

PRINCIPLES OF PHILOSOPHY Syllabus

PHIL 2050 FALL 2011 MWF 12:00-12:50 ADM 303

Dr. Seth Holtzman

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Course summary:

This course is an introduction to the discipline of philosophy required for RELP majors with a Theology & Philosophy concentration; it is more advanced than PHIL 1050. We will explore fundamental principles in philosophy: framework principles that define what philosophy is and how it proceeds, as well as substantive principles that philosophy establishes. We will study these principles explicitly but also implicitly through examining some philosophical problems in the culture.

Our questions include these: What is philosophy and how does it arise? Is philosophy important or even inevitable? What is the relationship between philosophy and the culture? Does one need to know about philosophy and need to be able to think philosophically? What are philosophical problems, and what are some examples? How does one think philosophically? What sort of philosophical knowledge is possible?

Unlike other disciplines, the fundamental principles that constitute philosophy or that are the focus of philosophy are themselves in need of philosophical explanation and justification. Contra the sciences, for example, there is no framework-neutral set of agreed-on methodological or substantive principles in philosophy. That helps make philosophy a difficult and rather odd discipline. There is, however, a broad tradition in philosophy, going back 2500 years, in which there is considerable agreement about philosophy.

Class format will be mostly lecture and some discussion.

<u>Expected learning outcome</u> <i>what a successful student should demonstrate:</i>	<u>Means of Assessment</u> <i>by successful completion of:</i>
Be aware the culture has philosophical assumptions and beliefs	Short essays, midterm, final
Be aware we pick up philosophical commitments in our culture	Short essays, midterm, final
Understand that philosophical issues and problems arise from our ordinary beliefs and philosophical beliefs	Short essays, midterm, paper, final
Understand the need for disciplined philosophical thought	Short essays, paper, exams
Understand philosophy as an a priori discipline	Short essays, exams, paper
Understand how to think philosophically	Short essays, exams, paper
Understand basic philosophical principles	Short essays, exams, paper
Understand some philosophical problems affecting modernity	Short essays, exams, paper

Requirements and grading:

1) Attendance is required; you cannot learn the course on your own. In class I will sometimes elicit your grasp of the readings, lecture, and course. Your participation through questions and discussion is important, too. You need to be present, mentally active and prepared. Class participation can raise your final grade by up to 1/3 of a grade.

2) Occasional short essays on the readings, usually one page. These help you to wrestle with the readings, typically before we cover those readings, and help me gauge how much you

understand. You may work on readings with classmates; but for written assignments, separate and come to your own thoughts before doing any writing. I will drop your lowest essay grade. Late essays are not accepted; a missed one counts as "F". Together, they will count **15% of your grade**.

3) A take-home midterm exam, tentatively handed out on Wednesday, Oct. 5th and due Wednesday, Oct. 12th, testing your grasp of the course readings, issues and problems. If you miss the exam, you must contact me immediately. If you know you'll miss it, contact me beforehand ASAP. I do not guarantee you a make-up exam. **25% of your grade**.

4) A group project in which you master the ideas in some reading and present them to the class—and then use question & answer and/or discussion to ensure that the class understood. Each member of the group must do part of the presentation. We will create a schedule for these presentations, and your group will sign up for one. **10% of your grade**

5) A 5-page paper on any topic relevant to the course. Due Friday, Dec. 2nd. Late papers receive a lowered grade. **25% of your grade**.

6)The mostly essay final exam will test your overall grasp of the course, not your memory of specific facts. We will discuss options for the final a week or two in advance. Blue book required; write in pen. Date: Thursday, Dec. 8, 3:00 - 6:00pm. **25% of your grade**.

Criteria employed in evaluating written work:

Responsiveness to the Assignment

Writing should fulfill the purpose of the assignment directly and completely.

Content

Writing should reflect an understanding of the subject. It should make good use of the relevant concepts, distinctions, positions, and reasons included in course readings or brought out in lecture or discussion. It should be organized so ideas are arranged logically and clearly. Main points should be backed by substantial and relevant details. Your work should be backed by good reasons. Your claims and reasons should be consistent with each other. Anticipate & respond to any reasonable objections.

Execution

Writing should use precise words and well-constructed sentences that clearly represent the writer's reasoning. It should adhere to conventions of grammar, capitalization, spelling, and usage. Writing style should be appropriate to the academy. Your work should be clearly written, its claims precise, its structure clear, with an explicit overall direction. It should be intelligible to an interested student.

Citations and Documentation

Writers must clearly differentiate their own material from source material. When writers use material that is not their own or not common knowledge, they must document the source of the information using a standardized (i.e., either MLA or APA) method.

