

Professor: Dr. Devin Sanchez Curry
Email: devin.curry@mail.wvu.edu

Discord: xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
Office hours: T/Th, 9:30–11am, Arnold 112

PROBLEMS OF PHILOSOPHY
PHIL 100 002, FALL 2023
9:30–10:20am M/W/F, Brooks Hall 225

“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 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, color, 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 sophisticated) methodologies

Week 1: Thinking to some purpose

Week 2: Arguing

quiz due 8/25

Week 3: Bullshitting

debate analysis and log due 9/1

Unit 2: Philosophies, ancient and modern

Week 4: Socrates: don't bullshit a bullshitter

Week 5: Plato: dialectically transcending the bullshit

quiz due 9/15

Week 6: Descartes: doubting everything in search of truth

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

conversation and log due 9/29

Unit 3: Science, religion, and the everyday world

Week 8: Descartes: arguments for God's existence

Week 9: Hume: the design of nature

quiz due 10/13

Week 10: Plantinga v. Dennett: science and religion

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

log due 10/27

Unit 4: Morality and the meaning of life

Week 12: Racism and racialism

Week 13: What do we owe others?

quiz due 11/10

Week 14: The absurdity of it all

conversation due 11/17

Week 15: Meaning in life

log due 12/1

Wrap-up: What is philosophy, again?

Week 16: How things hang together

final exam on 12/12, 2–4pm

Assignment/grading breakdown**Grade scale**

Four participation logs: 20% (due 5pm 9/1, 9/29, 10/27, 12/1)	A: 90–100%
Four quizzes: 20% (due 5pm 8/25, 9/15, 10/13, 11/10)	B: 80–89%
Debate analysis: 5% (due 5pm 9/1)	C: 70–79%
Two conversations: 30% (due 5pm 9/29 and 11/17)	D: 60–69%
Final exam: 25% (12/12, 2:00–4:00pm)	F: 0–59%

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

The main aim of this course is to get each student effectively participating in discussions of philosophical problems. For our purposes, effective participation involves asking questions and/or 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. Participation will be self-graded via four logs detailing your engagement (in class and on Discord) during each unit of the course.

Four quizzes (worth 5 points each; due by 5pm on 8/25, 9/15, 10/13, and 11/10)

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 5 points; due by 5pm on 9/1)

Complete one of the following exercises:

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

Two conversations (worth 15 points each; due by 5pm on 9/29 and 11/17)

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.)

Final exam (worth 25 points; 12/12 from 2-4pm in Brooks Hall 225)

You will answer five short-answer questions and write an essay (in response to a prompt). I will distribute a detailed study guide by 12/4, and we will have a review session in class on 12/6. During the exam, you will be allowed to consult one piece of paper featuring your own (handwritten or typed) notes.

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: I'll pick up where Wednesday's lecture left off, then we'll have a freewheeling full-class conversation about the material covered in the readings, podcasts, and earlier class meetings, and finally 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 Tuesdays and Thursdays from 9:30–11:00am, via Discord 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 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, 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 class discussion.

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

Missing 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).

Late policy

Assignments must be uploaded to eCampus by 5pm on the due date to receive credit. If you need to request an extension of any due date, 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 (and AI tools)

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. Using ChatGPT (or any other large language model) without attribution is a form of plagiarism. You may not use any AI tool for any course-related purpose unless you first clear the use with me. (Don't hesitate to message me if you have a reasonable use!)

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 (but note that all required readings are available on eCampus)

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 16th–18th)****Read:** Guerrero, "The Lottocracy" ***Listen:** Ep. 2: Philosopher citizens**Week 2: Arguing (Aug 21st–25th)****Read:** Weston, *A Rulebook for Arguments* (I, VI, Appendix I) **A Rulebook for Arguments* (II–V, VII–X) †

Stebbing, "Thinking and Doing" †

"A Mind in Blinkers" †

Listen: Ep. 3: Argumentation and philosophical conversation**Submit:** Quiz by 5:00pm on Friday**Week 3: Bullshitting (Aug 28th–Sept 1st)****Read:** Curry, "How to Read Philosophy"

Frankfurt, "On Bullshit" *

Cohen, "Deeper into Bullshit" †

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

Debate analysis by 5:00pm on Friday

*no class on Mon 9/4**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 6th–8th)

Read: Plato, *Apology* *

Euthyphro †

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

Adamson, Plato's Socrates

Week 5: Plato: dialectically transcending the bullshit (Sept 11th–15th)

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 (Sept 18th–22nd)

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 (Sept 25th–29th)

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

(Meditation VI, 55)

Elisabeth-Descartes Correspondence of 1643 *

Listen: Ep. 8: Cartesian interaction

Submit: Participation log by 5:00pm on Friday

Conversation assignment by 5:00pm on Friday

Reminder: you can submit your first conversation assignment (due 9/29) 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 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: Descartes: arguments for God's existence (Oct 2nd–Oct 4th)

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

no class on Fri 10/6

Week 9: Hume: is nature intelligently designed? (Oct 9th–13th)

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

Submit: Quiz by 5:00pm on Friday

Week 10: Plantinga v. Dennett: do science and religion conflict? (Oct 16th–20th)

Read: Dennett, "The Bright Stuff" †

Dennett and Plantinga, *Science and Religion: are they Compatible?* (Chapters 1, 2, 5.4 & 6) *
(Chapters 3–5) †

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

Week 11: What's real and what's fantasy? (Oct 23rd–27th)

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

"Technical and Untechnical Concepts" †

"Perception" †

Hatfield, "Objectivity and Subjectivity Revisited" *

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 11/17) 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 (Oct 30th–Nov 3rd)

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 6th–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

Week 14: The absurdity of it all (Nov 13th–17th)

Read: Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, aphorism 125

Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus” *

Nagel, “The Absurd” †

Listen: Ep. 14: Imagine Sisyphus happy

Submit: Conversation by 5:00pm on Friday

no class Nov 20th–24th (Thanksgiving Break)

Week 15: Meaning in life (Nov 27th–Dec 1st)

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

Week 16: How things hang together (Dec 4th–6th)

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

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

Final exam: 2:00–4:00pm on Tuesday, Dec 12th in our normal classroom (Brooks Hall 225)

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 • PHIL 341: Philosophy and Death