Phil 750 Deontic and Epistemic Modals 'Spring' 25
Dowell

This course aims to get participants up to speed on recent discussions in philosophy of language, linguistics, metaethics, and epistemology concerning the natural language semantics and pragmatics of deontic and epistemic modals.

The focus will be primarily on the literature in philosophy of language and linguistics. The payoff for those interested in metaethics and epistemology will be gaining familiarity with the constraints natural language semantics and pragmatics place on theories of deontic and epistemic modal expressions such as 'ought' and 'might', terms that are an indispensable part of their toolkit.

The payoff for those interested in linguistics and philosophy of language will be an introduction to the canonical, Kratzerian semantics for modals, as well as several of the challenges to it that have been posed in the philosophical and linguistics literature over the past fifteen years.

Specific topics from the options below will be selected based on class interests.

Course grades: Final grades will be made up of a final paper grade (80%) and a presentation grade (20%).

Students are not required but are strongly encouraged to discuss their presentation and final paper ideas with me prior to their presentation date.

Week 1 Background: Contextualism about modals (Kratzer on modals and on conditionals) (1/15)

Weeks 2-7 ***Deontic Modals: Possible topics*** (1/22, 1/29, 2/5, 2/12, 2/19, 2/26)

1. Deontic modals and information-sensitivity (Kolodny and MacFarlane, Cariani, Kaufmann, and Kaufmann, Dowell)
2. Deliberative, advisability, and evaluative uses (Schroeder, Chrisman, Bronfman and Dowell)
3. Deontic modals and imperatives (Ninan, Portner)
4. Action-guidingness, judgement internalism, and discourse internalism (Smith, Dreier, Rosati, Dowell)
5. Expressivism and Compositionality (or Expressivism vs Contextualism) (Schroeder, Yalcin, Dowell)

6. The ‘if ϕ, ought ϕ’ problem and the diversity constraint (Zvolensky)
7. Natural language modals and Deontic logic (Cariani, Willer)
8. Is there a Result Constraint on deontic modals? (Rett)

Weeks 8-12 Epistemic Modals: Possible Topics (3/5, 3/19, 3/26, 4/2, 4/9)

1. ‘Must ϕ’ and the indirectness constraint (von Fintel and Gillies)
2. Does ‘must ϕ’ entail ‘ϕ’? (von Fintel and Gillies)
3. Contextualism about epistemic modals (von Fintel and Gillies, Dowell)
4. Knowledge and ‘might’: Are knowledge that p and ‘might not p’ compatible? The lottery paradox (Speaks, Hawthorne)
5. Expressivsm about ‘might’ part 1: Epistemic ‘contradictions’ (Yalcin, Stojnic)
6. Expressivism about ‘might’ part 2: Epistemic modals de re (Yalcin, Dowell)
7. Is there a Result Constraint on epistemic modals? (Rett)

Weeks 13 & 14: Paper Presentations (4/16, 4/23)

5/5/25: Final papers due.