Course Description

In this course, we will investigate the philosophical views known as logical empiricism (or logical positivism), a philosophical movement that initially arose in Central Europe in the early twentieth century and later became a fundamental influence on contemporary Anglophone philosophy. We will consider several primary philosophical positions of the logical empiricists; the philosophical, scientific, and political influences on the movement; and the late stages of logical empiricism and its aftermath. Significant attention will be devoted to recent secondary literature known for its reassessment of logical empiricism’s projects.

Materials


- *The Cambridge Companion to Logical Empiricism*, Alan Richardson and Thomas Uebel (Eds.), Cambridge University Press. (R+U)

- Additional readings will be made available on Blackboard. (Bb)

Course Goals

Familiarity with a significant philosophical tradition: The work of the logical empiricists has fundamentally influenced nearly all areas of analytical philosophy. Investigation of their projects and methods thus yields insight into a variety of contemporary investigations. This will help prepare you for future research in a variety of contemporary areas of philosophy.

Understanding historical context: We will not only investigate philosophical questions, but also discuss related historical events—including scientific developments, such as Einstein’s theory of relativity, and political changes, such as nationalism, socialism, and the Cold War. These historical episodes shaped the concurrent philosophical developments, and they will also help provide perspective on contemporary philosophical issues.

Careful analysis of philosophical texts: As with any graduate/advanced undergraduate seminar, a primary aim of this course is to provide you with the opportunity to further hone your skills of exegesis and interpretation.

The opportunity to contribute to philosophical scholarship: Finally, the goal of this course is not merely to increase your understanding of the philosophical issues encountered, but to give you the opportunity to further develop your philosophical views and to hone your skills in defending those views. This will largely be accomplished through seminar discussion and written work.

Course Requirements

Class participation: This is a discussion-based course. Students are expected to attend all class meetings and participate actively in discussion; verbal discussion and debate are crucial in the field of philosophy. Please contact me if you would like suggestions for increasing your level of participation in class discussions. There will also be the opportunity for participation work outside of class.
Readings: Each reading assignment should be completed before the class meeting when it is scheduled to be discussed. Students should employ whatever means help them to fully digest the material: slow reading, repeated reading, annotating the text, taking reading notes, etc. etc. Careful reading of philosophical texts is a crucial skill to cultivate, and it is important for your ability to participate in class and your understanding of the ideas we encounter.

Reading Responses: You will be expected to write a short (150-300 word) response to each reading. Responses to all readings assigned for a given class meeting should be submitted in the body of an email, sent to me no later than one hour before that meeting. Your response should be substantive and understandable but need not be comprehensive nor polished. The reading responses are designed to motivate timely completion of the readings, to help deepen your understanding of the material, and to fuel class discussion. You can skip responding to one reading during the quarter without penalty.

Paper(s): There are three options for the written work in this course. You may write (a) a single 5,000 word seminar paper, (b) two 2,500 word papers, or (c) one 2,500 word paper, then a 5,000 word expanded version of that same paper. A brief abstract will be due in advance of the paper(s). Students enrolled in 503 should choose from options (b) and (c).

If you choose option (b) or (c), your first abstract is due anytime on or before 4 May, and your first paper is due anytime on or before 11 May. Everyone’s abstract for the final paper is due by 1 June, and the final paper is due by 7 June.

Grading

15% Participation
25% Reading Responses
5% Paper Abstract(s)
55% Paper(s)

Course Policies

Absences: In ordinary circumstances, you should not miss any seminar meetings; there are only ten, after all. If you must miss a meeting, you should let me know as soon as possible. If you miss more than one meeting, you should get in touch with me to formulate a plan for how you will pass the course.

Paper Submission: Papers and abstracts should be typed and double spaced, and then submitted to me by email. I prefer PDFs if possible.

Extensions and Late Work: If you miss a reading response due to illness or another unforeseen setback, a more substantive assignment can be substituted (with permission). Any paper extensions should be requested in advance. I’m generally accommodating about granting extensions during the quarter, much less so beyond the end of the quarter. If an extension is granted, the new due date we agree upon is firm. Late papers that have not been granted an extension in advance will be penalized in a manner commensurate with the circumstances, with a typical penalty of ⅓ letter grade per day late.

Collaboration: You are encouraged to discuss any and all material with other participants in the course and to exchange paper drafts for peer editing. However, all written work must be completed on your own and must contain your own ideas. You must cite the sources you consulted for any ideas you discuss or use that are not your own, and you must clearly identify any direct quotes. Failing to do either counts as plagiarism. Whether intentional or not, any cases of plagiarism will be taken very seriously and addressed according to University and Department policies.
Reading and Discussion Schedule

29 March  The Vienna Circle
- Hahn, Neurath, and Carnap, “Wissenschaftliche Weltaufassung,” preface, §1, §2 (Bb)
- Stadler, “The Vienna Circle: Context, Profile, and Development” (R+U, Ch 1)
*Optional: “Ayer on Logical Positivism,” YouTube, two parts (link on Bb)

5 April  Empiricism, Metaphysics, and the Role of Philosophy
- Schlick, “The Turning Point in Philosophy” (LP, Ch 2)
- Carnap, “The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language” (LP, Ch 3)
- Friedman, “Overcoming Metaphysics: Carnap and Heidegger” (Bb)

12 April  The A Priori and Analytic
- Carnap, excerpt from “Intellectual Autobiography,” in Library of Living Philosophers Vol. (Bb)
- Friedman, “Coordination, Constitution, and Convention” (R+U, Ch 4)

19 April  Physicalism and the Unity of Science
- Neurath, “Protocol Sentences” (LP, Ch 9)
- Neurath, “Sociology as Physicalism” (LP, Ch 14)
- Uebel, “Philosophy of Social Science in Early Logical Empiricism” (R+U, Ch 10)
*Optional: Neurath, “Physicalism” and “Unified Science as Encyclopedic Integration” (Bb)

26 April  Political and Social Zeitgeist
- Nemeth, “Logical Empiricism and the History and Sociology of Science” (R+U, Ch 11)
- Potochnik and Yap, “Revisiting Galison’s ‘Aufbau/Bauhaus’...” (Bb)

3 May  Philosophy of Psychology
- Carnap, “Psychology in Physical Language” (LP, Ch 8)
- Hardcastle, “Logical Empiricism and the Philosophy of Psychology” (R+U, Ch 9)

10 May  Physics and Geometry
- Ryckman, “Logical Empiricism and the Philosophy of Physics,” (R+U, Ch 8)
- Background reading as needed

17 May  Quine and the Vienna Circle
- Quine’s “Two Dogmas” or “Epistemology Naturalized,” whichever is less familiar, or both (Bb)
- Creath, “Vienna, the City of Quine’s Dreams” (R+U, Ch 13)

24 May  Frameworks
- Carnap, “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology” (Bb)
- Richardson, “Thomas Kuhn and the Decline of Logical Empiricism” (R+U, Ch 14)

31 May  Postscript: The Overthrow of Logical Empiricism and (a Taste of) its Resurgence
- Reisch, “From ‘the Life of the Present’ to the ‘Icy Slopes of Logic” (R+U, Ch 3)
- Okruhlik, “Logical Empiricism, Feminism, and Neurath’s Auxiliary Motive” (Bb)