

Introduction to Philosophy

Sample syllabus

Fall 2010

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Course description

Philosophy is the study of life's big questions, i.e. questions about the fundamental nature of reality, our knowledge of it, and what it is to live a good life in it. This course seeks to motivate a student's interest in these questions, by addressing one major question about each of these fundamental philosophic topics. Is there a God? How do we know it—or anything? And how should we live?

As it turns out, these questions are related to each other, with the question of how we know playing a special role. Thinking about whether God exists, we soon discover that different ways of answering this question correspond roughly to different theories of knowledge: some are based more on "pure reason," others on experience, while still others proclaim the unimportance of argument or evidence. In the middle portion of the course, we will examine these theories of knowledge on their own and think generally about whether any of these theories can help the philosopher answer important philosophical questions.

We conclude by studying various theories of ethics. As with arguments for the existence of God, it turns out that different approaches to the theory of knowledge often yield different styles of ethical theory. Here we examine "pure reason"-based and experience-based theories of value, among others, in order to put philosophy to its ultimate test, to see if it can actually guide our lives on the basis of evidence and argument.

Texts

- Pojman, *Philosophy: The Quest for Truth*
- Course pack

Lecture and reading schedule

Introduction

The importance of philosophy

- Bertrand Russell, "The Value of Philosophy"
- Ayn Rand, "Philosophy: Who Needs It" (course pack)

The importance of logic, and its basics

- Hy Ruchlis, "The importance of clear thinking," "The reasoning process" (course pack)
- Louis Pojman, "Excursus: A Little Bit of Logic"

Arguments for the existence of God

The ontological argument

- St. Anselm, from *Proslogion*
- Response: Gaunilo, Scriven (course pack)

Cosmological arguments

- St. Thomas Aquinas, from *Summa Theologica*
- Response: Scriven (course pack)

Teleological arguments

- William Paley, from *Natural Theology*
- Response: David Hume, from *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, Scriven (course pack)

Testimonial arguments

- John Locke, from *The Essay concerning Human Understanding* ("On Reason and Faith")
- Response: David Hume, from *The Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* ("Of Miracles")

Pragmatic arguments

- William James, “The Will to Believe”
- Response: William Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief”

Arguments for atheism and agnosticism

- Michael Scriven, “The Concept of God,” “God and Reason,” “The Consequences if the Arguments Fail” from *Primary Philosophy* (course pack)
- Response: K.D. Ellis, “Why I am an Agnostic” (course pack)
- Response: Alvin Plantinga, “Religious Belief without Evidence”

Theories of knowledge

Rationalism

- Plato, from *The Republic* and *The Phaedo* (course pack)
- Descartes, from *The Meditations on First Philosophy*
- Response: Harry Binswanger, “The Possible Dream” (course pack)

Aristotelian inductivism

- Aristotle, from *The Metaphysics* (A.1.) and *The Posterior Analytic* (II.19) (course pack)

Empiricism

- John Locke, from the *Essay*
- David Hume, from the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*

Skepticism

- Descartes, from *The Meditations*
- Hume, from *The Enquiry*
- Response: Leonard Peikoff, “Maybe You’re Wrong” (course pack)
- Response: Michael Huemer, “The G.E. Moore Shift” (course pack)

Pragmatism

- William James, from *Pragmatism*
- Response: Brand Blanshard, from *The Nature of Thought* (course pack)

Ethics

Religious ethics

- From the Bible (Ten Commandments, Sermon on the Mount) (course pack)
- William Lane Craig, from “Theistic Critiques of Atheism” (course pack)

Rationalistic value theories

- Plato, from *The Republic*
- Spinoza, from *Ethics* (course pack)

Aristotelian inductivist value theory

- Aristotle, from *The Nichomachean Ethics*

Empiricist value theory

- David Hume, from *The Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* and *The Treatise on Human Nature* (course pack)
- John Stuart Mill, from *Utilitarianism*

Kantian rationalistic value theory

- Kant, from *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*
- Kantian epistemology and theology

Pragmatist value theory

- William James, from “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life”

Relativism vs. objectivism

- Ruth Benedict, “Morality is Relative”
- James Rachels, “Morality is not Relative”
- Erik Wielenberg, from *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (course pack)