

PHIL 020-14 Introduction to philosophy

Car Barn 315; M & W 1140 AM – 1255 PM

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W 1-3 PM; Th 9-10 AM; by appointment

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“The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term.” Or so claimed the philosopher Wilfrid Sellars in his 1962 paper, “Philosophy and the scientific image of man”. This seems a good place to start! But, as it turns out, trying to see how things hang together is no easy task. Since this is an introductory class, we’ll only have time to look at a few approaches to making sense of how things hang together. In this course, we will focus on two sorts of questions. First, we will ask what it means to say that something is a person; second, and in light of the answers that we find for this question, we will ask what this means for living a good life as a person. We will begin by looking to the answers that have been provided by great philosophers; and at the end of the semester, we will look at some more recent approaches to the mental lives of machines, animals, and cyborgs. In struggling to understand these different approaches to the study of minds like our own—both in class meetings and on the class blog—we will also attempt to find answers to these questions for ourselves, and to see how the world we experience hangs together (even if we can’t do so in the broadest possible sense of the term).

Course goals: By helping you to develop answers to hard philosophical questions, and by helping you to learn how to interpret the arguments that have been offered by others, I hope to introduce a set of important and unfamiliar issues in philosophy; but far more importantly, I hope to provide you with a set of tools and skills that will allow you to *do philosophy well*. In short, my goals are two-fold: to improve your abilities to understand and to critically analyze difficult arguments; and, to help you to develop and defend your own positions on these difficult philosophical issues.

Required texts: Tolstoy, *The death of Ivan Illyich and other stories*; Plato, *Republic*; Descartes, *Meditations on first philosophy*; Nietzsche, *On the genealogy of morality*; Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*; pdf files posted on the course blog.

Assignments and Grades: Your grade will be determined on the basis of class participation and your performance on two exams and two short papers. The assignments for this course are roughly as follows (more details will follow over the course of the semester):

Participation 30% The material that we will cover in this class is likely to be difficult and, in many cases, unfamiliar. Thus, close and careful reading of each text is expected and required. You should come to class prepared to discuss the material that you have understood, and prepared to tell me what you found unclear and what you did not understand.

In addition to the standard in-class discussion, you will also be required to post discussions on the course blog (<https://digitalcommons.georgetown.edu/blogs/phil-020-14-fall2009/>). Over the course of the semester, each student will be required to post two new discussions to the blog; each will be a brief (approx. 300 words) critical discussion of one of the readings; and each will be posted a minimum of 12 hours prior to the in-class discussion of that reading. You will be randomly assigned two days on which to make a new post. If there are readings for which you *do not* wish to post a new discussion, notify me of this by Friday, September 4. You will your date assignments by September 7. During those weeks during which you are not assigned to post a new discussion, you must comment on at least one other person's posting. You will not be graded on the content of your postings. However, if you fail to contribute to the blog in a way that demonstrates an engagement with the philosophical issues, you will be penalized on the participation component of your grade.

Note: I will not contribute to the blog. This is a space where you can discuss, and struggle with the issues together. However, I will read each of the posts and will use them to help structure the in-class discussions.

In-class exam October 5	10%	The first in-class exam will present a series of 3-5 short excerpts from the texts that we have read. Your task will be to explain the arguments that are being offered and then explain what the author is attempting to show with this argument.
Paper 1 November 2	15%	The first paper will build on the skills that you have developed in taking the first exam. You will be presented with 2-3 excerpts from the texts that we have read. You will explain the arguments offered in those texts, explain what the author is trying to show, and then raise a compelling objection to each argument.
In-class exam December 7	20%	The second in-class exam will build on the skills that you have developed in writing your first paper. You will read 1-2 excerpts from the texts that we have read, explain the arguments and the reason for the argument, raise a compelling objection, and then offer a plausible response showing either why the objection misses its target, or explaining how the argument would have to be modified to avoid the objection.
Final paper December 14	25%	In the final paper you will be presented with one of the philosophical questions that we have discussed over the course of the semester. Building on the skills that you have developed throughout the semester, you will now defend <i>a plausible philosophical position of your own</i> , raise one plausible objection to that position, and respond to that objection—either making it clear why this seemingly plausible objection misses its mark, or explaining how the initial view that you advance must be revised in light of the objection. This paper may seem scary at this point, but the goal of this course is to help you to develop the skills that will make this task both possible and relatively straightforward by the end of the semester.