Other requirements: on time, typed, paginated, stapled/bound, standard margins & fonts, and dark print. Failure to meet these requirements hurts your assignment grades. Your paper (not your short essays) should have a cover page with your name, course name/number, date, my name, and a title.

Grading:

"A"	Superior mastery	A+ 97-100	A 93-96	A- 90-92
"B"	Good mastery	B+ 87-89	B 83-86	B- 80-82
"C"	Satisfactory achievement	C+ 77-79	C 73-76	C- 70-72
"D"	Less than satisfactory achievement	D+ 67-69	D 63-66	D- 60-62
"F"	Unsatisfactory achievement			

A+ is not a possible final course grade. Grades can and should measure achievement only.

Text:

A set of handouts that comprise a coursepack. Please buy a 3-ring binder to hold them.

Reading and taking notes:

I expect you to do all readings; to do well in the course, you will need to. Some of the material is easy and accessible on your first attempt. Other assignments are quite taxing and will probably require multiple readings. I suggest the following strategy for any difficult reading: read it once quickly simply to get the gist; then read it carefully for details, not worrying about the overall picture; then read it normally, fitting the details into the overall picture.

Lectures at times track the readings but also range far afield. Come to class having done the readings. You are responsible for them all; the final exam will be frightening if you have not grasped them. Since lectures cover material not in the readings, this is another reason to attend each class.

Most students take very sketchy notes. Perhaps they think that they cannot both take notes and listen; perhaps they do not know the value of taking notes. Learn to write while you listen; it not only can be done, it enhances your grasp of what is being said. Take as many notes as you can, without losing too much of what is said. You cannot get by with writing down only key terms and definitions. Your notes are an invaluable resource for understanding the course and for the final.

Absences and violations:

To keep attendance--and to learn names--I will start a seating chart on the 2nd or 3rd class. Choose a permanent seat; see me to change it. I will use the chart to take attendance promptly at the start of class. If late, you might be counted absent; if late enough, you do count as absent. Avoid tardiness; if you are often late (without good reason), I will choose to count you absent. Sleeping in class and other forms of mental absence count as an absence. When absent, you are responsible for assignments and notes. Get notes from a classmate. If you still have questions, contact me.

No absences are excused. After 3 penalty-free absences, which you needn't explain to me, further absences lower your final grade: 4-5 total absences = -1/3 grade; 6-8 total = -2/3 grade; 9-10 total = -1 grade. Missing the class immediately before or after a vacation counts double. Over 10 absences for other than an emergency is automatic grounds for an "F" (or an "I" in some cases), regardless of your grades.

Respect the people and ideas in our class. I don't care if you bring a drink or sport a hat or wear rags. I care that you pay attention to me and to others (so, no cell phones or activated pagers/beepers/watches), that you are on time and ready to work, that you bring a positive attitude to class even if you are struggling, and that you contribute positively to class.

Cheating, working with others to complete individual assignments (unless this is allowed), and falsifying an emergency to skip class or an assignment, all violate the Honor Code. So does plagiarism, employing a writer's ideas (and words) without giving the writer due credit. See me for help about borrowing someone's ideas or words for your use. No electronic devices are allowed during an exam, except for simple watches, computers (if specifically allowed), and any needed medical devices. Specifically, cell phones and any devices that allow for texting are prohibited. Violation of this policy can result in an "F" for that exam.

COURSE STRUCTURE

1) Problems with philosophy in the culture:

a) Anti-intellectualism in general

Primitivism, irrationalism, concrete vs. abstract thought, rejection of the “impractical”

Reading: [Hofstadter: from Anti-Intellectualism in American Life](#)

b) Misconception of philosophy in culture, suspicion of or rejection of (substantive) a priori truth on basis of our sensory empiricism. Much confusion even within the discipline, growing stronger as the modern era in the West has gone on: Locke, Hume, Russell, Quine, Rorty,

So, we need to make sense of an area of thought widely misunderstood and challenged in multiple ways from inside and outside philosophy.

Reading: [Handout on rejection of or devaluation of philosophy](#)

Essay #1: Discuss some of the problems philosophy faces in the culture.

2) The uniqueness and importance of philosophy

a) Let's start by identifying a kind of problem that arises in human thought, that is (and could not be) not dealt with by any other discipline, and that clearly needs disciplined thought to solve

Adams' three philosophical problems & their implications for life & thought

Readings: [Implications, Assumptions, and Presuppositions](#)

[Adams: “Culture, Social Structure and Reality”](#)

[Adams: “Is the Modern Western Mind Deranged?”](#)

Essay #2: Discuss what a philosophical problem is by identifying one.

b) Brief account of philosophy that we will illuminate and discuss through the course

A priori, about the world, dialectical ad hominem method, cultural criticism/therapy, metadiscipline

Readings: [Handout on what philosophy is](#)

[Adams: “Philosophical Education as Cultural Criticism”](#)

Essay #3: What is a metadiscipline, and why is philosophy one?

