Introduction to Philosophy: Syllabus

Philosophy 200
TR 3:00-4:20
Fall 2012

Professor:
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http://www.msu.edu/~orourk51/
Office hours: 12:00-1:00 T, 1:00-2:00 R, or by appointment

Class Meetings:
We will meet in B119 Wells Hall.

Texts:
The required text for the class is Introduction to Philosophy, 6th edition, edited by John Perry, Michael Bratman, and John Martin Fischer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). It should be available through the bookstore; if you purchase it elsewhere, please be sure you have the 6th edition. There are a few required readings that will be available as pdfs on my website. These are marked on the tentative course schedule.

Introducing Philosophy
Let me second what the editors of our book say at the beginning: Welcome to philosophy! It’s a wonderful subject, full of mystery, intrigue, excitement, and power. Some of you may have heard otherwise, but don’t believe any of that. I aim to make philosophy your favorite subject, and while I will probably not pull that off in general, I hope you’ll give me a chance.

Just for the record, here is the description of this course from the catalog:

Theories of knowledge, values, and reality. Topics such as objectivity, relativism and cultural diversity, moral responsibility, aesthetic values, the self, existence of God, free will, minds and machines.

A number of these topics will be on our agenda this semester, but first it is useful to get to know philosophy just a bit, on its own terms. So let’s begin with the term, ‘philosophy’. This term derives from the Greek ‘philosophia’, or “love of wisdom”, which itself is a combination of ‘philo-’ or “loving”, and ‘sophia’, or “wisdom”. So philosophy is, etymologically speaking, the love of wisdom. What does this mean? Does one love wisdom like one loves football? Or perhaps Ben and Jerry’s Bonnaroo Buzz ice cream? Probably not, but then … what? One way
to think about this is to recognize **loving** as a serious attitude grounded in trust, affection, and commitment—to **love** wisdom is to trust it and to be fond of it, both in terms of its effects but also in terms of what it means to have it be part of one’s character. Commitment to wisdom follows from this: if you trust it and are fond of it, you will commit to it by making it part of who you are. What about wisdom? That is also tricky. Wisdom is not knowledge—in fact, if you take Socrates, that paragon of philosophy, at his word, wisdom might imply the **absence** of knowledge. To some extent, working out what is meant by this term is the task ahead of us. For now, we might think of wisdom as being **right with the world, given that we are creatures that rely on our powers of reason.**

If this course is successful, you will love wisdom more at the end than at the beginning. One thing about love that seems to be true across the board: if you love something, you will want to have more of it, and when it comes to something like philosophy, that entails learning more about it. (This is not exactly true of something like Ben and Jerry’s, unless you mean learning about where the second pint is hidden…) We will learn more about philosophy in this class, focusing on knowledge, value, and reality, as well as on what it all means. In fact, we’ll start with the topic of meaning and meaningfulness. After all, what would an introductory philosophy course be without time spent on the question, “What is the meaning of life?” We’ll start with that, before turning to questions about the nature and extent of knowledge, the character of moral action and evaluation, and the nature of the self.

In fact, you can see the self as the main theme of the course. We’ll spend the last few weeks of the course talking about three problems: the mind/body problem, the problem of free will, and the problem of personal identity. These are pretty clearly relevant to an understanding of the self, but so too are knowledge and value; after all, how and whether we know are pretty crucial questions about the type of being we take ourselves to be, and morality is a central aspect of the human experience. Attention to all of these problems should provide us with a framework for thinking about who we are—a framework for thinking about the person you call “I”.

Finally, a word or two about how you should engage with this course if you want to get the most out of it. I don’t want this class to be simply a study in what other people think or what I think. To be sure, I want you to be guided by what others have thought, but I want you to concentrate on developing your own thoughts about these issues. To this end, you will examine a variety of philosophical claims, critically analyze them, and then select and defend those that seem correct to you. The currency of philosophical exchange is the argument, and I expect you to be contributing participants in the economy of ideas that we build and maintain in this classroom. Secondly, while it is true that each one of us will look inward this semester, we’ll begin with the assumption that the reality we’re exploring is an objective one. (This assumption is certainly open to debate, and I expect you to engage in that debate at various points.) That is, while you may be the principal investigator into who you are, the investigation is not limited to you alone. Philosophical discourse is a communal discourse, and we should make every effort to work together to investigate what each of us is as an individual.
Goals & Objectives:

As a Michigan State student, you are part of an educational institution that has certain, well-defined learning goals and objectives. You have a right to expect that these goals and objectives will guide your instructors as they design their courses. Just as a reminder, here are the Michigan State University learning goals and outcomes (from http://undergrad.msu.edu/learning):

**Analytical Thinking (AT)**
The MSU graduate uses ways of knowing from mathematics, natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, and arts to access information and critically analyzes complex material in order to evaluate evidence, construct reasoned arguments, and communicate inferences and conclusions.

