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Office hours: Mondays, 2–5pm

PROBLEMS OF PHILOSOPHY
PHIL 100 002, FALL 2021
9:30–10:20am M/W/F, Oglebay Hall 106

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

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

quiz due 5pm 8/27

Week 3: Bullshitting

log due 5pm 9/3

Unit 2: Philosophies, ancient and modern

debate analysis due 9:30am 9/8

Week 4: Socrates: don't bullshit a bullshitter

Week 5: Plato: dialectically transcending the bullshit

quiz due 5pm 9/17

Week 6: Descartes: doubting everything in search of truth

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

Week 8: Descartes: arguments for God's existence

conversation due 9:30am 10/4

Unit 3: Science, religion, and the everyday world

log due 5pm 10/6

Week 9: Cavendish v. Hume: the design of nature

Week 10: Plantinga v. Dennett: science and religion

quiz due 5pm 10/22

Week 11: What's real and what's fantasy?

log due 5pm 10/29

Unit 4: Morality and the meaning of life

Week 12: Racism and racialism

Week 13: What do we owe others?

quiz due 5pm 11/12

Week 14: The absurdity of it all

Week 15: Meaning in life

log due 5pm 12/3

Wrap-up: What is philosophy, again?

Week 16: How things hang together

conversation due 9:30am 12/6

exam due 5pm 12/14

Assignment/grading breakdown**Grade scale**

Four participation logs: 20% (due 5pm 9/3, 10/6, 10/29, 12/3)	A: 90–100%
Four quizzes: 20% (due 5pm 8/27, 9/17, 10/22, 11/12)	B: 80–89%
Debate analysis: 10% (due 9:30am 9/8)	C: 70–79%
Two conversations: 30% (due 9:30am 10/4, 12/6)	D: 60–69%
Take-home exam: 20% (due 5pm 12/14)	F: 0–59%

Four participation logs (worth 5 points each; due by 5pm on the last day of each unit)

This course will center on class discussion about complicated subject matters, and thus will require each student's effective participation. Effective participation involves thoughtfully and respectfully engaging in live class discussions (and/or posting to our Discord server) in a manner that demonstrates you have done the assigned reading. (Note that asking clarificatory questions about the reading or about something I've said is often an extremely effective method of engagement!) Participation will be self-graded via four logs detailing your participation (in class and on Discord) during each unit of the course.

Four quizzes (worth 5 points each; due by 5pm on the second Friday of each unit)

Take a short multiple-choice quiz on eCampus, which will assess your understanding of the basic concepts necessary to follow the current unit of the course.

Debate analysis (worth 10 points; due by 9:30am on the Monday after the end of Unit 1)

Complete two of the three following exercises (worth 5 points each):

- 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 conversations (worth 15 points each; due by 9:30am on the Mondays of Weeks 8 and 16)

Record a 5–15 minute philosophical conversation with a friend, family member, or classmate (with their permission). In this conversation, you must explain a philosophical problem, argument, or doctrine of your choice, and then have an open-ended discussion of the issue with your friend. Your explanation must explicitly draw on at least one author we read during the most recent two units of this course. You will be graded on how clearly and accurately you explain your chosen problem, argument, or doctrine (5 points), on how clearly and accurately you describe the work of the author(s) you are drawing on (5 points), and on how thoughtfully you weigh in during the ensuing discussion (5 points). (Your friend's contributions will not be judged. If you would prefer, you may come to office hours and I'll pretend to be your friend.)

Take-home final exam (worth 20 points; due by 5pm on the Tuesday of Finals Week)

I will distribute four exam prompts. Respond to each part of two prompts (of your choice) with 300–750 word essays. Each essay will be worth 10 points.

Other information, advice, policies, and expectations

A typical week

Mondays: I'll introduce the week's topic, and we'll have a preliminary class discussion.

Wednesdays: You are required to complete the week's reading and podcast listening by classtime on Wednesday. In class, I'll answer any questions you have, and give a lecture on some of the nitty-gritty philosophical details.

Fridays: We will have a freewheeling full-class conversation about the material covered in the readings, podcasts, and earlier class meetings, and I'll set up the next week's topic.

Online course hubs

- Our eCampus page, where you will find pdfs of all required readings, links to all required podcast episodes, places to submit your assignments, and your grades.
- Our Discord server, where you will find announcements and interact with me and your classmates outside of the classroom.

Contacting me

You should reach out early and often about any issues you're having with the course. Sending me a message on Discord is the easiest way to ask me a quick question and get a quick answer. For more involved or sensitive questions, please use email. I'll respond to all questions posed on Discord or via email within one work day.

Office hours

I'll be available on Mondays from 2–5pm, via Discord (text only) and Zoom (be patient in the waiting room), and in my physical office (Arnold 112). That time is specifically set aside to talk to students; I highly recommend taking advantage by dropping in and asking any and all questions you have about the course.

Some more tips

Set aside at least three hours a week, between Saturday and Wednesday morning, to engage in the sustained, attentive and reflective thinking which philosophical reading demands. Then come to class on Wednesday (or our Discord channel whenever!) ready to ask questions about the parts of the readings or podcast that you found confusing or fascinating or silly. Finally, after Wednesday's lecture, reread the required texts carefully (especially the primary text marked with an *""*) and relisten to the podcast, taking notes about further questions to ask and points to raise in discussion on Friday.

During our class 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.

