

INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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Office Hours:
LBR 1309
MWF 12:00-1:00
or by appointment

Course Description

This is a philosophy course which means we'll be looking at some abstract concepts —like “knowledge” and “rights”—with the goal of getting a clearer understanding of what they mean, how they are possible, and how they are related to each other. We'll be asking lots of questions that you've probably already thought about: questions like “Do we ever *really* know anything?” “Where do rights and duties come from?” and “What really gives my life meaning?” People have been asking these kinds of questions for centuries and philosophers in particular have tried to work out good answers.

Doing philosophy is like taking the back off a clock and seeing how all the parts fit—except that we're dealing with concepts and ideas and not gears and springs. If we can see how our concepts mesh together, then our thinking should be clearer and run more smoothly. For example, if you believe in god then that probably affects your ethical views, and if you believe reality is 100% physical then that probably affects how you think about mathematics and human rights. Our beliefs about science, ethics, art, mathematics, and religion, etc., are all connected. Philosophy studies these connections and helps us weed out inconsistencies and contradictions.

This course takes the long view, so we'll be looking at the last 400 years or so, from René Descartes and David Hume to some 21st century philosophers. Today we live in a culture that's been shaped by philosophy. Ideas that now seem obviously true actually had to be hammered out over time, so it's good to know where these ideas came from and how they got to seem so obvious. But this isn't a history course and we're not interested in just figuring out what Descartes or Hume once thought. We also want to *do* philosophy and that means picking up the conversation, figuring out why some pretty smart people said what they did, and then trying to do better.

Sometimes people are put off by the idea of taking a philosophy class, maybe because almost no one takes a philosophy class in high school. That can make philosophy look a little strange and it's natural to have some questions about what philosophy is and why it's worth doing. My view is that people are doing philosophy whenever they think hard about important issues, so philosophy is something you're probably already doing. A philosophy class gives us the tools—the specialized vocabulary, the historical context, the big picture—that help us do a better job of thinking these important issues through. No matter what, you just can't help doing philosophy.

Finally, it's become pretty common to hear people defend philosophy (and the liberal arts in general) by pointing to its practical benefits. Maybe studying philosophy does make us better citizens, or more thoughtful designers, or more reflective scientists, or just better at standardized tests. (It's true that philosophy majors do extremely well on the GRE, LSAT, etc.) There's probably some truth to all that and if that becomes your experience, then that would be wonderful of course. But others think there's more to it than that. They think philosophy is good because it makes us better people, and it makes us better people because it exercises abilities that no other animals have—like the ability to give reasons for what we do. That's a practical benefit, sure, but on a different scale than acing the GMATs. And others people think there's less to it than that: that philosophy is good because it raises some puzzles that are just intrinsically interesting. There may be no big practical benefit from studying philosophy, but it's fun and challenging, and there are certainly worse ways of spending our time.

Texts

Here are the books we'll be reading. They are all available at the campus Barnes & Noble. All other course readings are in a single .pdf that you can download from myCourses. *Please be sure to print this .pdf.* You can print for free at many ITS computer labs.

René Descartes: *Meditations on First Philosophy**

David Hume: *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding**

Derrick Darby: *Rights, Race, and Recognition*

Susan Wolf: *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*

*Any edition of these books will be fine, but I prefer the ones published by Hackett. If you buy the Hackett edition then we'll literally all be on the same page.

Expectations

Discussion-Oriented

1. Philosophy is a group activity that depends on conversation and discussion. Discussion is the only way to make sure that we're covering all our bases and considering all the options. There is no way to do this entirely on your own. In order for this class to function well I need to be confident that everyone's doing the reading: no free-riders. I *don't* expect everyone to have understood the reading; that's what class and our discussions are for. But I do expect everyone to make a good faith effort to do the reading, get at least some idea of what it's about, and have a couple questions or interesting thoughts to raise. I expect regular attendance. I will do everything I can so that everyone can participate in our discussions. Attendance and participation are worth 10% of the final grade.

2. There will be periodic short quizzes, usually true/false, usually not too tricky if you've been doing the reading. These are worth 25% of the final grade. I don't give make-ups on the quizzes but I do drop the lowest one.

Assignments

3. There will be two short writing assignments that will take the form of "argument outlines." Later I'll explain in mind-numbing detail what these are. For now, here's the gist: an argument outline is a page of highly condensed arguments in support of a position you choose to defend. In an argument outline you make your case, consider objections, and offer responses. Argument outlines encourage you to focus on quality, not quantity. Together these two argument outlines will be 40% of your final grade.

4. There will be a final exam. The final exam will cover basic knowledge of the philosophers we read—most likely through a combination of short answer and short essay style questions. I'll have a lot more to say about this later and we'll set aside class time for review, if necessary. The final is worth 20% of the final grade.

Talk Write-Up

5. One of the luxuries of being at a university is that there are lots of chances to hear interesting people talk about interesting things. Maybe surprisingly, they're often talking about philosophical topics and, since philosophy doesn't just happen in classrooms, I'm asking everyone to attend a talk this semester on a philosophical topic, broadly understood. This might be a talk sponsored by the Hale Chair in Applied Ethics, by the Philosophy Department, or it could be a talk sponsored by another department or group on campus. There is no shortage of opportunities and I'll announce talks as I hear about them. (If you have a question about whether an event is serious and philosophical enough, ask me and I'll let you know.) After you go to the talk I'm asking for a *one page* write-up (or, to use a fancier word, a "précis") where you do three things: 1) identify the speaker's thesis or main point, 2) summarize the speaker's argument in support of that thesis, and 3) offer your assessment of this argument: did the speaker provide enough evidence? did the speaker consider relevant counter-examples? did the speaker respond well to questions? (Be sure to give reasons—not just assertions—in support of your own assessment.) This write-up will be due within *one* week of the talk and is worth 5% of your final grade.

