

Syllabus for Introduction to Philosophy PHIL 020 (CRN: 14843) – Summer 2019

Course Info

MTWR, 1:00-3:00pm
Maguire 101

Instructor Info

Gerald Taylor
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Office Hours

Tuesday, 2:00-4:00pm
Outside Midnight Mug

COURSE DESCRIPTION

What makes me the same person today that I was when I was born, or even that I was yesterday? How do I come to knowledge about the world, and how secure is that knowledge once I get it? What is the nature and extent of my freedom of will? What would be the best way to conduct myself, ethically speaking? How should we conduct ourselves, as members of a certain kind of political society? And what significance does all of this have in the grand scheme of things, anyway?

These are just a few of the centrally important questions that philosophers tend to contemplate, and courses like this one typically explore those questions by direct engagement with historically important thinkers – Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Nietzsche, Mill, Locke, Rawls, and so on. But not only is the work of these scholars often murky and dense, it is also falls short of representing the sheer diversity of experiences that we have as people simply trying to live our lives. As such, canonical thinkers will play at most a background role in this course, and we will instead engage with materials that demonstrate how these foundational philosophical questions continue to arise even here and now, in the world that we current navigate.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this course, you will:

- Have a basic understanding of many foundational philosophical questions and debates;
- Develop foundational philosophical skills, such as thinking critically, analyzing texts, crafting arguments, and persuasive writing;
- Learn how to give a sustained argument in defense of a key claim or thesis; and
- Appreciate how philosophical questions and skills remain pertinent in our everyday lives.

MATERIALS

All required readings will be provided electronically via Canvas or email.

ASSESSMENT

Argument Extractions (10% x 2 = 20%) – Following both the first and the third weeks of the course, you will be asked to analyze three passages that I will provide, and to extract the arguments that they contain. The first round of these will be due on Canvas by the beginning of class (1:00pm) on Monday, June 10, and the second by the beginning of class on Monday, June 24.

Critical Responses (10% x 2 = 20%) – Following both the second and fourth weeks of the course, you will be asked to summarize a reading from the relevant week and to provide both a positive and a negative

critical response to it. By critical, I mean that you should aim either (1) to raise a question regarding something unclear or puzzling in the reading, (2) to press an objection to the reading, or (3) to thoughtfully expand upon the reading. Avoid simply summarizing the reading, and avoid simply offering your off-the-cuff reactions to the reading. These responses should be no more than 750 words in length. The first of these will be due on Canvas by the beginning of class (1:00pm) on Monday, June 17, and the second by the beginning of class on Monday, July 1.

Take-Home Short Answer Test (20%) – Following the third week of the course, you will be asked to compose short answers (≤600 words) in response to four out of ten questions, which I will provide on Thursday, June 13. Regarding subject matter, all of the readings/topics covered up to week three of the course are fair game. These will be due on Canvas by the beginning of class (1:00pm) on Monday, June 24.

Final Paper Outline (10%) – Following the fourth week of the course, you will be asked to submit an outline of the final paper that you intend to write for this course. I will provide the prompt/s on Monday, June 24, and the outline will be due on Canvas by the beginning of class (1:00pm) on Wednesday July 3.

Final Paper (30%) – You will submit a 1500-2000-word paper on Canvas by the end of the day (11:59:59pm) on Thursday, July 11. You must submit a final paper in order to pass this course.

Grading Scale

A: 100-94	C+: 79-77
A-: 93-90	C: 76-73
B+: 89-87	C-: 73-70
B: 86-83	D: 69-60
B-: 83-80	F: 59-0

COURSE POLICIES

Attendance – Class attendance is mandatory, and three (3) unexcused absences will be grounds for failing the course. As such, you essentially have two ‘freebies’.

For an absence to count as excused, you must notify me via email at least 24 hours prior to the class that you’ll be missing. If you must miss a class for reasons that arise within that 24-hour period, please still let me know the details of your situation via email; I will handle such situations on a case-by-case basis. If you know now that there are sessions that you will have to miss (e.g., for weddings, job interviews, and the like), please email me the details as soon as you can.

Extensions – If you need an extension for an assignment, please let me know as soon as you can before the associated deadline has passed. Requests that come in after the associated deadline has passed will be automatically denied; timely requests will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

Lateness – An assignment is late the moment its associated deadline has passed, and will immediately be marked down a 1/3 of a letter grade. That assignment will be marked down an additional 1/3 of a letter grade for every subsequent 24-hour period that it has not been submitted.

Email – I will do my very best to respond to your emails within 24-36 hours after having received them. If I fail to respond to you before 48 hours have passed, assume that your message has fallen through the cracks, and feel free to nudge me about it.

Also, for legal reasons, please only email me from your official GU email address. Be sure to check your email daily, and to write courteous and professional emails (with appropriate salutations and valedictions). I reserve the right to ignore any emails containing questions that could be answered by consulting this document.

Title IX – Please note that if I am made aware of discrimination, harassment, or other Title IX-relevant violations at or in relation to Georgetown University, I am bound by Title IX's mandatory reporting rules to report them to a Title IX coordinator within 24 hours.

