

Introduction to philosophy: The architecture of the public mind

ICC Auditorium

T & TH 9-9:50

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WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

“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*). As you will see over the course of the semester, trying to understand how things hang together is no easy task! Moreover, since we only have a short amount of time together, we can only begin to address the kinds of questions that can help us to see how *some things* hang together. Specifically, we will focus a set of distinct but related questions: “Is there a rational point of view from which we can challenge rhetoric and ideology?”; and, “What does the answer to this question tell us about living a good life and building a good society?”. We will examine the answers that three famous philosophers (i.e., Plato; Descartes; Nietzsche) offered to these questions; and we will examine the ways in which these questions are crystalized when socially and politically embedded beings engage in revolutionary action and political dissent aimed at constructing a better society. In struggling to understand what it means to be a person, we will search for our own answers to these questions, and hopefully begin to see how some parts of the world that we experience hang together.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Plato, *Gorgias*

Descartes, *Meditations on first philosophy*

Nietzsche, *On the genealogy of morality*.

Additional PDF (uploaded to BlackBoard)

COURSE GOALS:

Our primary 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 they arise in the context of a philosophy class or in your broader engagements with the world. By the end of this class, we hope that you will have learned to read more carefully, to interpret difficult arguments, and to critically assess the claims that are made by other people. In the lectures on Monday and Wednesday, we will focus on important and (likely) unfamiliar issues in philosophy; in discussion sections, we will help you to develop the kinds of skills that will allow you to *do philosophy*. If you work hard, then by the end of the semester you will have improved your ability to understand and critically assess difficult arguments; and, you will have begun to develop and defend your own positions on difficult philosophical issues.

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADES:

Your course grade will consist of three short papers (max = one page, single-spaced, 11 point Arial font), a slightly longer final paper (max = 2½ pages, single-spaced, 11 point Arial font), and participation in discussion sections:

Three short papers (15% / 15% / 15%):

Over the course of the semester, you will have five chances to write a short expository paper (14 Feb; 28 Feb; 20 March; 3 April; 24 April). Each assignment will require you to explicate an argument that is developed by one (or more) of the philosophers whose work we will examine. In these papers, your goal is to present the author(s) argument in a manner that is as accurate, clear, and concise as possible. Since we will be reading incredibly difficult material in this class, and since you are all busy, we have decided to offer you some latitude in the paper topics upon which you chose to write. That is, you will not write on every paper topic, but will write **only three** out of the five possible papers.

Final paper (25%)

Your final paper will be a revision and extension of one of your three short papers. In this paper, your task will be to begin to do some philosophy. This will require: 1) explaining an argument that is developed by one (or more) of the philosophers whose work we have examined; 2) offering the most plausible objection that you can to this argument; and 3) explaining how the philosopher in question would respond to your argument.

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. There will always be some opportunity for you to ask pressing and important questions in the large lecture sessions on Tuesday and Thursday. But, you should be sure to attend discussion sections every week, prepared to discuss the material that you have understood, and prepared to tell your Teaching Assistant what you have found unclear in the readings and lectures.

LATE PAPER AND MAKE-UP POLICY:

The deadlines for turning in your papers are firm. Given that you have some latitude in deciding which papers you will choose to write, no extension will be given unless you have a documented excuse (NB: this is a good reason for **not** waiting to write only the last three papers). 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:

In general, a paper 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 will only be awarded 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. However, you will not need 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 given that these sources do not always offer a reliable reconstruction of the arguments that we will address. We can recommend further readings if you need them, but the interpretations of many of the texts that we read will differ substantially from the standard interpretations that you will find in the secondary literature. 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 discussion sections, and beyond asking questions in class, 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.

ACADEMIC HONESTY:

Keeping this in mind, when it comes time for you to write your papers, 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. We expect you to be familiar with both the letter and the spirit of the pledge, and we 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.

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. Our hope, in adopting an anonymous 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; appeals must be made no more than two weeks after your paper is returned. We will do our best to return papers promptly; out of fairness, you will do your best to make any appeals for reevaluation in a timely manner. NB: 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.

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, we ask that you 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. We promise to do our 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, we will only be able to do this if each of you helps to create an atmosphere where we can all develop our 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:

There is a large quantity of reading for this course, and we may not get through all of it. If we don't, that is OK. We may find things that are of interest, or things that we want to dwell on; if so, we will adjust the reading schedule to accommodate our interests. So, if we are moving too fast, please speak up and let us know! The three films required for this course will be placed on reserve at the Lauinger Library.

Week	Topic	Assigned reading
Jan 12		No reading: Introduction
Jan 17-19	Rhetoric & Propaganda	Orwell , "Politics and the English Language"; Plato , <i>Gorgias</i> (447a-461b)
Jan 24-26	Complacency & Freedom	Plato , <i>Gorgias</i> (461b-481b); Baldwin "Sonny's Blues"
Jan 31- Feb 2	Power vs. Reason	Plato , <i>Gorgias</i> (481b-506bc); LeGuin , "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas"
		Watch: <i>Pickpocket</i>
Feb 7-9	Knowledge & Reason	Plato , <i>Gorgias</i> (506b-527e); Plato , <i>Republic</i> (Excerpts)
Feb 14-16	Science & Psychology	Descartes , <i>Meditations on first philosophy</i> (Meditations 1 and 2)
Feb 21-23	Representing the world	Descartes , <i>Meditations on first philosophy</i> (Meditations 3 and 4)
Feb 28- March 1	The structure of the world?	Descartes , <i>Meditations on first philosophy</i> (Meditations 5 and 6)
Over Spring Break watch: <i>Ghost in the shell</i>		
March 13-15	Rationality & Language	Descartes , Meditation 6 (cont'd); On animal minds Turing , "Computing machinery and intelligence"
March 20-22	Ethics, Morality, & Power	Nietzsche , <i>On the genealogy of morality</i> (Preface and First Treatise)
March 27-29	Guilt & Sad Passions	Nietzsche , <i>On the genealogy of morality</i> (Second Treatise)
April 3	Living Like a Philosopher?	Nietzsche , <i>On the genealogy of morality</i> (Third Treatise)
Over Easter Break watch <i>D9</i> or <i>Battle for Algiers</i>		
April 10-12	Society & Government	Thoreau , "Civil Disobedience" Goldman , "Anarchism: What it really stands for"
April 17-19	The Power of Nonviolence	King , "Letter from Birmingham Jail" Lynd , "Nonviolence as solidarity"
April 24-26	Building a Better World	Malcolm X , "Black Revolution"; "The Ballot or the Bullet" Carmichael , "The Basis of Black Power"
May 8		Final Paper Due