Attendance

Attendance is not required, but failing to attend class will hurt your participation grade. Much more importantly, attending and engaging in class is essential to cultivating critical thinking skills and a philosophical frame of mind (and thus getting your time and money's worth for taking this course). Class meetings will not be recorded, and (due to their interactive nature) cannot be helpfully recapped, for those not present in person.

Late policy

Please note that assignments must be uploaded to eCampus by either 5pm or 9:30am on the due date. Late assignments will not be accepted unless an extension of the deadline has been granted. If you need to request an extension, please email me as soon as you can. In most cases, I will happily grant a 48-hour extension, no questions asked.

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. If you have questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please ask. Plagiarism will result in a zero on the plagiarized assignment and a formal complaint.

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.

Recommended 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)
Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion by David Hume, ed. By Richard Popkin (Hackett)
Science and Religion: are they Compatible? by Daniel Dennett and Alvin Plantinga (Oxford)
Meaning in Life and Why it Matters by Susan Wolf (Princeton)

Detailed schedule

(* = primary; † = optional)

Before the first day of class**Listen:** Dialogues, Meditations, and Analyses Ep. 1: How to use this podcast**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?" †

Unit 1: Philosophical (and sophistical) methodologies**Week 1: Thinking to some purpose (Aug 18th–20th)****Read:** Curry, "How to Read Philosophy"

Guerrero, "The Lottocracy" *

Listen: Ep. 2: Philosopher citizens**Week 2: Arguing (Aug 23th–27th)****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**Submit:** Quiz by 5:00pm on Friday**Week 3: Bullshitting (Aug 30th–Sep 3rd)****Read:** Frankfurt, "On Bullshit" *

Cohen, "Further into Bullshit"

Frankfurt, "Reply to G.A. Cohen" †

Listen: Ep. 4: Two analyses of bullshit**Submit:** Participation log by 5:00pm 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

no class on Mon 9/6

Week 4: Socrates: don't bullshit a bullshitter (Sep 8th –10th)

Submit: Debate analysis by 9:30am on Monday

Read: Plato, *Euthyphro* *

Apology

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

Adamson, Plato's Socrates

Week 5: Plato: dialectically transcending the bullshit (Sep 13th –17th)

Read: Plato, *Meno* *

Phaedo (57a–59b, 102a–118a) †

Listen: Adamson, Plato's *Meno*

Adamson, Plato's *Phaedo*

Submit: Quiz by 5:00pm on Friday

Week 6: Descartes: doubting everything in search of truth (Sep 20th –24th)

Listen: Ep. 6: Doubt

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

(Letter, Preface, Synopsis) †

Listen: Ep. 7: None of your beeswax

Week 7: Descartes v. Elisabeth: the mind-body problem and God (Sep 27th –29th)

Read: Descartes, *Meditations* (Meditation III, 25–26)

(Meditation VI, 55)

Elisabeth-Descartes Correspondence of 1643 *

Listen: Ep. 8: Cartesian interaction

no class on Fri 10/1

Week 8: Descartes: arguments for God's existence (Oct 4th –6th)

Submit: Conversation assignment by 9:30am on Monday

Read: Descartes, *Meditations* (Meditations III–V) †

Submit: Participation log by 5:00pm on Wednesday

no class on Fri 10/8

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 9: Cavendish v. Hume: is nature intelligently designed? (Oct 11th–15th)

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

Cavendish, "A Natural Philosopher Cannot be an Atheist" †

Chirimuuta, "On Hume's Racism and Naturalism" †

Listen: Ep. 9: Adorable mysteriousness

Week 10: Plantinga v. Dennett: do science and religion conflict? (Oct 18th–22nd)

Read: Dennett, "The Bright Stuff" †

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

Listen: Ep. 10: Faith in God's (lack of) existence

Submit: Quiz by 5:00pm on Friday

Week 11: What's real and what's fantasy? (Oct 25th–29th)

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

"Technical and Untechnical Concepts" †

"Perception" †

Hatfield, "Objectivity and Subjectivity Revisited: Color as a Psychobiological Property"

Listen: Ep. 11: Tables, touchdowns, and technical terms

Submit: Participation log by 5:00pm on Friday

Reminder: you can submit your second conversation assignment (due by the beginning of Week 16) at any time. I recommend getting a head start on this assignment 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 12: Racism and racialism (Nov 1st–5th)

Read: Appiah, “Racisms” *

Shelby, “Racism: Ideological, Institutional, and Structural”

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

Listen: Ep. 12: Race, racisms, and solidarity

Week 13: What do we owe others? (Nov 8th–10th)

Read: Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” *

Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism”

Confucius, *Analects* (selection with excerpts of commentaries by Van Norden and Huang)

Listen: Ep. 13: Fancy suits and moral failings

Submit: Quiz by 5:00pm on Friday

no class on Fri 11/12

Week 14: The absurdity of it all (Nov 15th–19th)

Read: Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus”

Nagel, “The Absurd” *

Listen: Ep. 14: Imagine Sisyphus happy

no class 11/22–11/26

Week 15: Meaning in life (Nov 29th–Dec 3rd)

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

Willison, “Ethical Meaning” (1-10)

Listen: Ep. 15: What makes the examined life worth living?

Submit: Participation log by 5:00pm on Friday

Dead week and exam week

Week 16: What is philosophy, again? (Dec 6th–8th)

Submit: Conversation by 9:30am on Monday, Dec 6th

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

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

Submit: Take-home exam by 5:00pm on Tuesday, Dec 14th

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