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PROBLEMS OF PHILOSOPHY PHIL 100 002, FALL 2020

"Nihil tam absurde dici potest, quod non dicatur ab aliquo philosophorum." – Cicero, *De Divinatione*

Office hours: 10:30am–1:30pm on Mondays
Initial reading/listening: Sundays-Tuesdays

Q&A: 12:00–1:30pm on Wednesdays
Discord discussion: Wednesdays-Fridays

Course description: In this course, we will take a whirlwind tour of philosophical inquiry. We'll begin by acquiring some of the basic tools of logical thinking, and then sharpen those tools by identifying good, bad, and bullshit arguments in a US presidential debate. We'll then bring our critical tools to bear on the metaphysical and epistemological work of a few of the greatest philosophers in the European tradition. Finally, we'll read and discuss recent essays on science and religion, race and racism, moral partiality, and the meaning of life, amongst other topics. By the end of the course, we will have studied many (though not nearly all) of the big questions that make up the subject matter of philosophy. We may not walk away with satisfactory answers to these questions, but we will develop a deeper understanding of both the questions themselves and various possible ways of answering them. By immersing ourselves in Plato's 4th century BCE dialogues, Descartes's 17th century *Meditations*, and essays, polemics, and analyses from the 18th–21st centuries, we will also come to appreciate several distinctive ways of doing philosophy.

Brief schedule

Unit 1: Philosophical (and sophistical) methodologies

Week 1: Thinking to some purpose

Week 2: Arguing

Week 3: Bullshitting

*logic quiz due 9/4
debate analysis due 9/11*

Unit 2: Philosophies, ancient and modern

Week 4: Socrates: don't bullshit a bullshitter

Week 5: Plato: dialectically transcending the bullshit

Week 6: Descartes: doubting everything in search of truth

Week 7: Descartes v. Elisabeth: the mind-body problem

*exam prompt due 10/9
conversation due 10/9*

Unit 3: Science, religion, and the everyday world

Week 8: Cavendish v. Hume: is nature intelligently designed?

Week 9: Plantinga v. Dennett: do science and religion conflict?

Week 10: What's real and what's fantasy?

Unit 4: Morality and the meaning of life

Week 11: Racism and racialism

Week 12: What do we owe others?

Week 13: Absurdity and meaning in life

Wrap-up: What is philosophy, again?

Week 14: Wrap-up

*exam prompt due 11/23
conversation due 12/4
exam due 12/9*

Required books

A Rulebook for Arguments (5th Edition) by Anthony Weston (Hackett)
Plato: Five Dialogues (2nd Edition), trans. by G.M.A. Grube and John Cooper (Hackett)
Meditations on First Philosophy by René Descartes, trans. by Michael Moriarty (Oxford)
Science and Religion: are they Compatible? by Daniel Dennett and Alvin Plantinga (Oxford)

Other course materials

PDFs of all other required readings (available on eCampus)
Dialogues, Meditations, and Analyses (course companion podcast)
 Podcast RSS feed: <https://feeds.acast.com/public/shows/5f2864c55c4d152f8619337e>

Brief grading breakdown

Reading questions: 10%
 Discord discussions: 20%
 Logic quiz: 5%
 Debate analysis: 15%
 Two exam prompts: 10%
 Two conversations: 20%
 Stay-home exam: 20%

Grade scale

A: 90–100%
 B: 80–89%
 C: 70–79%
 D: 60–69%
 F: 0–59%

Reading questions (worth 1 point per week; maximum 10 points)

Each week, by Wednesday at 10am, post a question about the reading on Discord.

Discord discussions (worth 2 points per week; maximum 20 points)

Each week, on at least two separate occasions between 1pm on Wednesday and 5pm on Friday, contribute to our ongoing class discussion on Discord. At least one of these contributions must take the form of a response to a classmate's post.

Logic quiz (worth 5 points; due before midnight on 9/4)

Complete a short multiple-choice quiz on eCampus.

Debate analysis (worth 5 points per part; due at the end of Unit 1)

- Identify one logically valid argument employed during a U.S. Presidential Primary debate, and reconstruct that argument in (valid) premise-conclusion form.
- Identify a fallacy employed during the debate, and explain why it is a fallacy.
- Identify one instance of Frankfurtian or Cohenesque bullshit employed in the debate, and explain why it is an instance of that type of bullshit.

Two exam prompts (worth 5 points each; due at the end of Units 2 and 4)

Post a (or substantively revise a classmate's) candidate exam prompt on Discord.

Two conversations (worth 10 points each; due at the end of Units 2 and 4)

Record (with permission) a 5–15 minute philosophical conversation with a friend or family member. (You may instead come to office hours, and I'll pretend to be your friend.) In this conversation, you must explain a philosophical problem, argument, or doctrine of your choice, and then discuss the issue with your interlocutor.

Stay-home final exam (worth 20 points; 10 points per answer)

I will select four of the candidate prompts that students have posted to Discord.
 Respond to two of the selected prompts with 500–750 word essays.

