

Introduction to philosophy: The architecture of the public mind

Car Barn 315, M W 11h00 – 12h15

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WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

It has been said that 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” (Sellars, *Philosophy and the scientific image of man*). This way of approaching things is a good place to start! But, trying to see how things hang together is no easy task; and since this is an introductory class, we will only have time to look at a few of the many approaches that one could adopt in attempting to make sense of how things hang together. In this course, we will focus on two distinct but interrelated questions. Our first task will be to think about what the most fundamental and important features of a human being are; our second task will be to think about what our answer to this first question entails about living a good life and constructing a good society. We will begin by looking to some of the more well known answers to these questions that have been offered by great philosophers; but in the concluding sections of the course, we will turn to some more intriguing approaches to understanding socially and politically embedded beings like us and the role of revolution and political dissent in establishing a good society. In struggling to understand a variety of different approaches to the study of beings like us—both in our class meetings and as the conversation develops on the class blog—we will attempt to find answers to these questions that are satisfying to us, and we will attempt to see how the world that we have experienced hangs together (even if we can't do so in the broadest possible sense of the term).

COURSE GOALS:

My goal in this course is to help you to develop a set of analytic tools that will help you to find answers to hard theoretical questions, whether these questions arise in the context of a philosophy class or outside of this class in your broader engagements with the world. I hope to help you acquire these analytical tools by teaching you how to read, interpret, and critically assess the arguments that have been offered by others. In this class, I will introduce a set of important and (likely) unfamiliar issues in philosophy; but far more importantly, I hope to provide you with a set of skills that will allow you to do philosophy well. So, if you work hard, then by the end of the semester you will have improved upon your abilities to understand and to critically assess difficult arguments; and, you will have begun to develop and defend your own positions on these difficult philosophical issues.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

The death of Ivan Illyich; Republic; Meditations on first philosophy; On the genealogy of morality; and, additional pdf files that will be posted at the course website.

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADES:

Your course grade will consist of one diagnostic exam, three short papers (3-5pp), and class participation:

Quiz (10/5; 5%):

There will be an in-class quiz, which is intended merely as a diagnostic test. You will be presented with a series of 5 short quotations from the texts that we have read up until this point and your task will be to identify the author and context of the quote. For each quote, you will then be asked to explain what the author's is attempting to show in the quote.

Paper 1 (10/16; 15%):

In the first paper, you will be asked to apply some of the ideas that we have raised in discussing Tolstoy, Epicurus, or Plato to the moral psychology of the character Michel in Bresson's *The Pickpocket*. Further details about the precise requirements for this paper will be presented early in the semester; and you will be expected to watch the film prior to **10/12**.

Paper 2 (11/13; 20%):

In the second paper, you will be asked to apply some of the ideas that we have raised in discussing Descartes, Turing, and Searle in addressing the core themes that arise in Scott's *Bladerunner*. Further details about the precise requirements for this paper will be presented in mid October; and you will be expected to have watched the film prior to **11/7**.

Paper 3 (12/17; 30%):

In the final paper, you will be asked to apply some of the ideas that we have raised in discussing Nietzsche and the papers on revolution in addressing the core themes that arise in Pontecorvo's, *The Battle of Algiers*. Further details about the precise requirements for this paper will be presented in late early November; and you will be expected to have watched the film prior to **12/7**.

Participation (30%):

The material that we are going to cover in this class is difficult and likely to be unfamiliar. Thus, careful attention to each text will be expected and required. You should come to each class prepared to discuss the material that you have understood, and prepared to tell me what you have found unclear. In addition to in-class discussion, you will also be required to participate in discussions on the course blog:

<https://blogs.commonsgorgetown.edu/phil-020-12-fall2011/>

Over the course of the semester, every student will be required to post two new blog discussions; these posts should offer a brief critical remark on one of the readings for the upcoming class (approximately 300 words), and each must be posted a minimum of 18 hours prior to the class meeting in which we will discuss that reading. You will be randomly assigned two days on which to post a new discussion—if there are any readings for which you would prefer not to post a new discussion, please notify me that this is the case by **Friday, 9/1**. Random assignments will be sent out on **9/2**.

In addition to these new posts, you must also comment on at least one posting prior to every class meeting. 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 a genuine 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.

LATE PAPER AND MAKE-UP POLICY:

The deadlines for turning in your papers are firm, as is the date of the in-class exam. 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.

GRADING CRITERIA:

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 clear evidence and arguments in support of these claims, and 4) is stylistically clear—thereby presenting a clear and well structured 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.

USE OF EXTERNAL RESOURCES:

To succeed in this course, you will need to learn how to read and reason carefully; you will also need to learn how to recover arguments from difficult texts. For this task, you will not have to read anything beyond what has been assigned in order to do well in this class—indeed, seeking out sources of information on your own (e.g., Sparknotes and Wikipedia) can have deleterious effects on your performance. I can recommend further readings if you need them, but my interpretations of many of the texts that we read differ substantially from the interpretations that tend to be offered. That said, 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 with your friends on Facebook or Google+. 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.

ANONYMOUS GRADING:

Your exam and your papers will be submitted for anonymous grading, with no identifying information other than your GUID#. If you include additional identifying information, your work 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.

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 reevaluation 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.

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 exam and the papers.

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 possible.

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 nonacademic 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, some of 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:

I have assigned a large quantity of reading for this course. There is a chance that we will not get through all of it, and that is OK. If we find things that are of interest, or if we find things that we want to dwell on for a longer period of time, we will adjust the reading schedule to accommodate our interests. So, if we are moving too fast, please speak up and let me know! The three films that are required for this course will be placed on reserve at the Lauinger Library. I will organize a time when we can watch the film as a group outside of class if possible. However, if I cannot accommodate all of us, you will be responsible for watching the films on your own. I will provide further information about viewing times as it becomes available.

8/31	Introduction
9/5	Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday
9/7	Leo Tolstoy, The death of Ivan Illyich
9/12	Epicurus, "Letter to Menoeceus"
9/14	Thomas Nagel, "Death"
9/19	Plato, Republic Book I and Book II (357-376c)
9/21	<i>Continued</i>
9/26	Plato, Republic (412a5-445e; 504c-520d)
9/28	<i>Continued</i>
10/3	Plato, Republic (543-592b)
10/5	In-Class Exam
10/10	Mid-semester Holiday
10/12	Discussion: Robert Bresson, The Pickpocket
10/16	First paper due
10/17	Descartes, Meditation I
10/19	Descartes, Meditation II
10/24	Descartes, Meditation III
10/26	Descartes, Meditation VI
10/31	Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence"
11/2	Searle, "Minds, Brains, and Programs"
11/7	Discussion: Ridley Scott, Bladerunner
11/9	Nietzsche, On the genealogy of morality, Preface and First Treatise
11/13	Second Paper Due
11/14	Nietzsche, On the genealogy of morality, First and Second Treatises
11/16	<i>Continued</i>
11/21	Nietzsche, On the genealogy of morality, Second and Third Treatises
11/23	<i>Continued</i>
11/28	Thoreau, Civil Disobedience
11/30	Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail"
12/5	Malcolm X, "The black revolution"; "The ballot or the bullet"
12/7	Discussion: Gillo Pontecorvo, The Battle of Algiers
12/17	Final Paper is due