

INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY

FALL SEMESTER 2023-2024
ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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Office Hours: MWF 12:00-1:00 @ LBR 1309

Course Description

This is a philosophy course which means we'll be looking at some abstract concepts—like “knowledge” and “truth”—with the goal of getting a clearer understanding of what they mean, how they are possible, why they matter, 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?” “How do we prevent false beliefs?” and “Are there objective ethical facts?” People have been asking these kinds of questions for a long time and it's the job of philosophers to work out ways of answering them.

Doing philosophy is like taking the back off a clock and seeing how all the parts fit— the difference is 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 a 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 (neither of which is physical). 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.

Philosophy has a long history so we'll be looking at historical figures (Plato, Descartes, Hume) even though our focus is mostly on contemporary issues and problems. So, first, 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, second, this isn't a history course and we're not interested in only learning what long-dead philosophers 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.

In the past I've seen some people get put off by the idea of taking a philosophy class. This is probably because almost no one takes philosophy in high school. That can make philosophy seem a little unfamiliar and it's natural to have some questions about what philosophy is and why it's worth doing. My view is that we are doing philosophy whenever we think hard about important issues, so philosophy is something you're already doing. A philosophy class just gives us the tools—the specialized vocabulary, the historical context, the experience of examining our beliefs and discussing with others—so we can do a better job of thinking these issues through. You can't avoid doing philosophy. The goal of this class is to help you do it better.

Finally, it's 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 I'd be pleased if that's your experience. But there's also the argument that philosophy is more than just practically useful: here the idea is that philosophy is good because it makes us better humans and it makes us better humans because it exercises abilities that no other animals have—like the ability to be reflective and give reasons for what we do. That's a practical benefit on an entirely different scale than acing the GMATs. And finally there's the argument that philosophy has little or no practical value: really it's just a game or a bunch of puzzles that are fun to think about and a good way to get your daily mental exercise. I'm OK with that too. The bottom line is that philosophy has lots of benefits and you might find it handy, depending on the topic and your interests, to keep all of these possibilities in mind.

Texts

Here are the books we'll be reading: you'll need to buy these wherever books are sold. All other course readings are on myCourses.

René Descartes: *Meditations on First Philosophy**

David Hume: *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding**

Elizabeth Anderson: *Private Government*

*Any edition of these books will be fine, but I prefer the inexpensive editions 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 understand 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.

For the most part I plan to talk/lecture for 10-15 minutes at the start of each class. After that I will open the class up for questions, comments, conversation, and discussion.

Attendance and participation are worth 15% of the final grade.

Quizzes

2. There will be periodic—about 1 per week—short quizzes on myCourses. Keep your eyes open for e-mail announcements when a quiz has been posted. These quizzes will generally be designed to guide you through a day's reading and will be due before class on the day that a reading is assigned. These quizzes are worth 35% of the final grade. I don't give make-ups on the quizzes but I do drop the lowest one.

Writing Assignments/ Argument Outlines

3. There will be three short writing assignments that take the form of "argument outlines." Later I'll explain in mind-numbing detail what an argument outline is. 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, related to the work we do here. 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 three argument outlines will be worth 50% of your final grade.

General Policies and Additional Information

4. 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 come across as sloppy or disrespectful and that makes it hard to take your work seriously. You don't want that.

5. More belaboring the obvious: make sure the day's reading is accessible during class. Frequently I'll be drawing our attention to specific passages so you need to have the text in front of you. In addition, research shows that those who read from paper have higher comprehension, and are less likely to be over-confident, than those who read from screens.¹ I figure we're spending a lot of our lives on screens these days, so it's not a bad idea to take a break, unplug, and read something on paper, if possible.

¹ Clinton, V. 2019. Reading from paper compared to screens: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 42: 288– 325. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9817.12269>.

6. Because I think philosophy is really wonderful and important I'm always happy to talk about the course. Please e-mail me if you have any questions or would like to set up a meeting. I'm also usually available right after class.

7. 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'm pretty good about responding to e-mails. Because I can see everyone's grades I have a better sense if grades need to be curved or adjusted, and I can give you a better sense of where you stand in relation to the entire class. Keep in mind that myCourses doesn't necessarily give you an accurate snapshot of your grade because it sometimes calculates in strange and disturbing ways.

8. I cannot over-stress the importance of communication. If you have any questions please reach out to me. Likewise if you need to miss class or are having trouble with the assignments: reach out. My experience is that issues can be addressed easily if they get addressed early, but they can't be addressed at all if I don't know about them. In general it's a good idea to keep the lines of communication open.

9. For this class I am enforcing a no electronics policy. Evidence shows that laptops and phones (etc.) distract and hurt the grades of people nearby; evidence also shows that taking notes on a laptop is not as effective as pen and paper.² For these reasons, I will ask anyone using an electronic device to leave. (Let me know if you have an accommodation.)