Detailed schedule

(* = primary; † = optional)

Unit 1: Philosophical (and sophistical) methodologies**Before the first day of class****Read:** Callard, "The End is Coming" †

Epicurus, "Letter to Menoeceus" †

King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail" †

Zhuangzi, "The Dexterous Butcher" †

Le Guin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" †

Dennett, "Where am I?" †

Listen: Ep. 1: How to use this podcast**Week 1: Thinking to some purpose (Aug 26th – 28th)****Read:** Curry, "How to Read Philosophy"

Guerrero, "The Lottocracy" *

Listen: Ep. 2: Philosopher citizens

Introductory session (recorded live on Zoom: Wednesday, 12:00–1:30pm)

Submit: Introduction by 10:00am on Wednesday

Two discussion contributions by 5:00pm on Friday

Week 2: Arguing (Aug 31st – Sept 4th)**Read:** Stebbing, "Thinking and Doing"

"A Mind in Blinkers" †

"Propaganda: an Obstacle" †

Weston, *A Rulebook for Arguments* (I, VI, Appendix I) **A Rulebook for Arguments* (II–V, VII–X) †**Listen:** Ep. 3: Argumentation and philosophical conversation

Q&A (recorded live on Zoom: Wednesday, 12:00–1:30pm)

Submit: Reading question by 10:00am on Wednesday

Two discussion contributions by 5:00pm on Friday

Logic quiz by 11:59pm on Friday

Week 3: Bullshitting (Sept 9th – 11th)**Read:** Frankfurt, "On Bullshit" *

Cohen, "Further into Bullshit"

Frankfurt, "Reply to G.A. Cohen" †

Listen: Ep. 4: Two analyses of bullshit

Q&A (recorded live on Zoom: Wednesday, 12:00–1:30pm)

Submit: Reading question by 10:00am on Wednesday

Two discussion contributions by 5:00pm on Friday

Debate analysis by 11:59pm on Friday

*Did you enjoy this unit? If so, consider taking:**PHIL 170: Introduction to Critical Reasoning • PHIL 260: Introduction to Symbolic Logic**PHIL 323: Social and Political Philosophy*

Unit 2: Philosophies, Ancient and Modern

Week 4: Socrates: don't bullshit a bullshitter (Sept 14th – 18th)

Read: Plato, *Euthyphro* *

Apology

Listen: Ep. 5: Bullshit detector or bullshit artist?

[Adamson, Plato's Socrates](#)

Q&A (recorded live on Zoom: Wednesday, 12:00–1:30pm)

Submit: Reading question by 10:00am on Wednesday

Two discussion contributions by 5:00pm on Friday

Week 5: Plato: dialectically transcending the bullshit (Sept 21st – 25th)

Read: Plato, *Meno* *

Phaedo (57a–59b, 102a–118a)

Crito †

Listen: [Adamson, Plato's Meno](#)

[Adamson, Plato's Phaedo](#)

Q&A (recorded live on Zoom: Wednesday, 12:00–1:30pm)

Submit: Reading question by 10:00am on Wednesday

Two discussion contributions by 5:00pm on Friday

Week 6: Descartes: doubting everything in search of truth (Sept 28th – Oct 2nd)

Read: Descartes, *Meditations* (Letter, Preface, Meditation I, Meditation II) *

Listen: Ep. 6: Doubt

Ep. 7: Aristotelianism, the new science, and the Cogito

Q&A (recorded live on Zoom: Wednesday, 12:00–1:30pm)

Submit: Reading question by 10:00am on Wednesday

Two discussion contributions by 5:00pm on Friday

Week 7: Descartes v. Elisabeth: the mind-body problem (Oct 5th – 9th)

Read: Descartes, *Meditations* (Meditation III, Meditation VI)

(Meditation IV, Meditation V) †

Elisabeth-Descartes Correspondence of 1643 *

Listen: Ep. 8: Cartesians on God and Psychology

Q&A (recorded live on Zoom: Wednesday, 12:00–1:30pm)

Submit: Reading question by 10:00am on Wednesday

Two discussion contributions by 5:00pm on Friday

Exam prompt by 11:59pm on Friday

Conversation by 11:59pm on Friday

Did you enjoy this unit? If so, consider taking:

PHIL 244: History of Ancient Philosophy • PHIL 248: History of Modern Philosophy

PHIL 301: Metaphysics • PHIL 302: Theory of Knowledge • PHIL 306: Philosophy of Mind

Unit 3: Science, religion, and the everyday world

Week 8: Cavendish v. Hume: is nature intelligently designed? (Oct 12th – 16th)

Read: Cavendish, “A Natural Philosopher Cannot be an Atheist”

Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (selections from Parts II & V) *

Listen: Ep. 9: A dialogue on Hume’s dialogues

Q&A (recorded live on Zoom: Wednesday, 12:00–1:30pm)

Submit: Reading question by 10:00am on Wednesday

Two discussion contributions by 5:00pm on Friday

Week 9: Plantinga v. Dennett: do science and religion conflict? (Oct 19th – 23rd)

Read: Dennett and Plantinga, *Science and Religion: are they Compatible?* (Chapters 1 & 2) *
(Chapters 3–6)

