PHZ350 Truth, Lies, and Fiction (Spring 2025)

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Course Description

This course studies three kinds of communication: truthful communication, communication with bad intentions, and communication about fictional objects. In the first part of the course ("truthful communication"), we study Paul Grice's theory of conversational implicature and Robert Stalnaker's concept of context as a body of information mutually shared by the interlocutors. With these theoretical tools under our belt, we will engage with a host of philosophical questions about communication with bad intentions and fictional discourse: How is bullshitting different from lying and misleading? Is lying morally worse than misleading? How should we make sense of sentences that seem to be true in a fiction (e.g. "Sherlock Holmes is a detective and he is clever than Dr. Watson")? Why do we respond emotionally to fictional characters even though we know that they do not exist? This course presupposes no prerequisites.

Course Requirements

1. Class participation (20%): For every meeting starting from week 3, two students will be selected to ask a question about the reading two days before class. The students should post their questions to our class's chat group and explain their questions in class.

2. Mid-term take-home assignment (40%)

3. Final take-home assignment (40%)

Course Schedule

Week 1: Course introduction

Week 2: Paul Grice. "Logic and conversation", *Studies in the Ways of Words* (1989), Ch2

Week 3: Class exercises on conversational implicature

Week 4: Harry Frankfurt. *On Bullshit* (First half)

Week 5: Harry Frankfurt. *On Bullshit* (Second half)

Week 6: Robert Stalnaker. "Pragmatics" (1970)

Weeks 7 and 8: Andreas Stokke & Don Fallis. "Bullshitting, lying, and indifference toward truth" (2017).

Week 9: David Lewis. "Truth in fiction" (1978).

Weeks 10 and 11: Kendall Walton. "Fearing Fictions" (1978).

Mid-term assignment due

Weeks 12 and 13: Kendall Walton. "Metaphor and Prop Oriented Make-believe" (1993).

Weeks 14 and 15: Tamar Gendler. "The puzzle of Imaginative Resistance" (2000)

Weeks 16 and 17: Daniel Hoek. "Conversational Exculpature" (2018)