

Philosophy 472: Identity

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Class meetings: Tuesdays 2–4:30 in Cooper House 201
Office Hours: Wednesday 3:45–4:45, and by appointment

Topic:

Identity is the relation a thing bears to itself and to no other thing. It is so basic to our thought, and so fundamental to the world we think about, that philosophers have despaired of saying much more about it. Some have even suggested that we should dispense with talk of “identity.” Yet, issues of identity are at the center of many important philosophical issues, for example, the relation between mind and body, the constitution of persons, and the nature of scientific discovery. And recent philosophers have done much to illuminate the nature of identity by studying its logic and grammar, and by asking how it interacts with other fundamental phenomena.

In the first part of this seminar, we will explore some puzzles revealed by these recent investigations. Identity and meaning: why exactly is it more informative to say that Lady Gaga is Stefani Germanotta than it is to say that Lady Gaga is identical to herself? Relative Identity: Should we say that one thing is identical to another, such as Barack Obama and the President of the United States, only relative to a functional role or a sortal concept? Contingent identity: could one thing, such as Water/H₂O, have been two, or two things one? Vague identity: is it coherent to hold that two things, such as the mountain(s) that rise to connected and nearby peaks, neither stand, nor fail to stand in the identity relation to one another? Identity and composition: is my reading lamp identical to the swarm of microphysical particles that compose it? Identity and change: how can a thing, such as a river, undergo change while retaining its identity?

In the second part of the course, we will use our general understanding of identity to explore the individuation of such entities as psychological states, musical works, events, and persons. The topic of personal identity will consume the final month of the seminar.

Prerequisites:

Two courses in philosophy. Some familiarity with logic would be useful, though not necessary. This seminar is designed for upper-division philosophy majors, and they will be given preference in enrollment.

Attendance:

Attendance at all seminar meetings is mandatory. If you foresee any potential conflict or other problem with your complete attendance let me know well ahead of time.

Number of Breaks Per Seminar Meeting:

One

Readings:

All readings for the course will be posted on the course web-site, or distributed in class. The readings will not be excessive, but they will often be dense (in the “compact and difficult” sense). This is due in part to the nature of the topic: I can think of no more abstract topic than *identity* (it’s in a dead-heat with *existence*). But it’s also because, for the most part, we will be discussing contemporary journal articles. In any case, you will be expected to read each assignment carefully, which usually means more than once. And you will be expected to keep up with assigned readings and to come prepared to talk about them. In order to facilitate our discussions, I ask you to post a “response” to the course web-site by 11:00 on Tuesday morning of every seminar meeting. (More on this below.)

Assignments:

I am still uncertain about the constitution of the seminar (i.e., the number of seminarians and their backgrounds), so some of the seminar’s structural and bureaucratic details remain undecided. However, the assignments will be roughly as follows: a seminar paper of approximately 7–15 pages due at the end of the semester; possibly one short paper (4 pages) due before spring break; weekly responses to the readings. I may also arrange for in-class presentations.

The weekly reading responses are an important part of the class. These are short (anywhere from two paragraphs to two pages) engagements with the material for that day’s seminar meeting. In a response you might develop a question about something you find puzzling in that day’s reading, develop an objection, or make a “synthetic” comment linking the day’s topic to larger course themes. You should submit your responses to the course-web-site by 11 AM on the day of class. I will give you feedback early on if I think your responses are somehow off-target, or not substantive enough.

I read every response carefully, and do my best to integrate the points they raise into our discussion. However, because of the number of responses and the variety of questions they address, I’m not always able to engage with every response in class. I occasionally respond to them via e-mail, but this is not to be expected. I will not formally grade your responses, but they are required in order to pass the course.

The final seminar paper can concern almost any topic that we will have investigated during the course of the seminar. I will guide you through the process of choosing a topic, and writing on it. However, you should stay mindful as the seminar proceeds to topics that you might want to research. One obvious starting point is to expand upon a reading-response that you find particularly interesting.

Very Rough Seminar Outline:

Preliminaries

Informative Identity Claims (Frege and Kripke)

Relative Identity (Geach and the Trinity (same God but not same person))

Identity and Composition (the problem of the many)

Identity and change (the problem of temporary intrinsics and the 4D view)

Identity and Indeterminacy (Quine, Evans and Musical Works)

Personal Identity (after spring break)