

Introduction to Philosophy

University of Houston
Phil 1301 (3469)
D3 W122
Tue-Thu 8:30am-10:00am

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Office Hours: Tue and Thu, 11:30 – 1:00, in Agnes Arnold Hall 508.

Course Description: This class will introduce you to six fundamental philosophical puzzles about our world. We will first discuss (a) the nature of our own identities and (b) the nature of consciousness: What is it that makes you the same person you were 5 years ago? Is consciousness a part of the physical world? Next, we will discuss (c) the possibility of free will and moral responsibility and (d) the nature of morality: how can anyone be morally responsible for anything in a world governed by the laws of cause and effect? Where do moral rules come from, if indeed they exist at all? Finally, we will discuss (e) the possibility of knowledge and (f) the meaning of life: do we really know the things we think we know? What is the meaning, if there is any, of the series of predictable events that we call life? Coursework consists in heavy reading, 3 short assignments, and 3 non-cumulative exams.

Course Objectives: This course has three goals and your success in it will be measured by how well you achieve them. The *first goal* is introducing you to various philosophical topics, questions, and arguments. On the exams, you will be expected to display the knowledge of these that you have acquired in this class. The *second goal* of the course is developing the skill of critical thinking. You will be encouraged to exercise this skill during classroom discussion and activities, and you will be required to apply it on short assignments. The *third goal* of the course is developing the important skills of reading comprehension and clear and precise writing. The readings and short assignments both provide you with an opportunity to get better and better at understanding complex texts and effectively communicating your own ideas. Altogether, this class will challenge you to *receive, process, and convey* philosophical ideas. This is not an easy class. But if you apply yourself, it will be incredibly rewarding.

Required Text: All readings will be provided as PDF documents on Blackboard.

Course Requirements:

Participation (5%)
Short Assignments (30%) ----- See below for due dates
First Exam (15%) ----- Thu (02/14)
Second Exam (20%) ----- Thu (03/28)
Final Exam (30%) ----- Tue (05/07)

Grade Curve: Once all the grades are determined, I will subtract the highest final grade from the max grade to determine the size of the curve. Every grade will receive a boost equal to the difference between the highest final grade and the max grade. Final letter grades will follow the following distribution:

A+	97-100	B+	87-89	C+	77-79	D+	69-59
A	93-96	B	83-86	C	73-76	D	60-64
A-	90-92	B-	80-82	C-	70-72	F	0-59

Course Policies

Short Assignments: There are 3 short assignments. The purpose of these assignments is developing and exercising the skills of critical thinking and clear writing. For each assignment, you will be directed to a short passage and asked to (a) clarify the argument in that passage, and (b) state your thoughts on it. Assignments are worth progressively more of your grade. This allows you to “warm-up” to the type of content and activity that this class requires, and prevents you from front-loading your effort and merely cruising through the final weeks. All assignments should be submitted through Blackboard. You are not allowed to miss any assignment, and no grade will be dropped.

Exams: There are 3 exams in this class. They will each have two sections: a section where you will be expected to give *very short* answers (1 sentence), and a section where you will be expected to give *short* answers (1 paragraph). One week before each exam, you will be provided with a list of possible questions (a study guide) from which the exam questions will be selected. We will discuss the study guide in a review section during the class meeting before each exam. Exams are also worth progressively more, and for the same reasons. You are not allowed to miss any exam, and no grade will be dropped.

Late Submissions: With the exception of *well-documented* emergencies, your grade on short assignments will suffer a 1-point deduction per late day. (This is equivalent to losing 10% of your grade for that assignment per day.) No exceptions will be made for excuses such as: “I was too busy with other coursework,” “I found it too hard to understand,” “I am going through a hard time in my life,” and so on. You should come talk to me in advance about any of these issues.

Participation: I do not take attendance in my classes. This means that missing classes will not affect your attendance grade. When you come to class, however, you will be required to follow certain common sense rules. Minimally: (a) you cannot use your phone, (b) you cannot carry unrelated conversations during class, (c) you cannot use your computer for class-unrelated activities, and (d) you cannot take naps during class-time. Violation of these rules will affect your participation grade.

Grade Complaints: As already noted, coursework in this class counts progressively more towards your final grade. This gives you an opportunity to work your way out of a bad start, but also prevents you from not needing a good grade at the end. In light of this, *I will not provide anyone with an opportunity for extra credit*. Of course, I am happy to talk to you about your grade throughout the course. If you are confused about why you received the grade that you did, or if you disagree with the grade that you received, then you should email me about this, or come see me during office hours, or schedule an appointment. I will not, however, look over your work and discuss your grade informally after a class.

Office Hours and Appointments: You are encouraged to make good use of my office hours. I am here to help you succeed in this course, and I am more than happy to review your lecture notes, to explain difficult material a second time, and to discuss any questions or insights that you may have. I love talking about philosophy and it will be my pleasure to discuss any aspect of it with you.

