

# Intro to the Problems of Philosophy

## PHIL 2101 SYLLABUS

Prof:	Bryant	Semester:	Spring 2015
Email:	abryant@gc.cuny.edu	Room:	4141 B
Sect:	MWEB	Time:	MW 11AM-12:15PM
Code:	18119	Credits:	3.0

Office Hours: MW by appointment

Office: 3316 B

Philosophy is the art of reasoning and argument, the goal of which is to help us understand the world and our place in it. It challenges us to articulate and justify our beliefs in the clearest, most rigorous manner possible.

“The value of philosophy is, in fact, to be sought largely in its very uncertainty. The man who has no tincture of philosophy goes through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of his age or his nation, and from convictions which have grown up in his mind without the co-operation or consent of his deliberate reason. To such a man the world tends to become definite, finite, obvious; common objects rouse no questions, and unfamiliar possibilities are contemptuously rejected. As soon as we begin to philosophize, on the contrary, we find... that even the most everyday things lead to problems to which only very incomplete answers can be given. Philosophy, though unable to tell us with certainty what is the true answer to the doubts which it raises, is able to suggest many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts and free them from the tyranny of custom. Thus, while diminishing our feeling of certainty as to what things are, it greatly increases our knowledge as to what they may be; it removes the somewhat arrogant dogmatism of those who have never travelled into the region of liberating doubt, and it keeps alive our sense of wonder by showing familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect.” (Bertrand Russell, Problems of Philosophy, Ch XV)

We will be looking at how philosophers have responded to the following questions:

- What is knowledge? What can I know?
- Can it be rational to believe in God?
- How should I live?

## Learning Objectives (from the Philosophy Department)

- 1) Students will improve critical thinking by developing skills of explaining, critically examining, and responding to philosophical theories, issues, and claims in the philosophical areas of epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics.
- 2) Students will improve writing skills by explaining, exploring, and critically examining philosophical theories, issues, concepts, and arguments relating to the philosophical areas of epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics clearly in writing.
- 3) Students will improve communication skills by explaining orally philosophical theories, issues, claims, concepts, and arguments relating to the philosophical areas of epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics.
- 4) Students will improve skills of interpreting and evaluating philosophical writings.
- 5) Students will develop an openness to having their beliefs challenged, will learn to hear and comprehend the views of others, and to entertain objections to their own views.
- 6) Students will be able to explain several classic ethical theories, to compare and contrast ethical theories, and to apply these to justify conclusions relating to concrete moral issues.
- 7) Students will acquire a familiarity with and an understanding of some classic and contemporary philosophical literature and some fundamental philosophical issues, and will be able to explain important contributions to the history of philosophy and their relation to present viewpoints.
- 8) Students will be able to explain several classic epistemological theories, and to compare and contrast theories of what knowledge is and how it is acquired.
- 9) Students will be able to show that issues may be regarded from multiple viewpoints, and will be able to present reasons in support of each viewpoint.
- 10) Students will improve reasoning skills and ethical decision making skills by acquiring an understanding of ethical theories and philosophical concepts that will enable them to develop their own opinions on conceptions and practices of moral interaction and democracy.
- 11) Students will develop a conceptual foundation for future learning by exploring philosophical theories and arguments and will acquire related critical thinking and communication skills.

## Required Text

All readings will be available on Blackboard.

## Course Requirements

*Participation:* You are expected to attend class regularly and contribute to discussion. Repeated, unexcused absences and latenesses will affect your grade negatively. I will also expect you to participate in online discussions via Blackboard — I will make clear my specific expectations about this at the beginning of term.

*Short papers:* You will write two short papers, 2-4 pages in length, **due on or before 11:59pm MAR 04 and APR 29**. Topics will be distributed roughly two weeks in advance of the due dates. These papers are not subject to revision, but you may submit a draft.

*Midterm exam:* There will be an in-class midterm exam on **MAR 23**.

*Final exam:* This exam will be cumulative. It will be held **MAY 22 from 1-3pm**, location TBD.

## Grading

Participation:	15%
1st short paper:	15%
2nd short paper:	20%
Midterm exam:	20%
Final exam:	30%

### Note:

- There will be no extra credit given (so take the requirements seriously!)
- Final grades will be curved

## Letter Grades

A+	90-100%	B+	77-79%	C+	67-69%	D+	57-59%	F	0-49%
A	85-89%	B	74-76%	C	64-66%	D	54-56%		
A-	80-84%	B-	70-73%	C-	60-63%	D-	50-53%		

## My Policies

### Classroom Behavior

- Be respectful: we may discuss topics that are controversial, about which some people hold strong opinions. We should be critical of the views of others, but never malicious or belligerent. This should be an environment in which we may all feel comfortable contributing to discussion
- Give your attention to whomever has the floor (this involves not having side-conversations, not texting, not Facebooking, and so on)
- Please arrive in a timely manner. If you must be late, try to enter the classroom in the least distracting manner possible
- Please do not bring food to class if it will be distracting to others
- Cell phones, laptops, and other noise-making devices should be silenced

### Blackboard

In this class we will be using an online Learning Management Tool (LMT) called Blackboard. You are enrolled automatically when you register for the class. Much course content — such as course announcements, assignment-related materials, and readings will be posted here, so it is imperative that you learn how to use it. Please talk to me immediately if you are having any trouble using this tool.

## **Attendance**

I will take attendance promptly at the beginning of each class. If you arrive before or during the taking of attendance, you will be marked present. If you arrive after attendance is taken, let me know at the end of class to mark you late rather than absent. Repeated, unexcused absences and latenesses will affect your grade negatively.

If you must miss class, please let me know beforehand. In order to excuse your absence, you must present me with appropriate documentation that demonstrates your reason for missing class.

