schedule (teaching format is mainly seminar-style discussion)

Week 3 Jan 25 Berlin, The Truth Fathers of Romanticism”, “Alleged Relativism”
Week 4 Feb 1 Johann Georg Hamann, “Metacritique on the Purism of Reason”, “Letter to C.J. Kraus”
Week 5 Feb 8 Berlin, “Herder and the Enlightenment”
Week 6 Feb 15 Johann Gottfried von Herder, Treatise on the Origin of Language”
Week 7 Feb 22 cont.
Week 8 Mar 1 cont.
Week 9 Mar 8 Herder, This Too a Philosophy of History
Week 10 Mar 15 (make up to be arranged) cont.
Week 11 Mar 22 cont.
Week 12 Mar 29 open

(The syllabus is tentative; student input on content of readings is welcome and encouraged.)