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Office hours: T 1:25–2:25pm; W 9–11am

PROBLEMS OF PHILOSOPHY
PHIL 100 002, SPRING 2024
10:00–11:15am T/R, Oglebay 103

Course description: This course is a whirlwind tour of philosophical inquiry. We'll begin by acquiring some of the basic tools of logical thinking, and go on to use our tools to grapple with the ideas of a few of the greatest philosophers in the European tradition. We'll then read and discuss recent essays on science and religion, color, 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.

Brief grading breakdown

Four participation logs: 20%
Eight quizzes: 35%
Conversation assignment: 20%
Final exam: 25%

Grade scale

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

Brief schedule

Unit 1: Philosophical (and sophisticated) methodologies

Week 1: Thinking to some purpose

Week 2: Arguing

quiz due 1/19

Week 3: Bullshitting

quiz & log due 1/26

Unit 2: Philosophies, ancient and modern

Week 4: Socrates: don't bullshit a bullshitter

Week 5: Plato: dialectically transcending the bullshit

quiz due 2/9

Week 6: Descartes: doubting everything in search of truth

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

quiz & log due 2/23

Unit 3: Science, religion, and the everyday world

Week 8: Descartes v. Hume: arguing about God

Week 9: Plantinga v. Dennett: science and religion

quiz due 3/8

Spring break!

Week 10: no class — Curry at conference

Week 11: Science and everyday experience

quiz & log due 3/29

Unit 4: Morality and the meaning of life

Week 12: What do we owe others?

quiz due 4/5

Week 13: The absurdity of it all

Week 14: Meaning in life

quiz & log due 4/19

Wrap-up: What is philosophy, again?

Week 15: How things hang together

final exam on 5/2, 5–7pm

Full grading breakdown

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.

Eight quizzes (worth 5 points each; due by 5pm on 1/19, 1/26, 2/9, 2/23, 3/8, 3/29, 4/5, and 4/19)

Take a short quiz on eCampus, which will assess your understanding of the basic concepts necessary to follow the current unit of the course. Your lowest quiz grade will be dropped.

Conversation assignment (worth 20 points; due by 5pm on a date you sign up for)

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 choosing, 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 weeks 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 (10 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; 5/2 from 5–7pm in our standard classroom)

You will answer five short-answer questions and write an essay (in response to a prompt). I will distribute a detailed study guide by 4/22, and we will have a review session in class on 4/25. During the exam, you will be allowed to consult one piece of paper featuring your own (handwritten or typed) notes.

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 submitted on 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.

Other information, advice, policies, and expectations

A typical week

Tuesdays: I'll introduce the week's topic and give a lecture on some of the key philosophical concepts involved, and we'll have a preliminary class discussion.

Thursdays: You are required to complete the week's reading and podcast listening by classtime on Thursday. (Of course, you're more than welcome to have already completed them by Tuesday.) In class, I'll answer any questions you have and give a lecture on some of the nitty-gritty philosophical details, and then we'll have a freewheeling full-class conversation.

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 from 1:25–2:25pm and Wednesdays from 9:00–11:00am, 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 Thursday (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.

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 (week of Jan 8th)****Read:** Guerrero, "The Lottocracy" ***Listen:** Ep. 2: Philosopher citizens**Week 2: Arguing (week of Jan 15th)****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 (week of Jan 22nd)****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

Quiz by 5:00pm 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 2: Philosophies, ancient and modern**Week 4: Socrates: don't bullshit a bullshitter (week of Jan 29th)**

Read: Plato, *Apology* *

Euthyphro †

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

Adamson, Plato's Socrates

Week 5: Plato: dialectically transcending the bullshit (week of Feb 5th)

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 (week of Feb 12th)

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 (week of Feb 19th)

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

Quiz by 5:00pm 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: Descartes v Hume: is nature intelligently designed? (week of Feb 26th)

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

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 9: Plantinga v. Dennett: do science and religion conflict? (week of Mar 4th)

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

Submit: Quiz by 5:00pm on Friday

Spring break: week of Mar 11th

Week 10: no class on Tues 3/19 or Thurs 3/21—Curry at the American Philosophical Association

Week 11: Science and everyday experience (week of Mar 25th)

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

Quiz by 5:00pm on Friday

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: What do we owe others? (week of Apr 1st)**

Read: Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" *

Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism"

Confucius, *Analects* (selection w/ excerpts of commentaries by Van Norden and Huang) †

Listen: Ep. 13: Fancy suits and moral failings

Submit: Quiz by 5:00pm on Friday

Week 13: The absurdity of it all (week of Apr 8th)

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

Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus" *

Nagel, "The Absurd" †

Listen: Ep. 14: Imagine Sisyphus happy

Week 14: Meaning in life (week of Apr 15th)

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

Quiz by 5:00pm on Friday

Wrap-up: What is philosophy, again?**Week 15: How things hang together (week of Apr 22nd)**

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

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

Final exam: 5/2, 5-7pm in our standard classroom

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