Blind Grading: Your exams and papers will be submitted blind, with no identifying information other than your GUID#. If you include additional identifying information, your paper will not be graded. There is a wealth of psychological data suggesting that subtle, often implicit prejudices can influence the evaluation of a paper merely on the basis of a person's name. My hope, in adopting a blinded grading strategy, is to guarantee as far as possible that grading is carried out in a way that is fair and reasonable. Given that your name will never appear on your exams, this means that every exam will be graded on the basis of *the words that are on the page*, focusing on the clarity and accuracy of the presentation and the strength of the evidence that you present for the claims that you make.

Grading Criteria: The specific criteria for grading will be presented in detail when each assignment is distributed. However, *in general*, a paper or exam that exhibits a 1) clear articulation of the claims that are being defended, 2) is well organized, 3) relies on strong evidence and arguments in support of these claims, and 4) is stylistically clear—thereby presenting a clear and compelling argument—will receive a 'B' grade (a 'B-' will be weaker in one of these areas—but still satisfactory—and a 'B+' will excel in one of these areas). A 'C' grade will be awarded where a paper is weak in one or two of these categories; a 'D' grade will be awarded where a paper is weak in 3 or 4 categories or omits one altogether (e.g., by lacking a thesis or lacking arguments for the truth of that thesis). An 'A' grade is awarded only where a paper excels in each category, exhibiting a clear capacity for *doing philosophy*.

Appealing a grade: You are welcome to appeal any grade that you do not feel accurately represents the work that you have done. However, all appeals for re-evaluation must be made in writing, and must provide a compelling argument for raising the grade; and, all appeals must be made no more than two weeks after you get your paper back. We will do our best to return exams promptly; out of fairness, you will do your best to make any appeals for re-evaluation in a timely manner. Note, however, that the agreement to re-evaluate can result in three distinct outcomes: 1) raising the grade; 2) lowering the grade; or, 3) making no change to the grade. That is, a re-evaluation is no guarantee of a better grade and can even result in a lower grade if you do not offer a compelling case for raising your grade.

Late paper and make-up policy: The deadlines for turning in your papers are firm; as are the dates of the in-class exams. I will give make-up exams only where I am presented with evidence of illness or a family emergency *prior* to the exam. Late papers will automatically be penalized 1/3 of a grade (A- to a B+, B+ to a B, etc) for each day that they are late.

The writing center: The writing center provides one-on-one assistance at various stages of the writing process. All writers, even the most accomplished, can benefit from their assistance on issues as diverse as topic development, organization, and general strategies for revising. To make an appointment, see <http://writingcenter.georgetown.edu>.

Accommodations for students with differing abilities: If you are on record with the university as requiring special accommodations for the in-class exams, please stop by my office and let me know in confidence within the first two weeks of the semester. If you find, during the course of the semester, that special accommodations are required, please bring me the relevant documentation from the university as soon as you acquire it.

Use of external resources: To succeed in this course, you will need to learn how to read carefully and reason carefully, and you need to learn how to recover arguments from difficult texts. You will not have to read anything beyond what has been assigned in order to do well in this class. However, it is important to remember that the best way for developing many of these skills is through collaboration and discussion. Beyond trying to clarify your thoughts by thinking out-loud in class, and beyond the discussions that you will be having on the class blog, you may also want to get together in small groups to think through the issues that we have been discussing outside of class; alternatively, you might want to tweet about your philosophical thoughts or argue about the texts that you have been reading on Facebook. All of this is perfectly acceptable and likely to be helpful in understanding these difficult philosophical texts. People have very different styles of thinking and learning; and you should use whatever resources suit you best in order to develop the skills that you need for succeeding in this class.