You must be present for all exams. Make-up exams will only be given to students with sufficiently-documented extenuating circumstances.

## **24-Hour Rule**

When an assignment or exam is returned to you, I will not discuss your grade with you until a period of at least 24 hours has passed. Do not contact me about your grade (by email or in person) until after that point. This is for my benefit and for yours.

## **Email**

If you choose to email me, please do so in a judicious manner. Consult the syllabus and/or essay assignment first. Often it is better to discuss your questions with me in person by appointment, rather than by email. Be advised that I do not discuss grades via email. If you wish to discuss a grade, you must make an appointment with me.

## **Academic Dishonesty**

Never take someone's words or ideas and try to pass them off as your own. Give credit where credit is due. If you get certain words or ideas from some particular source, tell me what that source is. If you are having trouble completing an assignment or studying for an exam, be sure to come see me as soon as possible, and I will do my best to help you.

Academic dishonesty need not be malicious — it can be completely unintentional. Make sure that you cite your sources thoroughly, whether you are quoting somebody or simply paraphrasing an idea of theirs.

I will report all cases of academic dishonesty to the head of my department and to the college's Academic Integrity Officer.

## **Late Assignments**

Unless you have some well-documented excuse and my prior permission, late assignments will be subject to the following penalty:

2% deducted on the first day of lateness (i.e. if the paper is submitted after the first five minutes of class-time on the due date), 5% additional deduction for each subsequent day of lateness (including weekends). *These penalties add up fast.* I will not accept assignments that are more than one week late. If you fail to hand in an assignment within one week of the deadline, your grade for that assignment will be 0.

## **Brooklyn College Policies**

### **Plagiarism**

The faculty and administration of Brooklyn College support an environment free from cheating and plagiarism. Each student is responsible for being aware of what constitutes cheating and plagiarism and for avoiding both. The complete text of the CUNY Academic Integrity Policy and the Brooklyn College procedure for implementing that policy can be found at this site: <http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/bc/policies>. If a faculty member suspects a violation of academic integrity and, upon investigation, confirms that violation, or if the student admits the violation, the faculty member **MUST** report the violation.

### **Religious Holidays**

Please note page 49 in the Bulletin and its reference to the state law regarding non-attendance because of religious beliefs.

### **Disability Services**

In order to receive disability-related academic accommodations students must first be registered with the Center for Student Disability Services. Students who have a documented disability or suspect they may have a disability are invited to set up an appointment with the Director of the Center for Student Disability Services, Ms. Valerie Stewart-Lovell at 718-951-5538. If you have already registered with the Center for Student Disability Services please provide your professor with the course accommodation form and discuss your specific accommodation with him/her.

Lastly: all students should read carefully and thoroughly the current Brooklyn College Bulletin, for a complete listing of academic regulations of the College. Also be sure to look at this semester's academic calendar and take note of important dates.

# Reading Schedule

Note: This reading schedule is subject to revision at my discretion.

## Introduction

JAN 28 Overview of Syllabus (no reading)  
FEB 02 Arguments (no reading)

## Epistemology

FEB 04 Reading 1: Nozick, "The Experience Machine"  
Reading 2: Descartes, *Meditations* Part I  
FEB 09 Reading 3: Descartes, *Meditations* Part II  
FEB 11 Descartes continued (no additional reading)  
  
FEB 16 NO CLASS (Presidents' Day)  
  
FEB 18 MONDAY SCHEDULE  
Reading 4: Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief"  
**PAPER TOPICS TO BE DISTRIBUTED**  
FEB 23 Reading 5: Hume, *An Enquiry Into Human Understanding*, Sections II & IV  
FEB 25 Reading 6: Hume, *An Enquiry into Human Understanding*, Section V  
MAR 02 Reading 7: Moore, "Proof of an External World"  
MAR 04 Reading 8: Ayer, "Philosophy and Knowledge"  
**FIRST PAPER DUE** on or before 11:59pm

## Metaphysics

MAR 09 Reading 9: Paley, *Natural Theology* (Selection)  
MAR 11 Reading 10: Hume, "Critique of the Argument from Design"  
Reading 11: Dawkins, "The Blind Watchmaker"  
MAR 16 Reading 12: Pascal, "The Wager"  
  
MAR 18 Overflow and Review  
MAR 23 **MIDTERM EXAM**  
MAR 25 Reading 13: Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence"  
MAR 30 Mackie continued (no additional reading)  
APR 01 Reading 14: Hick, "The Soul-Making Theodicy"  
  
APR 06 NO CLASS (SPRING BREAK)  
APR 08 NO CLASS (SPRING BREAK)

## Ethics

- APR 13 Reading 15: Rachels, "The Challenge of Cultural Relativism"  
APR 15 Reading 16: Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"

### **PAPER TOPICS TO BE DISTRIBUTED**

Note: Thursday Apr 16 is the last day to withdraw with a grade of W.

- APR 20 Reading 17: Plato, *Euthyphro*  
APR 22 Reading 18: Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals* (Selection from Ch 1)  
APR 27 Reading 19: Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals* (Selection from Ch 2)  
Reading 20: O'Neill, "A Simplified Account of Kant's Ethics"  
APR 29 **SECOND PAPER DUE** on or before 11:59pm  
Reading 21: Altman, "Kant on Sex and Marriage: The Implications for the Same-Sex Marriage Debate"  
MAY 04 Reading 22: Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Selection from Ch 2)  
MAY 06 Reading 23: Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality"  
MAY 11 Reading 24: Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Selection)  
Reading 25: Hursthouse, "Virtue Theory and Abortion"  
MAY 13 Overflow and review

**FINAL EXAM** Friday May 22, 1-3pm, location TBD