Academic Honesty: Do not cheat. Punishment will be harsh if you do. You're expected to be familiar with the University of Houston's policies: <http://www.uh.edu/provost/policies/honesty/>

Disabilities: If you have the need for disability-related services, please get in touch with the University of Houston's *Center for Students with Disabilities*. I will be happy to work with you and the center in arranging for reasonable accommodations: <http://www.uh.edu/csd/>

Mental Health: Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) can help students who are having difficulties managing stress, adjusting to college, or feeling sad and hopeless. You can reach CAPS (www.uh.edu/caps) by calling 713-743-5454 during and after business hours for routine appointments or if you or someone you know is in crisis. No appointment is necessary for the “Let's Talk” program, a drop-in consultation service at convenient locations and hours around campus. http://www.uh.edu/caps/outreach/lets_talk.html

Class Schedule

Introduction

- Jan 15 – Introduction to the Course
- Jan 17 – The Basics of Critical Thinking

PART I: IDENTITY AND CONSCIOUSNESS

Personal Identity

- Jan 22 – Human Souls and Survival
- Jan 24 – Identity and Psychological Continuity
- Jan 29 – Persons and Human Bodies (last day to drop the course without a grade)

Consciousness

- Jan 31 – Mind-Body Dualism
- Feb 05 – Physical Minds in a Physical World
- Feb 07 – The Knowledge Argument - Assignment #1 is due (5%)

First Exam Week

- Feb 12 – Review Session
- Feb 14 – Exam #1 (15%)

PART II: FREEDOM AND MORALITY

Freedom and Responsibility

- Feb 19 – The Puzzle of Free Will
- Feb 21 – Agent-Causation and Libertarian Freedom
- Feb 26 – The Scientific Evidence Against Free Will
- Feb 28 – Higher-Order Volitions and Compatibilism

Morality

- Mar 05 – Moral Subjectivism
- Mar 07 – Cultural Relativism
- Mar 12 & 14 – Spring Break
- Mar 19 – Divine Command Theory
- Mar 21 – Objective Moral Realism - Assignment #2 is due (10%)

Second Exam Week

- Mar 26 – Review Session
- Mar 28 – Exam #2 (20%)

PART III: SKEPTICISM AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

Skepticism

- Apr 02 – The Regress Problem
- Apr 04 – Cartesian Skepticism (last day to drop the course with a 'W')
- Apr 09 – The Problem of Induction
- Apr 11 – The Problem of Disagreement

The Meaning of Life

- Apr 16 – The Myth of Sisyphus
- Apr 18 – Objective and Subjective Meaning
- Apr 23 – Meaning in Life
- Apr 25 – Absurdity and Irony - Assignment #3 is due (15%)

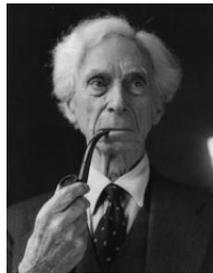
Final Exam Week

- May 05 – Review Session
- May 07 – Exam #3 (30%)

(Very) Selected Bibliography

1. David Armstrong (1968). *A Materialist Theory of the Mind*. Routledge.
2. A.J. Ayer (1936). *Language, Truth, and Logic*. Dover Publications
3. David Chalmers (1996). *The Conscious Mind: in Search of a Fundamental Theory*. Oxford University Press.
4. Patricia Churchland (2013). *Touching a Nerve: The Self as Brain*. W.W. Norton & Company.
5. René Descartes (1641). *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Hackett Publishing Company.
6. David Enoch (2011). *Taking Morality Seriously: A Defense of Robust Realism*. Oxford University Press.
7. John Martin Fischer, Robert Kane, Derk Pereboom, and Manuel Vargas (2007). *Four Views on Free Will*. Wiley-Blackwell.
8. Bryan Frances (2014). *Disagreement*. Polity Press.
9. David Hume (1748). *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Hackett Publishing Company.
10. Thomas Nagel (1979). *Mortal Questions*. Cambridge University Press.
11. John Perry (1978). *A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality*. Hackett Publishing Company.
12. Erik Wielenberg (2014). *Robust Ethics: The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism*. Oxford University Press.
13. Susan Wolf (2010). *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*. Princeton University Press.

Warning: You should be very careful with information acquired through the Internet. Be wary of simply searching for help on issues discussed in class. Most of the stuff that you will find originates from people who have less education than you, and it often ranges from poorly informed opinion to complete and utter nonsense. When you search the Internet, you *must* keep to reputable publications (but be critical even then!). For philosophical matters, here are two trustworthy online resources: the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/>) and the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/>). For all its other values, Wikipedia *is not* an adequate resource for serious academic work.



Bertrand Russell

“The value of philosophy is, in fact, to be sought largely in its very uncertainty. The man who has no tincture of philosophy goes through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of his age or his nation, and from convictions which have grown up in his mind without the cooperation or consent of his deliberate reason. To such a man the world tends to become definite, finite, obvious; common objects rouse no questions, and unfamiliar possibilities are contemptuously rejected. As soon as we begin to philosophize, on the contrary, we find... that even the most everyday things lead to problems to which only very incomplete answers can be given. Philosophy, though unable to tell us with certainty what is the true answer to the doubts which it raises, is able to suggest many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts and free them from the tyranny of custom. Thus, while diminishing our feeling of certainty as to what things are, it greatly increases our knowledge as to what they may be; it removes the somewhat arrogant dogmatism of those who have never travelled into the region of liberating doubt, and it keeps alive our sense of wonder by showing familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect.” (*The Value of Philosophy*, 1912)