3) Philosophy gets at and critiques our worldview through its foundations

a) Contingent vs. necessary truth-claims: status, discovery, verification/falsification

Reading: [Handout on contingent and necessary commitments](#)

Essay #4: How does the contingent/necessary distinction help clarify philosophy?

b) Contingent vs. necessary concepts

Example of “property”

Reading: [Handout about property](#)

c) Kinds of necessity

Metaphysics and epistemology

Tested partly by what sense can be made of the existing culture

Thus semantics / language & thought / philosophy of culture (“philosophy of...”)

Can what we seem to know possibly be knowable? (=, must it be knowable or can't it?)

Can what seems to be real possibly be real? (= must it be real or can't it?)

Can what we seem to mean possibly be meaningful? (= must it or can't it be meaningful?)

Reading: [excerpts from J. L. Mackie's Ethics](#)

Essay #5: Identify the author's metaphysical, epistemological, & “semantic” challenges to the subject matter he discusses.

d) Conceivability and possibility

What is impossible might be imaginable (either in image or in narrative) but not conceivable
It cannot be consistently thought through and thought out.
So, limits of the possible are the limits of the conceivable, and vice versa

Readings: Schick and Vaughn: "Conceivability and Possibility"
M. C. Escher drawings
Cortazar: "Continuity of Parks"

e) The realm of the possible

Metaphysical & epistemological presuppositions govern whether something is even a meaningful possibility. Choices are not "is it actual or not?" but rather "is it necessary or impossible?"

Reading: "The Story of the Sponion"

Essay #6: What necessary presuppositions govern the possibility of an onion and make a sponion an impossibility?

f) Categorical commitments and worldviews

The question is not simply "What presuppositions do we happen to have?" but rather "Are there presuppositions so logically fundamental that they are undeniable and therefore universal?"

Fundamental presuppositions as tests of philosophical commitments: Are some epistemological or metaphysical assumptions consistent with these presuppositions?

Basic ways that reality is constituted or structured: philosophical "categories": Categorical presuppositions in the form of concepts and principles

Readings: Long Island house case
Adams: "The Mission of Philosophy"

Essay #7: What necessary presuppositions separate the different investigators?

4) Example: Plato's approach to philosophy in the "Meno"

Reading: Plato: "Meno"
Meno's "Trick" argument

a) "Surface" commitments versus logically prior commitments

Essay #8: Why does Socrates not directly answer Meno's opening question?

b) Conceptual accounts

Essences

Necessary and sufficient conditions

Counterexamples

Essay #9: What does Socrates show is wrong with Meno's third answer to the "What is arête?" question?

c) Philosophers versus the Sophists

Language to serve Reason and Truth versus language to serve self-interest

d) A theory of the soul

Being versus Becoming

The relationship of knowledge to truth

The Forms

An account of *a priori* knowledge

Body and soul

Knowledge as "recollection"

Implications for education

Essay #10: How does Socrates refute Meno's "trick" argument?

5) Premodern versus modern worldviews

- a) Categorical distinctions between premodern worldviews and our modern Western worldview

[Reading:](#) [Naturalistic versus Humanistic summary theses](#)

- b) Consequences of our modern Western worldview

- a. Growing subjectivism and philosophical skepticism spreading in the culture

Examples

- b. Serious and intractable philosophical problems in the culture

- c. Loss of sense of life as meaningful and worthwhile, due to no longer taking reality to be inherently meaningful and valuable

- c) Descartes

[Reading:](#) [Biffle: Guided Tour of Descartes' Meditations I and II, pp.1-40](#)

Essay #11: How does Descartes end up in seemingly complete skepticism?

Essay #12: How does Descartes avoid that skepticism?

- d) Hume

[Reading:](#) [Hume on physical objects and causation](#)

Essay #13: What leads Hume to his skeptical positions?

- e) Bentham

[Readings:](#) [formal documents enumerating rights](#)
[Bentham, excerpts from "Anarchical Fallacies"](#)

Essay #14: What leads Bentham to his skeptical position about rights?

- f) Theology and God-talk

[Reading:](#) [excerpt from Hick's The Existence of God, pp.217-252](#)

Essay #15: What leads Bentham to his skeptical position about rights?

- g) Problem of the self

[Reading:](#) [Jones, Preface, Introduction, and "The Crisis of Contemporary Culture"](#)

Essay #16: Why does Jones contend we have a problem the reality of the self?