

**Professor:** Dr. Devin Sanchez Curry  
**Email:** [devin.curry@mail.wvu.edu](mailto:devin.curry@mail.wvu.edu)

**Zoom:** [redacted]  
**Discord:** [redacted]

PROBLEMS OF PHILOSOPHY  
PHIL 100, SPRING 2021

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

**Class meetings:** 9:30–10:20am M/W/F, Clark Hall 208      **Open zoom hours:** 12:30–2:00pm, M/W

**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 18<sup>th</sup>–21<sup>st</sup> 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 1/29*

Week 3: Bullshitting

*participation log due 2/5*

**Unit 2: Philosophies, ancient and modern**

*debate analysis due 2/8*

Week 4: Socrates: don't bullshit a bullshitter

Week 5: Plato: dialectically transcending the bullshit

*quiz due 2/19*

Week 6: Descartes: doubting everything in search of truth

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

*participation log due 3/5*

**Unit 3: Science, religion, and the everyday world**

*conversation due 3/8*

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

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

*quiz due 3/19*

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

*participation log due 3/26*

**Unit 4: Morality and the meaning of life**

Week 11: Racism and racialism

Week 12: What do we owe others?

*quiz due 4/9*

Week 13: The absurdity of it all

Week 14: Meaning in life

*participation log due 4/23*

**Wrap-up: What is philosophy, again?**

*conversation due 4/26*

Week 15: How things hang together

*exam due 5/5*

**Required course materials**

PDFs of all required readings are available on eCampus

[Dialogues, Meditations, and Analyses](#) (course companion podcast)

**Recommended books**

*A Rulebook for Arguments* (5<sup>th</sup> Edition) by Anthony Weston (Hackett)

*Plato: Five Dialogues* (2<sup>nd</sup> 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)

*Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* by Susan Wolf (Princeton)

**Assignment/grading breakdown****Grade scale**

Four participation logs: 20%

A: 90–100%

Four quizzes: 20%

B: 80–89%

Debate analysis: 10%

C: 70–79%

Two conversations: 30%

D: 60–69%

Take-home exam: 20%

F: 0–59%

**Four participation logs (worth 5 points each; due at the end of each unit)**

Fill out a log detailing your participation in class and on Discord. Creditworthy forms of participation include asking questions about the reading or podcast, contributing to class discussion (in person or on Discord), and crafting take-home exam prompts.

**Four quizzes (worth 5 points each; due on 1/29, 2/19, 3/19, and 4/9)**

Take a short multiple-choice quiz on eCampus.

**Debate analysis (worth 10 points; due at the end of Unit 1)**

Complete two of the three 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 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 at the end of Units 2 and 4)**

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.)

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

I will distribute four exam prompts at least one week before the due date. Respond to two of the selected prompts with 300–750 word essays.

**Detailed schedule**

(\* = primary; † = optional)

**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

**Unit 1: Philosophical (and sophistical) methodologies****Week 1: Thinking to some purpose (Jan 20<sup>th</sup>–22<sup>nd</sup>)**

**Read:** Curry, "How to Read Philosophy"  
 Guerrero, "The Lottocracy" \*  
**Listen:** Ep. 2: Philosopher citizens

**Week 2: Arguing (Jan 25<sup>th</sup>–29<sup>th</sup>)**

**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 (Feb 1<sup>st</sup>–5<sup>th</sup>)**

**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

### Week 4: Socrates: don't bullshit a bullshitter (Feb 8<sup>th</sup> –12<sup>th</sup>)

**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 (Feb 15<sup>th</sup> –19<sup>th</sup>)

**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 (Feb 22<sup>nd</sup> –26<sup>th</sup>)

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

**Listen:** Ep. 6: Doubt

Ep. 7: None of your beeswax

### Week 7: Descartes v. Elisabeth: the mind-body problem (Mar 1<sup>st</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>)

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

Elisabeth-Descartes Correspondence of 1643 \*

**Listen:** Ep. 8: Cartesians interaction

**Submit:** Participation log by 5:00pm on Friday

*no class on Weds 3/3*

*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? (Mar 8<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup>)

**Submit:** Conversation assignment by 9:30am on Monday

**Read:** Cavendish, "A Natural Philosopher Cannot be an Atheist"

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

**Listen:** Ep. 9: Adorable mysteriousness

#### Week 9: Plantinga v. Dennett: do science and religion conflict? (Mar 15<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup>)

**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 10: What's real and what's fantasy? (Mar 22<sup>nd</sup>–26<sup>th</sup>)

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

"Technical and Untechnical Concepts"

"Perception" †

**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 4/26) 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 11: Racism and racialism (Mar 29<sup>th</sup> – 31<sup>st</sup>)

**Read:** Appiah, “Racisms” \*

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, racisms, and solidarity

*no class on Fri 4/2*

### Week 12: What do we owe others? (Apr 5<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup>)

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

Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism”

Van Norden, “Confucius on Differentiated Caring”

Diamond, “Eating Meat and Eating People” †

**Listen:** Ep. 13: Fancy suits and moral failings

**Submit:** Quiz by 5:00pm on Friday

### Week 13: The absurdity of it all (Apr 12<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup>)

**Read:** Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus”

Nagel, “The Absurd” \*

**Listen:** Ep. 14: Imagine Sisyphus happy

### Week 14: Meaning in life (Apr 19<sup>th</sup>–23<sup>rd</sup>)

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

Willison, “Ethical Meaning”

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

**Submit:** Participation log by 5:00pm on Friday

## Dead week and exam week

### Week 15: What is philosophy, again? (Apr 26<sup>th</sup>–30<sup>th</sup>)

**Submit:** Conversation by 9:30am on Monday, Apr 26<sup>th</sup>

**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 Wednesday, May 5<sup>th</sup>

*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

### 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 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.

### Some 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. Attending and engaging in class is nevertheless 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). Much less importantly, it is also the easiest way to earn participation credit. Class meetings will not be recorded, and (due to their interactive nature) cannot be recapped, for those not present in person.

### Late policy

Assignments will not be accepted late. However, you can always communicate with me prior to a due date to discuss the possibility of an extension.

### 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.

**COVID-19 statement**

WVU is committed to maintaining a safe learning environment for all students, faculty, and staff. Should campus operations change because of health concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is possible that this course will move to a fully online delivery format. If that occurs, students will be advised of technical and/or equipment requirements, including remote proctoring software.

In a face-to-face environment, our commitment to safety requires students, staff, and instructors to observe the social distancing and personal protective equipment (PPE) guidelines set by the University at all times. While in class, students will sit in assigned seats when applicable and wear the required PPE. Should a student forget to bring the required PPE, PPE will be available in the building for students to acquire. Students who fail to comply will be dismissed from the classroom for the class period and may be referred to the Office of Student Conduct for further sanctions.

If a student becomes sick or is required to quarantine during the semester, they should notify the instructor. The student should work with the instructor to develop a plan to receive the necessary course content, activities, and assessments to complete the course learning outcomes.

**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.