

PHIL 101: Introduction to Philosophy

Spring 2008 MWF 11:30-12:20pm

Instructor:

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General Remarks:

All of you, I am sure, have taken or will take 101 courses in a number of disciplines. Each of these courses are designed (in theory) so as to give you a broad but thorough introduction to the core aspects of the field in question. All fields have a history, a subject matter, and a methodology, but most fields, I think, are defined primarily by their subject matter. For example, if you were to take Psychology 101, you would be introduced to the subject matter of psychology (namely, human and/or animal psychology) and to how psychology is done (lab studies, surveys, therapy, etc.), as well as to some of the history of the field. But what makes it a course in psychology is more what you are studying than how it is studied. Philosophy is different, because I believe that philosophy is defined primarily by its method. While philosophy certainly has a number of traditional subject matters; the *core* of philosophy is methodological; how you proceed to examine a given topic is much more important to its being philosophy than what the topic is itself. That being said, this course will focus primarily on the methodology of philosophy; our main subjects will be how to read, write, think about and construct philosophical arguments. This is not to say, of course, that you will not be learning some of the history of philosophy, and you will certainly be reading works dealing with traditional philosophical subjects. My highest priority, however, is that you leave this course having learned something about how to think like a philosopher.

This course is designed so as to promote class discussion. While I will do some lecturing, my primary intention is for us to discuss—as a group—the arguments presented in the readings, and for you to offer arguments of your own. It is therefore important that you all feel free to make arguments, even controversial ones. Some of the best discussion in philosophy is generated by people defending controversial views—even ones that they do not personally hold. So, not only should you feel comfortable defending viewpoints that may not be popular, but I encourage all of you to consider how you might defend viewpoints that are not your own. Along these lines, you should always be mindful of the fact that the positions your classmates take do not necessarily represent what they actually believe.

One further note: As some of you may already know, this class is actually comprised of students from two courses: a regular 101 course and an honors 101 course. As far as time in class is concerned, I will draw no distinction between the two groups; you are all part of the same class and should all feel free to participate and contribute equally in class.

Course Materials:

We have 15 weeks together in this course. My intention is to assign one reading per week (after the first, of course). I am, however, somewhat flexible on this; if discussion on a particular topic carries over into a second week, so be it. These readings—with some exceptions—will be selected from *Reason and Responsibility*, which is the required text for this course. Readings will be assigned each Monday for the following week. This way, it will be possible for me to select readings that are appropriate to the path the course takes as we progress, while still leaving ample time for you to thoroughly read each selection.

Course Structure:

Beginning with the second week, we will follow a *loose* schedule:

1. We will begin the week with careful examination of the argument being made in the week's selection. I will often begin with some introductory remarks, especially for readings that deal with areas of philosophy we have not previously discussed. We will go through the reading and, together, try to come up with a clear understanding of the author's main argument(s). My hope is that, in most cases, we will get through this on Monday, but it is likely that this will sometimes continue on into Wednesday's class.
2. We will then discuss your reactions to the author's arguments and your own arguments in defense of or against the author's position. This will likely take up class time on Wednesday and, perhaps, Friday.
3. If and when there is time left on Friday after completion of (1) and (2), we will typically engage in some sort of philosophical activity that does not require prior reading—examples include discussion of formal and informal fallacies, a discussion of and mock example of experimental philosophy, or some sort of game theory exercise. You likely do not have any idea what any of those are yet; do not be concerned.

Readings:

Anselm – The Ontological Argument
Aquinas – The Five Ways
Paley – The Argument from Design
Mackie – Evil and Omnipotence
Pascal – The Wager
Pollock – A Brain in a Vat
Descartes – Meditations on First Philosophy I-II
Perry – A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality
Turing – Computing Machinery and Intelligence
Searle – Minds, Brains, and Programs
Rachels – The Debate Over Free Will
Ayer – Freedom and Necessity
Vonnegut – Harrison Bergeron
Nagel – Moral Luck

Wolf – Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility
Marquis – Why Abortion Is Immoral
Singer – Famine, Affluence, and Morality
O’Neill – Kantian Approaches to Some Famine Problems

Assignments:

1. As important as any aspect of the methodology of philosophy is the ability to read philosophical material. That being said, your first assignment will be to complete some critical reading exercises on the second week’s reading. You will complete a similar assignment at a later point in the semester. More information on this assignment will be provided separately.
2. Each week, you will be expected to complete a 1-2 page (typed, double-spaced) response to the week’s reading. These response papers are due at the beginning of class at the first meeting of each week. These response papers are to (a) demonstrate that you understood the major argument(s) in the reading and (b) offer an opportunity to critique the author’s work. More information on these response papers will be provided separately.
3. In addition, there will be a final in this course. I have not yet decided what form this final will take, but it will likely be an exam, a take-home exam, or a paper. Those of you enrolled in the honors section of this course will have a larger project to complete for this final assignment.

Grading:

Your grade will be out of a total of 100 points:

- 70 points for weekly response papers (14 weeks x 5 points per paper)
- 10 points for critical reading exercises (2 assignments x 5 points per assignment)
- 20 points for final project
- Class participation considered in borderline cases

Office Hours:

In addition to any regularly scheduled office hours (TBA), I will be available to meet with students by appointment as needed. If you would like to meet with me at any time other than during normal office hours, please call or email me to schedule.

Academic Dishonesty:

It is my hope that this section of the syllabus is merely a formality. Please do not plagiarize. In all but the most extremely exceptional cases, students found presenting others’ work as their own will fail this course. The school’s official policies on the matter can be found here:
http://www.bgsu.edu/catalog/Acad_policies/Acad_policies2.html.