6. I hate belaboring the obvious, but it's just extremely important that you proof-read anything and everything you hand in. Grammatical and typographical errors are more than annoyances: they can indicate a sloppy nonchalance that makes it hard to take your work seriously.

7. More belaboring the obvious: bring the day's reading to class. Frequently I'll be drawing our attention to specific passages so, unless you have a truly amazing photographic memory, you must have the text in front of you.

8. Because I think philosophy is really wonderful and important I'm always happy to talk about the course. Feel free to drop by my office hours or speak to me after class. I've found it's usually a lot more efficient to talk in person than over e-mail.

9. Feel free to ask if you have a question about your grade. While I expect you can keep track of this, too, I'm happy to tell you where you stand if you have any concerns. I generally avoid myCourses in the conviction that we don't need another barrier to direct forms of communication. I'm usually pretty good about responding quickly to e-mails.

10. For this class I am enforcing a *no electronics* policy. Evidence shows that laptops (etc.) distract and hurt the grades of people nearby; it also shows that taking notes on a laptop is not as effective as pen and paper.¹ For these reasons, I will ask anyone using an electronic device to leave. (Let me know if you need an accommodation.)

¹ Carrie Fried 2008. "In-Class Laptop Use and Its Effects on Student Learning." *Computers & Education* 50: 906–914.
Arnold L. Glass & Mengxue Kang. 2018. "Dividing attention in the classroom reduces exam performance." *Educational Psychology*, DOI: 10.1080/01443410.2018.1489046
Pam Mueller and Daniel Oppenheimer. 2014 "The Pen Is Mightier Than the Keyboard: Advantages of Longhand over Laptop Note Taking," *Psychological Science* 25: 1159-1168.
Susan Payne Carter, Kyle Greenberg, and Michael Walker. 2016. "The Impact of Computer Usage on Academic Performance: Evidence from a Randomized Trial at the United States Military Academy." *School Effectiveness and Inequality Initiative Working Paper* 2016.02

Readings and Assignments

08.27.18	Introductory Remarks
08.29.18	Mary Midgley: "Trying Out One's New Sword"
08.31.18	Descartes: <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i> Meditation One
09.05.18	Descartes: <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i> Meditations Two and Three
09.07.18	Descartes: <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i> Meditation Four
09.10.18	Descartes: <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i> Meditation Five
09.12.18	James Rachels: "The Challenge of Cultural Relativism"
09.14.18	Russ Shafer-Landau: "Where Do Moral Standards Come From?"

Please note: a particular day's reading should be done *before* class.

- 09.17.18 Russ Shafer-Landau: "Values in a Scientific World"
- 09.19.18 Hume: *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* Sections I-II
- 09.21.18 Hume: *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* Sections III-IV
- 09.24.18 Hume: *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* Section V
- 09.26.18 Hume: *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* Section XII
- 09.28.18 Catherine Elgin: "The Relativity of Fact and the Objectivity of Value"
- Argument Outline #1 Due**
- 10.01.18 William James: *Pragmatism* Lecture I
- 10.03.18 James: *Pragmatism* Lecture II
- 10.05.18 Wittgenstein: *On Certainty* (selections) §1-192
- 10.10.18 Wittgenstein: *On Certainty* (selections) §204-612
- 10.12.18 J.J. Thomson: "A Defense of Abortion" §1-3
- 10.15.18 **J.J. Thomson: "A Defense of Abortion" §4-5**
- 10.17.18 J.J. Thomson: "A Defense of Abortion" §6-8
- 10.19.18 Derek Darby: *Rights, Race, and Recognition* pp. 1-15
- 10.22.18 **Derek Darby: Rights, Race, and Recognition pp. 15-37**
- 10.24.18 Derek Darby: *Rights, Race, and Recognition* pp. 38-52
- 10.26.18 Derek Darby: *Rights, Race, and Recognition* pp. 52-61, 68-73
- 10.29.18 **J.J. Thomson: "The Trolley Problem" §I-III**
- 10.31.18 J.J. Thomson: "The Trolley Problem" §IV-VI
- 11.02.18 J.J. Thomson: "The Trolley Problem" §VII-X
- 11.05.18 **Derek Darby: Rights, Race, and Recognition pp. 74-90**
- 11.07.18 Derek Darby: *Rights, Race, and Recognition* pp. 90-92, 98-108
- 11.09.18 Derek Darby: *Rights, Race, and Recognition* pp. 109-126
- Argument Outline #2 Due**
- 11.12.18 **Sally Haslanger: "A Social Constructionist Analysis of Race"**
- 11.14.18 Derek Darby: *Rights, Race, and Recognition* pp. 126-141
- 11.16.18 Derek Darby: *Rights, Race, and Recognition* pp. 142-163
- 11.19.18 **Derek Darby: Rights, Race, and Recognition pp. 163-178**
- 11.26.18 Susan Wolf: *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* pp. 1-25
- 11.28.18 Susan Wolf: *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* pp. 25-48
- 11.30.18 Susan Wolf: *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* pp. 48-63
- 12.03.18 Susan Wolf: *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* pp. 85-101
- 12.05.18 Susan Wolf: *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* pp. 102-3, 115-132
- 12.07.18 Rebecca Goldstein: "How Philosophy Makes Progress"

12.10.18 Review for Final Exam

TBA **Final Exam**