Academic honesty: Keeping this in mind, when it comes time for you to write your tests (both in class and outside of class), you must use the skills that you have developed by thinking through the relevant issues on your own. You have all signed the Georgetown University Honor pledge and have agreed to be honest in your academic endeavors and to hold yourself to the high ideals and rigorous standards of academic life. I expect you to be familiar with both the letter and the spirit of the pledge, and I will enforce the Honor Code by reporting any and all suspected cases of academic dishonesty. The Honor Code applies to all of the relevant aspects of this course and it is the responsibility of every student in this class to inform herself or himself of the relevant principles and to abide by them throughout the semester. Of course, the key to avoiding any dire consequences is to think for yourself, and do your own work on the in-class and take-home exams.

Cell Phones and Computers: Be sure to turn off the ringers on your cell phones when you come to class; if you forget and it rings, turn it off immediately. You are welcome to use your computer for note taking and other purposes that are consistent with the tasks at hand in the course (e.g., looking up quotes from the reading); however, I would appreciate it if you would have the maturity to refrain from using your computer for non-academic purposes (e.g., playing games or checking your email) while in the class. Using your computer for non-academic purposes in the classroom can distract others and create an environment in which it is difficult for others to learn; so please respect one another.

Mind your manners: While philosophy is best done collectively and collaboratively, the questions that we will be discussing are also likely to generate contentious claims, spirited discussions, vehement disagreements, and trenchant criticisms—that is at least part of what doing philosophy is about. However, in discussing, disagreeing, criticizing, and arguing, we must also make an effort to remain courteous and respectful to one another. I promise to do my best to raise philosophical issues and to start philosophical discussions in ways that are as sensitive as possible to the variety of viewpoints and opinions that we are sure to find among the members of this class. But, I will only be able to do this if each of you helps me to create an atmosphere where we can develop ideas in a friendly and welcoming environment where we all learn from one another. Perhaps more importantly, if you want to disagree with someone, or if you want to offer a criticism of their viewpoint, be sure to offer reasons for the approach that you are suggesting. If we reason through things together, we are sure to have a good semester!

Tentative Course reading schedule:

Sept 2: What is philosophy and why should we care?
Sept 7: (Holiday/No class)

Death and the meaning of life:

Sept 9: Leo Tolstoy, *The death of Ivan Illyich*
Sept 14: Epicurus, "Letter to Menoeceus"
Thomas Nagel, "Death"

Human nature and the nature of the good life:

Sept 16: Plato, *Republic*, Book I
Sept 21: Plato, *Republic*, Book II (357-367c)
Sept 23: Plato, *Republic*, Book IV
Sept 28: Plato, *Republic*, Book VI-VII (504c-520d)
Sept 30: Plato, *Republic*, Book IX-X (580b-592b, 608d-621d)
Oct 5: **IN CLASS EXAM**

Culture, nature, and the banality of evil:

Oct 7: Film: Bresson, *The Pickpocket*
Oct 12: (Holiday/No Class)
Oct 14: Nietzsche, *On the genealogy of morality*: Preface and Book I
Oct 19: Nietzsche, *On the genealogy of morality*: Book I and II
Oct 21: Nietzsche, *On the genealogy of morality*: Book II and III
Oct 26: Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Chapters I-III)
Oct 28: Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Chapters V-VII, and 170-180)
Nov 2: Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Chapter XV, epilogue, and post-script)
Nov 4: **FIRST PAPER DUE**
Film: Kurosawa, *Rashomon*

Human knowledge and human uniqueness:

Nov 9: Descartes, *Meditations on first philosophy*: Mediation I
Nov 11: Descartes, *Meditations on first philosophy*: Mediation II
Nov 16: Descartes, *Meditations on first philosophy*: Mediation III
Nov 18: Descartes, *Meditations on first philosophy*: Mediation VI

Kinds of minds:

Nov 23: Alan Turing, "Computing machines and intelligence"
Nov 25: John Searle, "Minds, brains, and programs" (excerpts)
Nov 30: Marc Hauser, "The Mind"
Dec 2: Andy Clark "Natural born cyborgs"
Dec 7: **IN CLASS EXAM**
Dec 9: Daniel Dennett "Where am I?"
Reviewing, summing up, and asking questions

****FINAL PAPER DUE: December 14, 12:30 – 2:30 PM****