- Acquires, analyzes, and evaluates information from multiple sources
- Synthesizes and applies the information within and across disciplines
- Identifies and applies, as appropriate, quantitative methods for defining and responding to problems
- Identifies the credibility, use, and misuse of scientific, humanistic and artistic methods

**Cultural Understanding (CU)**
The MSU graduate comprehends global and cultural diversity within historical, artistic, and societal contexts.

- Reflects on experiences with diversity to demonstrate knowledge and sensitivity
- Demonstrates awareness of how diversity emerges within and across cultures

**Effective Citizenship (ECit)**
The MSU graduate participates as a member of local, national, and global communities and has the capacity to lead in an increasingly interdependent world.

- Understands the structures of local, national, and global governance systems and acts effectively within those structures in both individual and collaborative ways
- Applies knowledge and abilities to solve societal problems in ethical ways

**Effective Communication (ECom)**
The MSU graduate uses a variety of media to communicate effectively with diverse audiences.
• Identifies how contexts affect communication strategies and practices
• Engages in effective communication practices in a variety of situations and with a variety of media

**Integrated Reasoning (IR)**
The MSU graduate integrates discipline-based knowledge to make informed decisions that reflect humane social, ethical, and aesthetic values.

• Critically applies liberal arts knowledge in disciplinary contexts and disciplinary knowledge in liberal arts contexts
• Uses a variety of inquiry strategies incorporating multiple views to make value judgments, solve problems, answer questions, and generate new understandings

For this course, my primary goal is to expose you to the power and wonder of philosophy. To this end, I plan to accompany you through a number of seminal philosophical discussions related to topics in epistemology, metaphysics, and value theory. By semester’s end, you should be able to:

1. Recognize improvement in your writing and critical thinking (AT, ECom, IR)
2. Read and comprehend abstract theoretical discussions of conceptual issues (AT, IR)
3. Identify, analyze, and criticize complicated arguments (AT, IR)
4. Reflect on the conceptual character of issues related to meaning, knowledge, value, and the self (AT, CU, ECit, IR)
5. Recognize the importance of these issues to an understanding of who we are (CU, IR)
6. Construct, develop, and defend your own philosophical views of these issues (AT, IR)
7. Look at the person in the mirror whose teeth you’re brushing in a slightly deeper and more informed way (IR)

**Lectures:**

Lectures serve a purpose: they give you an opportunity to find out what someone else thought about the readings, most of which are hard and many of which lapse into tedium from time to time. I will lecture in here, but I want there to be an ample amount of discussion. Class is structured into pairs of sessions, the first of which is devoted to the lecture and the second to discussion. I plan to emphasize two things in my lectures: (a) how to read the assigned text for that session, and (b) what the main arguments are in the text. My lectures are informal, and I hope you will interrupt me with questions, comments, criticisms, challenges, etc. Discussion will be structured into small and large group blocks, structured by issues you raise about the readings.
Readings:

You won’t be asked to read much in this class—a few hundred pages altogether—but what you will read is difficult. I would recommend skimming the readings first to get a feel for the topic and the nature of the argument and then reading the piece more closely, pen in hand. Print off the readings and number the paragraphs so that you can refer to them in any notes you take. Try to summarize each reading after you finish it. Concentrate in your summary on the arguments in the piece, i.e., the principal claims advanced and the reasoning adduced in support of them. And talk with me at any time about any question you have concerning the reading.

As indicated above, we will take up four issues in turn: meaning and meaningfulness, the nature of knowledge, values and ethics, and the nature of the self. The readings are primarily in the text for the course. In addition to the readings, I will be crafting chunks of text from time to time for your review.

Requirements:

Class Participation: You will not be required to contribute to the full class discussions, but you will be required to participate in the small group discussions and group projects. You are also expected to prepare by doing the readings and then attend class, remaining attentive and engaged while there. Furthermore, you will be expected to turn your assignments in regularly and on time. The part of the grade associated with this requirement is described below. Note that attendance in this class is required, and roll will be taken at the start of every class session.