Listen: Ep. 10: Evolution, naturalism, and God

Q&A (recorded live on Zoom: Wednesday, 12:00–1:30pm)

Submit: Reading question by 10:00am on Wednesday

Two discussion contributions by 5:00pm on Friday

Week 10: What’s real and what’s fantasy? (Oct 26th – 30th)

Read: Ryle, “The World of Science and the Everyday World” *

“Technical and Untechnical Concepts”

“Perception” †

Listen: Ep. 11: Categories and conceptual schemes

Q&A (recorded live on Zoom: Wednesday, 12:00–1:30pm)

Submit: Reading question by 10:00am on Wednesday

Two discussion contributions by 5:00pm on Friday

Reminder: you can submit your second exam prompt (due 11/23) and conversation assignment (due 12/4) at any time. I recommend getting a head start on those assignments whenever you’ve got some time, especially if we’ve just discussed some readings in which you’re particularly interested!

Did you enjoy this unit? If so, consider taking:

PHIL 260: Brains, Minds, and Experiments • PHIL 308: Philosophy of Religion

PHIL 310: Philosophy of Science • PHIL 312: Philosophy of Language

Unit 4: Morality and the meaning of life

Week 11: Racism and racialism (Nov 2nd – 6th)

Read: Du Bois, “The Conservation of Races” *

Appiah, “The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race”

Taylor, “Appiah’s Uncompleted Argument: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Reality of Race”

Listen: Ep. 12: Race-talk

Q&A (recorded live on Zoom: Wednesday, 12:00–1:30pm)

Submit: Reading question by 10:00am on Wednesday

Two discussion contributions by 5:00pm on Friday

Week 12: What do we owe others? (Nov 9th – 13th)

Read: Van Norden, “Confucius on Differentiated Caring”

Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” *

Arthur, “World Hunger and Moral Obligation”

Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism”

Diamond, “Eating Meat and Eating People” †

Listen: Ep. 13: The ethics of calling your mother

Q&A (recorded live on Zoom: Wednesday, 12:00–1:30pm)

Submit: Reading question by 10:00am on Wednesday

Two discussion contributions by 5:00pm on Friday

Week 13: Absurdity and meaning in life (Nov 16th – 23rd)

Read: Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus”

Nagel, “The Absurd”

Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* (73–95) *

(96–116) †

Listen: Ep. 14: The absurdity of it all

Q&A (recorded live on Zoom: Wednesday, 12:00–1:30pm)

Submit: Reading question by 10:00am on Wednesday

Two discussion contributions by 5:00pm on Friday

Exam prompt by 11:59pm on Monday the 23rd

Wrap-up

Week 14: What is philosophy, again? (Nov 30th – Dec 4th)

Read: Sellars, “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man” (I)

Dotson, “How is this Paper Philosophy?” (I, V, VI) *

Listen: Ep. 15: How did you use this podcast?

Q&A (recorded live on Zoom: Wednesday, 12:00–1:30pm)

Submit: Reading question by 10:00am on Wednesday

Conversation by 11:59pm on Friday

Did you enjoy this unit? If so, consider taking:

PHIL 130: Current Moral Problems • PHIL 313: Philosophy of Race • PHIL 321: Ethical Theory

PHIL 331: Health Care Ethics • PHIL 355: Existentialism

Other advice, policies, and expectations

Some tips

Set aside at least six hours a week, between Sunday and Tuesday, to engage in the sustained, attentive and reflective thinking which philosophical reading demands. I recommend reading each text once, then listening to that week's podcast, and then rereading each text (and especially the primary text marked with an "**") carefully, taking notes about questions to ask and points to raise in discussion. During our class Discord discussions, presume that your peers are smart and have something interesting to say, and respond to their contributions accordingly. Don't be afraid to ask any question (clarificatory or substantive) that crosses your mind, or to admit when you don't understand something. (I have a Ph.D. in philosophy, and have published extensively on the subject, but I still frequently read things that I don't initially—or even ultimately!—understand.) Come chat with me in office hours whenever you want to delve deeper into something we have read or discussed.

Late policy

Assignments will not be accepted late. But...

Accommodations

If you have good reason to be exempt from (or subject to a modified version of) any policy on this syllabus, please let me know. We'll work something out. If you have a disability and anticipate needing any type of accommodation in order to participate in this course, please let me know and make appropriate arrangements with the Office of Accessibility Services (<https://accessibilityservices.wvu.edu/>).

Plagiarism

Don't do it. Exercise academic integrity, as defined by the WVU Policy on Student Academic Integrity. Plagiarism (or abetting another student plagiarizing) will result in an automatic zero on the plagiarized assignment, as well as a formal complaint. If you have questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please ask.

Statement of non-discrimination

The West Virginia University community is committed to creating and fostering a positive learning and working environment based on open communication, mutual respect, and inclusion. Our discussions will be predicated on these commitments.

Expected learning outcomes

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be better able to:

- 1) reason logically and creatively;
- 2) identify, describe, and evaluate the aims, strategies, assumptions, and arguments of philosophical texts;
- 3) discuss and debate vexed issues thoughtfully, charitably, and respectfully;
- 4) understand the fundamental contours of several problems of philosophy.