Honor Code and Academic Honesty – You are expected to be familiar with Georgetown University's Honor Code and to conduct yourself accordingly. All suspected cases of academic dishonesty will be reported to the Honor Council for investigation. Confirmed cases of academic dishonesty will result automatically in failure of this course.

Instructional Continuity – In the event that we must miss a class due to a school closing, I will come up with a plan and let you know, via email or Canvas, how to proceed.

FURTHER EXPECTATIONS

For You: Come to class prepared to discuss the relevant course materials. Please participate regularly and respectfully, and please ask questions at any moment that you're struggling to understand something. Be respectful of class time – arrive on time, don't be a distraction to your classmates, be attentive, and don't start packing up your things before class has been dismissed. Be respectful of your classmates – in general, be a reasonable, courteous, civil, good person.

For Me: I will provide timely and constructive feedback on your submitted work. I will do my best to foster an atmosphere in class that encourages open and respectful dialogue, and that is conducive to learning. I will let you out of class either on time or early, but never late.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Monday, June 3: Introduction; What is Philosophy?

- Jonardon Ganeri, Samir Chopra, John Dewey

Module One — Metaphysics: What makes me *me*?

Tuesday, June 4: Personal Identity

- Daniel Dennett, Greg Egan, Nina Strohminger

Wednesday, June 5: Social Construction of Deep Kinds

- Ian Hacking, Sally Haslanger

Thursday, June 6: Identity as Social

- Hilde Lindemann, Ross Gay

Module Two — Epistemology: What can I know?

Monday, June 10: Radical Skepticism

- Rene Descartes, Nick Bostrom
- First round of argument extractions due by the beginning of class

Tuesday, June 11: Social Epistemology

- C. Thi Nguyen, Miranda Fricker

Wednesday, June 12: Standpoint Theory

- Alison Wylie

Module Three — Action: What can I do?

Thursday, June 13: Free Will & Determinism

- Short answer test assignment distributed in class

Monday, June 17: Agency as Embodied

- Iris Marion Young, Sharon Krause, Victoria Pitts-Taylor
- First critical response due by the beginning of class

Tuesday, June 18: Language & the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

Module Four — Ethics: What *should* I do?

Wednesday, June 19: Artificial Intelligence

- Nick Bostrom, Paul Bloom & Sam Harris, Nick Christakis

Thursday, June 20: Sex and Consent

- Thomas Millar, Rebecca Kukla

Monday, June 24: Animal Ethics

- Gary Francione & Anna Charlton, Peter Singer
- Second round of argument extractions due by the beginning of class
- Short answer test due by the beginning of class
- Final paper prompt distributed

Module Five — Politics: What should *we* do?

Tuesday, June 25: Oppression & Privilege

- Marilyn Frye, Alison Bailey, Iris Marion Young

Wednesday, June 26: Anger & Civility

- Myisha Cherry, Amia Srinivasan

Thursday, June 27: Playfulness & World Traveling

- Maria Lugones, Anand Giridharadas

Module Six — Existentialism: What does it all mean?

Monday, July 1: What Makes for a Meaningful Life?

- Robert Nozick, Albert Camus
- Second critical response due by the beginning of class

Tuesday, July 2: The Goodness (and Badness) of Life and the Badness (and Goodness) of Death

- Thomas Nagel, David Benatar, Epicurus

Wednesday, July 3: What if Nothing Matters?

- Nick Hughes
- Final paper outline due by the beginning of class

Thursday, July 4: NO CLASS — Independence Day

Thursday, July 11 – FINAL PAPER DUE

TIPS FOR REFLECTION PAPERS

When the grades for your reflections are released on Canvas, you will notice that they will be marked up with colored highlights of various sorts, but with no (or at most very brief) textual comments. This is a feedback system that I have been trying out for the past year or so, and it seems to be working pretty well. Here's how it works:

Red highlights indicate major stylistic errors (e.g., misspellings, ungrammatical or incomplete sentences).

- Be sure to edit your work thoroughly, so that you catch major problems like this.
- An especially helpful tactic: read your work out loud, as if you were giving it as a speech.

Orange highlights indicate interpretive errors (e.g., incorrectly defined concepts, strawman-ing an author's argument).

- In general, interpret an author's work as accurately and charitably as you can.

Yellow highlights indicate minor stylistic errors (e.g., strange word choice, excessive preamble).

Green highlights indicate parts of your reflections that worked especially well (e.g., excellent or insightful point, helpful concrete example).

Blue highlights indicate places where more philosophical depth would have been helpful.

- In general, rather than discussing a multitude of things in a shallow manner, prefer focusing on one or two things and really digging deep in trying to understand or evaluate them.
- Also, in general, don't just assert the points you want to make; try and *argue* for them. That is, rather than merely stating your opinions, do your best to offer reasons in support of them.

Purple highlights indicate places where you've been unclear (e.g., you use a technical concept that you haven't yet defined, or in a way that leaves it ambiguous what you actually mean by it).

- Don't write to be understood; write so that you cannot be misunderstood.