² Carter, S.P., Greenberg, K., & Walker, M. 2017. The impact of computer usage on academic performance: Evidence from a randomized trial at the United States Military Academy. *Economics of Education Review* 56: 118-132. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2016.12.005>

Fried, C. 2008. In-class laptop use and its effects on student learning. *Computers & Education* 50: 906-914.

Glass, A.L. & Kang, M. 2019. Dividing attention in the classroom reduces exam performance. *Educational Psychology* 39: 395-408, DOI: 10.1080/01443410.2018.1489046

Mueller, P. and Oppenheimer, D. 2014. The pen is mightier than the keyboard: Advantages of longhand over laptop note taking. *Psychological Science* 25: 1159-1168.

Readings and Assignments

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

- 08.28.23 Introductory Remarks
08.30.23 Mark Edmundson: "Who Are You and What Are You Doing Here?"
09.01.23 Richard Rorty: "Education as Socialization and as Individualization"
- 09.04.23 **Labor Day—No Class**
09.06.23 Martha Nussbaum: "Education for Profit, Education for Democracy"
09.08.23 Elizabeth Anderson: "Fair Opportunity in Education: A Democratic Equality Perspective" pp. 595-614
- 09.11.23 Elizabeth Anderson: "Fair Opportunity in Education: A Democratic Equality Perspective" pp. 606-622
09.13.23 John Capps: "Truth and the Goldilocks Principle"
09.15.23 Cheryl Misak: "A Culture of Justification: The Pragmatist's Epistemic Argument for Democracy"
- 09.18.23 Derrick Darby & Nyla Branscombe: "Egalitarianism and Perceptions of Inequality"
09.20.23 G.A. Cohen: "Complete Bullshit"
09.22.23 Plato: Euthyphro
- 09.25.23 Mary Midgley: "Trying Out One's New Sword"
09.27.23 Catherine Elgin: "The Relativity of Fact and the Objectivity of Value"
09.29.23 James Rachels: "The Challenge of Cultural Relativism"
+ Writing Assignment #1 Due
- 10.02.23 Russ Shafer-Landau: "Where Do Moral Standards Come From?"
10.04.23 Russ Shafer-Landau: "Values in a Scientific World"
10.06.23 Justin Clarke-Doane: "Moral Epistemology: The Mathematics Analogy" pp. 238-246
- 10.09.23 **Fall Break — No Class**
10.11.23 Justin Clarke-Doane: "Moral Epistemology: The Mathematics Analogy" pp. 246-255.
10.13.23 William James: *Pragmatism* Lecture I
- 10.16.23 William James: Pragmatism Lecture II
10.18.23 Descartes: *Meditations on First Philosophy* Meditations One and Two
10.20.23 Descartes: *Meditations on First Philosophy* Meditations Three and Four
- 10.23.23 Descartes: *Meditations on First Philosophy* Meditations Four and Five

- 10.25.23 Descartes: *Meditations on First Philosophy* Meditations Five and Six
10.27.23 J.J. Thomson: "A Defense of Abortion" §1-3
- 10.30.23 J.J. Thomson: "A Defense of Abortion" §4-5
11.01.23 J.J. Thomson: "A Defense of Abortion" §6-8
11.03.23 Hume: *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* Sections III
+ Writing Assignment #2 Due
- 11.06.23 Hume: *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* Sections III-IV
11.08.23 Hume: *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* Section V
11.10.23 Wittgenstein: *On Certainty* (selections) §1-192
- 11.13.23 Wittgenstein: *On Certainty* (selections) §204-612
11.15.23 Gail Stine: "Skepticism, Relevant Alternatives, and Deductive Closure"
11.17.23 Elizabeth Anderson: *Private Government* Chapter 1
- 11.20.23 Elizabeth Anderson: *Private Government* Chapter 2
11.22.23 **No Class — Thanksgiving**
11.24.23 **No Class — Thanksgiving**
- 11.27.23 Elizabeth Anderson: *Private Government* Chapters 3 & 4
11.29.23 Elizabeth Anderson: *Private Government* Chapters 5 & 6
12.01.23 Elizabeth Anderson: *Private Government* Chapter 7
- 12.04.23 L.A. Paul "What You Can't Expect When You're Expecting" pp. 149-157
12.06.23 L.A. Paul "What You Can't Expect When You're Expecting" pp. 157-170
12.08.23 John Capps: "Even Worse Than it Seems: Transformative Experience and the Selection Problem"
- 12.11.23 Mary Midgley: "Philosophical Plumbing" + Concluding Remarks
- 12.19.23 **Writing Assignment #3 Due @ 10:30 AM**