Writing: Aside from assiduously studying and reflecting on philosophical approaches to the mind, the body, and everything in between, your principal responsibility in this class is to write, and write you will. All told, there are 19 different writing assignments due in this class during the semester. They are divided as follows: 12 reading responses, 2 standard form exercises, 2 group papers (and associated notes), a standard form exercise for your long essay, the long essay, and an e-mail message.

Reading Responses. You will produce 12 reading responses over the course of the semester. These are brief responses to 3 or 4 questions about the readings that you will prepare before the class where those readings are discussed. The questions are intended to help you think about the texts as you read them—critical reading is foundational for good philosophical work. With the exception of the first one, I will post the questions for each reading to the website one week ahead of when the response is due. Your responses can be as long as you like, but I am looking for two to three-sentence answers to each question. Altogether, the responses shouldn’t take up more than a page. These should be typed. These are due at the beginning of the class session in which the relevant reading is discussed.
Standard Form Exercises. “Standard form” is a term used to refer to a way of representing arguments. Arguments are collections of statements, one of which is the conclusion with others being reasons for that conclusion. As noted above, arguments are the currency of philosophical exchange, and you cannot understand philosophy without them. Standard form is useful as a way of representing arguments because it helps you focus on those statements in a text that are specifically relevant to the author’s reasoning. The form is straightforward: you like the reasons (or premises) in a numbered stack on top of the conclusion, like so:

1. Reason 1
2. Reason 2
3. Reason 3
   ...
 n. Reason n

C. Conclusion

You will be asked to represent two arguments from the assigned reading in standard form. These exercises should take no more than one page each. You will begin with a paragraph in which you reconstruct the argument from the text, and then you will supply a standard form representation of that argument. Details about argument reconstruction and standard form development will be supplied and modeled in class and in handouts, and they are also available on the Critical Thinking Worksite, located here: http://www.msu.edu/~orourk51/crit_think/ctw-intro.

Group Papers: Two short (two page) group papers will be prepared in class early in the semester. (One in September and one in October—see the Tentative Schedule.) Most of the work for these projects will be completed in class, including the writing, which will be done collectively in groups. Each group paper will occupy two class sessions, a reflection/analysis session and an outlining/writing session. More detail will be supplied about this assignment in the next week, but for now here is a description:

1. Groups of 4 or 5 students, arranged in advance, will come together in the first class session to discuss and analyze their topic. Each of you will write up individual notes about your group’s discussion and submit them at the end of this session with your names on them.

2. Between class periods, you will write up a few thoughts about the topic to bring with you to the second class session. These are thoughts that should help your group write up a collective report in the second session.

3. In the second session, you will share your written thoughts with your group, brainstorm a paper outline, and then spend the bulk of the hour writing up a collective report of your group’s analysis on paper that you are provided. When class ends, you will submit
your group report, which should be no more than two pages in length.

The first group paper will be devoted to reflection and analysis on a puzzle or paradox drawn from a subset of those contained at the end of the course textbook. The second pair of days will be devoted to identifying and analyzing the philosophical character of a current issue.

**Long Essay:** The final exercise in this class will be a 4 to 6-page essay on one of the topics we address in class. I will distribute a list of topics around the middle part of the semester, but you are encouraged to select your own topic. (If you select your own topic, please bounce it off me before you begin working on it.) This assignment has two parts. The first part is a brief, one-page statement of your thesis and a standard form representation of the argument you plan to develop in your paper. This will be due at the beginning of class on Tuesday, 27 November. I will work to get you comments within a week so that you can use them to guide your writing. In addition, please talk about these papers with one another—the more comments and criticisms you receive, the better your paper will be. The paper itself should be 4 to 6-pages in length, double-spaced, with 12-point font and 1-inch margins. The paper will be due at the beginning of the final exam period, scheduled for 3 to 5 pm, Monday, 10 December.

**E-mail message.** The first assignment, due by midnight next Thursday (9/6), is to send me an e-mail message from the account you check most regularly. In this message, I want you to tell me why you took this course, what your positive and negative expectations are, and what you hope to gain from it. Also, please tell me your major (or what you think your major might be) and what experience with philosophy you have had, if any. Please put “Phil 200” in the subject line.

There will also be some in-class writing that will not be graded. This writing will be done in advance of some discussions as well as after some discussions. You learn philosophy by thinking about it, and you learn to think about it through writing.

