

PHIL 120
Knowledge and Reality

Fall 2021

CRN 91106, Section AB2
Tuesdays 13:00-15:50, A310

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Office Hours:
Mondays 13:00–14:00, Room K155
Fridays 8:30–9:30

The University of the Fraser Valley is located on the unceded territory of the Stó:lō peoples. We gratefully acknowledge our ability to live and work on the traditional territory.

Short Course Description

Philosophy can be understood as an investigation into the foundations of knowledge (the branch of epistemology) and reality (the branch of metaphysics). Put differently, philosophy seeks to answer the “big” questions that have perennially puzzled humanity about the universe, our place in it, and how we can be certain that our beliefs about it, who we are, and what we should do, are true. These questions deal with complex topics including but not limited to: What distinguishes truth from opinion? What is the relationship between mind and body? Are we free? Why is there something rather than nothing? Does life have a meaning? We will cover historical and contemporary responses to such questions from the Western tradition, all the while approaching philosophy both as a discipline and a way of life.

Detailed Course Description

Everyone asks “big” questions of a philosophical nature. We all wonder and have thoughts about, say, what is and is not a credible source of information, what factors determine one’s personality, whether humans have free will, whether there are moral truths, how the universe came to be, and whether life has a purpose. We might think that science alone tells us what is true, that one’s personality is dictated by nurture more than nature, that we are always in control of our actions, that murder is always wrong, that God did not create the world, or that some higher power has given life meaning. In other words, we all operate with a particular worldview that has a philosophical dimension.

However, we often take our worldview for granted. We acquire our basic beliefs about the world and how we should act through our friends and parents, inherit them from our cultural background, or have been taught them in school or Church. The task of philosophy is to try to provide systematic, rational analysis and evaluation of our worldviews, revise when they prove to be problematic, and invent new ways of looking at the world. It does so by employing critical thinking to propose arguments based on good reasoning and avoid fallacies, biases, and inconsistency, as well as by investigating the very foundations of knowledge and reality.

We will consider some highly influential positions upheld by philosophers concerning its two main branches of epistemology and metaphysics. In terms of epistemology, we will tackle questions such as: How do we know life is not just one long dream? Can we know for sure that the sun will rise tomorrow? Can we know the world as it is, or only how it appears to us? As for metaphysics, we will discuss questions such as: Am I the same person I was ten years ago, even though I am constantly changing? Am I nothing but my brain? If everything event in the universe has a cause, am I responsible

for my actions? Are there moral laws everyone should follow, regardless of their desire or situation? Can we prove God's existence? If the universe is meaningless, can human life still have meaning?

Focusing on the Western tradition of philosophy, we will examine both classical and contemporary answers to these kinds of questions and the worldviews they entail. Throughout this course, we will emphasize how philosophical thinking has influenced world history and influences our day-to-day lives, even when we do not realize it.

Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of the course, students will be able to:

- Articulate central themes in Western epistemology and metaphysics.
- Explain major philosophical positions on the source and limits of knowledge, the nature of mind, ethics, theology, and the meaning of life.
- Use the methods of philosophical analysis and argumentation to evaluate these positions.
- Appreciate how philosophical positions underline one's worldview and attitude and hence have an impact on everyday life.
- Use key philosophical terms, concepts, and theories in conversation and writing.

Texts

The following texts are required and are the basis of coursework. They are available through UFV's bookstore:

- Descartes, René. *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*. Translated by Donald A. Cress. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Edited by Mary Gregor and Jens Timmermann. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. Translated by James W. Ellington. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. Translated by Carol Macomber. Edited by John Kulka. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.

Other required readings are available online via Blackboard.

Background Reading

If you are looking for extra or supplementary readings, there are many great resources that may help you navigate philosophical texts. These include the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and the *Very Short Introduction* series published by Oxford University Press. All of these are written by experts for a general audience.

Student Evaluation

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| • Participation | 10% | |
| • Essay 1 | 20% | <i>Due October 12</i> |
| • Midterm Exam | 20% | <i>In class on November 2</i> |
| • Essay 2 | 25% | <i>Due December 7</i> |
| • Final Exam | 25% | <i>To be set by the university</i> |

Essay 1:

The first essay will be of a historical and exegetical nature. You will contextualize and summarize key concepts and reconstruct the formal argument for them. The essay is designed to initiate you into philosophical thinking. The essay will be 1000 words.

Midterm:

A combination of true and false questions, multiple choice, and short answers on Parts I and II.

Essay 2:

The second essay will be a reflective essay that deals with a theme of your choice and argues for your own position with regards to this theme. I will circulate a list of topics, although you are encouraged to choose a topic of your own in consultation with me if there is a topic you would like to explore. This essay can be a place for you to investigate your philosophical interests and existential concerns through the course material. The essay will be 1200 words.

Final:

A combination of true and false questions, multiple choice, and short answers on Parts III and IV.

Class Schedule

Introduction: The Nature and Value of Philosophy

Week 1 (September 14): The What, Why, and How of the Philosophical Enterprise

Part I: Belief, Knowledge, and Skepticism

Week 2 (September 21): Rationalism: Knowledge is Based on Reason

- Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, Part One.
- Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditations One and Two.

Week 3 (September 28): Empiricism: Knowledge is Based on Experience

- Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, Sections II-V.

Week 4 (October 5): Idealism: The Mind Creates Experience

- Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, Preface, §§1-3, §5, and §§14-21.
- Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Preface to the second edition, excerpts.

Part II: Bodies, Minds, and Personal Identity

Week 5 (October 12): Mind-Body Dualism: The Mind is Not Physical

- Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditation Six.

Week 6 (October 19): Psychological Continuity and Bundle Theories: Are We the Same Person Throughout Our Lives?

- Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, "Of Identity and Diversity."
- Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, "Of Personal Identity."

Week 7 (October 26): Neuroscience and Eliminative Materialism: The Self is Not Real

- Metzinger, *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self*, Introduction and Chapter 1.

Midterm Exam on Parts I and II

Week 8 (November 2)

Part III: Human Freedom and Responsibility

Week 9 (November 9): Determinism, Compatibilism, and Freedom: Is Free Will an Illusion?

- Holbach, "Humans Are Determined."
- Mill, "Determinism and Free Will Are Compatible."
- Taylor, "Humans Are Free."

Week 10 (November 16): Are Moral Principles Universally Valid?

- Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Preface, Section I.

Week 11 (November 23): The Categorical Imperative, Human Dignity, and the Nature of Freedom

- Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Sections II-III.

Part IV: God and the Meaning of Life

Week 12 (November 30): "God is Dead": The Nihilism of an Atheistic World

- Paley, *Natural Theology*, excerpts.
- Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, Prologue, "On Three Metamorphoses," "On the Teachers of Virtues," "On the Hinterworldly," and "On the Passions of Pleasure and Pain."

Week 13 (December 7): Existentialism, Absurdity, and the Creation of Meaning

- Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*.

Final Exam on Part III and IV

To be set by the University during the final exam period.

Course Procedures and Policies

- 1 *Email*: I will respond within 2 business days. If something is urgent, please indicate so in the subject line so that I can prioritize getting back to you.
- 2 *Missed Exams*: Please contact me within 24 hours, if possible. If you are excused (for medical reasons, bereavement, etc., as determined on a case-by-case basis), you must reschedule.
- 3 *Late Essays*: Any essay handed in late will be penalized by 5% per day for a maximum of 7 days. Late essays after this point will not be accepted, except under extenuating circumstances.