PHIL 50 (2A) Are Meanings In The Head?
Summer Term 2014

Jesper Kallestrup, Edinburgh Visiting Professor
Philosophy Department
Thornton Hall, Dartmouth College
jesper.kallestrup@ed.ac.uk

Time and Place: Tuesday and Thursday, 2:00pm - 3:50pm.
19th June: Summer term classes begin. 14th August: last class.

Office hours: Tuesday and Thursday, 4:00pm – 5.00pm, or by appointment

General Description: Philosophers used to think that what we mean when we use language is fully determined by our inner mental states. In the 1970s Kripke, Putnam, Burge and others launched an attack on this received view in philosophy of language, arguing instead that meanings depend on our physical and social environment. Moreover, since we use language to report beliefs, such mental states also depend on environmental features beyond our bodily boundaries. Content externalism says that linguistic and mental content is external to our minds. This view seems to have a number of surprising, if not controversial, epistemological consequences. Traditionally, philosophers have agreed that we know introspectively our own thoughts and experiences in some privileged way, but they also concede that we may lack perceptual knowledge of the external world. After all, we cannot know we are not being deceived by Descartes’ evil demon. Content externalism swaps a problem about knowledge of the external world with a problem about knowledge of our internal world. On the one hand, if we know introspectively what thoughts we are thinking, and our thoughts depend on the external world, it looks as if we have introspective access to the external world. But surely we only have perceptual knowledge of the external world. On the other hand, if our thoughts depend on the external world in a way that is not introspectively accessible, it looks as if we only have perceptual knowledge of what thoughts we are thinking. But surely we have introspective knowledge of our inner world.

This summer course offers an overview of content externalism in philosophy of language and philosophy of mind, with particular focus on its epistemological implications. The topics that we will be covering include Putnam’s Twin Earth argument, Burge’s arthritis argument, self-knowledge and epistemological scepticism about the external world.

Prerequisites: One Philosophy course or permission of the instructor. No prior knowledge of philosophy of language, philosophy of mind or epistemology is needed.

Schedule:

Week 1 (24th/26th June) Descriptivism in Philosophy of Language
Week 2 (1st/3rd July) Kripke’s Critique of Descriptivism
Week 3 (8th/10th July) Putnam’s Twin Earth Argument
Week 4 (15th/17th July) Burge’s Arthritis Argument
Week 5 (22nd/24th July) Wide and Narrow Mental Content
Week 6 (29th/31st July) Self-Knowledge
Week 7 (5th/7th August) Scepticism about the External World
Week 8 (12th/14th August) Scepticism about the Internal World

Each topic roughly corresponds to a chapter in Semantic Externalism, Jesper Kallestrup, Routledge, 2012. The essential reading will therefore be a chapter per week in this book.

Learning Outcome: By the end of this course students should gain a sound understanding of some important topics at the intersection of philosophy of language, philosophy of mind and epistemology, as well as an ability to think and write critically and knowledgably about these topics.

Essential Reading: Semantic Externalism, Jesper Kallestrup, Routledge, 2012. This book is on reserve in the library. You can also purchase a copy from either Wheelock Books or the Dartmouth Co-op.

Additional Reading:


All three are on reserve in the library, and some are also available on-line as eBooks.

Other excellent on-line resources include:

- Philosophy Compass: http://www.blackwell-compass.com/subject/philosophy/
- Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy: http://www.seop.leeds.ac.uk/contents.html
- Oxford Bibliographies Online: http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/

Essay Questions:

(1) Discuss Kripke’s objections to the descriptive theory of reference
(2) Explain Putnam’s Twin Earth argument. Discuss at least one objection.
(3) Does content externalism provide a satisfactory response to epistemological scepticism?
(4) Is content externalism incompatible with self-knowledge?
(5) Does content externalism show that introspective knowledge of our own mind is impossible?
Suggested readings for each question will be offered in class, in office hours or via email. It is important that your essay is a response to the essay question in hand. You need to defend the claims you make with arguments, and in doing so draw on the materials from the texts that we have covered. Make sure your writing is clear and that you properly explain all terminology. Where you explore other peoples’ work, make sure that you properly reference them. For some general advice on writing philosophy essays, see:

http://www.public.asu.edu/~Edportmor/tips.pdf
http://dartmouth.edu/writing-speech/

Assessment

This course will be assessed by a midterm essay of 1500 words (worth 40%) and a final essay of 2000 words (worth 60%).