**Grading:**

Class participation will be determined on the basis of a 100-point scale, with 80 points associated with attendance and 20 with the quality (not the quantity) of your participation. Every unexcused absence will result in 8 point reduction of the attendance part of this grade, so 10 unexcused absences means you will get a 0 for that part of the grade. The quality points will be allocated based on my assessment, which I am happy to share with you. The reading responses will be evaluated using a ✓/− system, with “✓” indicating adequacy and “−” inadequacy. I will read these with a view to making sure that you have done the reading. If you do the readings and prepare thoughtful responses to the reading response questions, you will receive full credit on this part of the course. Every “−” received will result in the loss of 1/12 of this part of the grade. Standard form exercises, group papers, and the long essay (each part) will be graded on a 100-point scale. Each of these assignment categories will be converted to a
100-point scale and then multiplied by a factor corresponding to the percentage of the final grade. (See below.) Those earning between 90% and 100% will earn a 4.0 for the course, 85% and 89% a 3.5, 80% and 84% a 3.0, 75% and 79% a 2.5, 70% and 74% a 2.0, 65% and 69% a 1.5, 60% and 64% a 1.0 and 59% and below a 0.0.

Percentages of the final grade associated with each assignment category:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Long Essay</td>
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<tr>
<td>Standard Form/Thesis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Written Draft</td>
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<tr>
<td>Standard Form Exercises</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading Responses</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group Papers</td>
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**Policies:**

**Attendance**

Attendance is required in this class. Excused absences are those excused by the university for official activities, those excused by me in advance, or those excused subsequently for documented reasons (e.g., health problem, family emergency). When you attend class, please be respectful of the others in the room—turn all sounds off on your cell phones, refrain from reading the newspaper, etc.

**Academic Honesty**

Article 2.III.B.2 of the [Academic Freedom Report](#) states, "The student shares with the faculty the responsibility for maintaining the integrity of scholarship, grades, and professional standards." In addition, the Department of Philosophy adheres to the policies on academic honesty as specified in General Student Regulations 1.0, Protection of Scholarship and Grades; the all-University Policy on Integrity of Scholarship and Grades; and Ordinance 17.00, Examinations. (See [Spartan Life: Student Handbook and Resource Guide](#) or the MSU Web site: [www.msu.edu](http://www.msu.edu).) You are expected to complete all course assignments without assistance from any source that I have not authorized. You are expected to develop original work for this course; therefore, you may not submit course work you completed for another course to satisfy the requirements for this course, and you may not pass off the work of others as your own (i.e., plagiarize). Also, you are not authorized to use the [http://www.allmsu.com](http://www.allmsu.com) Web site to complete any course work in Philosophy 200. Students who violate MSU academic integrity rules may receive a penalty grade, including a failing grade on the assignment or in the course. If you are unsure about the appropriateness of your course
work, please contact me. (See also https://www.msu.edu/unit/ombud/academic-integrity/student-faq.html.)

**Deadlines**

All assignments must be handed in as you arrive in class on the day they are due. I do not accept late work unless class was missed for a documented emergency that arose without time for you to submit your work in advance. If you know that you will miss a class session prior to that session, you will need to submit your assignment in advance.

**Incompletes**

The University policy for incompletes is as follows:

> The I-Incomplete may be given only when: the student (a) has completed at least 6/7 of the term of instruction, but is unable to complete the class work and/or take the final examination because of illness or other compelling reason; and (b) has done satisfactory work in the course; and (c) in the instructor’s judgment can complete the required work without repeating the course.

I do not give out incompletes unless the “compelling reason” mentioned above is documented, and you must discuss this with me in advance of finals week. The only exception is

**Accommodations for Students with Disabilities (from the Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities (RCPD))**

Michigan State University is committed to providing equal opportunity for participation in all programs, services, and activities. Requests for accommodations by persons with disabilities may be made by contacting the Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities at 517-884-RCPD or on the web at http://rcpd.msu.edu. It is your responsibility to promptly register with RCPD because some arrangements must be done well in advance (e.g. alternative test taking place or time). Once your eligibility for an accommodation has been determined, you will be issued a verified individual services accommodation (“VISA”) form. Please present this form to me at the start of the term and/or two weeks prior to the accommodation date (e.g., paper due date). Requests received after this date will be honored whenever possible.

**Tentative Schedule:** https://www.msu.edu/~orourk51/200-Phil/Fall2012/200F12-Schedule.pdf