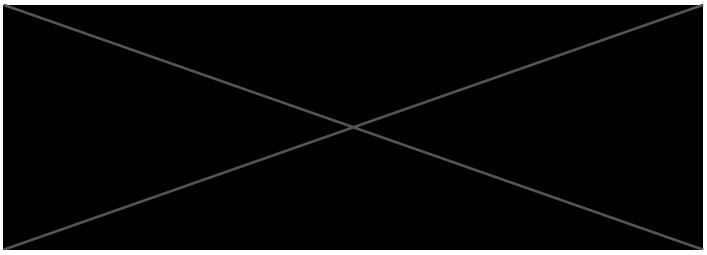
PHIL 101 – Introduction to Philosophy



Course description: How can we have free will when the universe seems to operate via completely deterministic mechanisms? How could we possibly know whether or not we're living in a simulation? Does the presence of suffering render God's existence questionable? In this course, we'll learn how to construct and respond to philosophical argumentation by engaging with arguments that philosophers have advanced concerning just these sorts of perennial issues. Topics to be discussed include – the nature of morality; the existence of God; political economy; free will; causation and time; and philosophical skepticism. By engaging with such arguments, we'll develop a better grasp of appropriate argumentative practice, as well as a more thorough understanding of the problems that have animated philosophers for millennia.

Course texts

Required texts: Throughout the course, we'll read papers and selections from books: you can find all these readings in PDF form on Blackboard.

Additionally, we'll supplement these readings with chapters from Daniel Korman's *Learning from Arguments: An Introduction to Philosophy*. You can freely access this text on Blackboard.

Assignments and grading

Your grade will be determined by the following items: **two argument reconstructions, one essay, one mid-term, an online journal, and class participation.**

Argument reconstruction: In 2-3 pages, first reconstruct (in standard, premise/conclusion form) a philosopher's argument from their text. (I'll provide you with the relevant passage.) After that, outline an objection to a premise from that argument.

Essay: In 5-7 pages, first present an argument from one of the philosophers we've discussed. After that, either *defend* or *argue against* their position. (I'll provide you with a list of arguments to choose from, and we'll discuss what it means to 'defend' or 'argue against' a position in class.)

Mid-term: A mix of multiple choice and short answer questions. The mid-term will cover the first half of the course material.

Online journal: Once a week, I'll provide you a prompt related to the that week's reading and you'll respond with a 100-200 word journal entry. Your posts are due by Thursdays at 11:59 PM**.** Late journal entries will not be accepted.

Participation/classtime*:* Participation is an integral component of this course. As such, you must first and foremost attend all class meetings in order to complete the course objectives. Your participation grade will be determined by your attendance, your engagement in discussion, and your engagement in in-class activities.

We'll discuss all these assignments in far more detail in class.

Grading scheme

Argument reconstruction #1 (due 10/4): 15%
Argument reconstruction #2 (due 11/8): 20%
Essay (due 12/14): 25%
Mid-term (in-class 10/15): 20%
Online journal: 10%
Participation: 10%

Class policies

- You're allowed two unexcused absences. After that, you should contact me and let me know about any extenuating circumstances. Each further unnotified absence will result in a 1/3rd of a letter grade being deducted from your participation grade.

- Papers turned in late will be penalized 1/3rd of a letter grade for every day they are late. For instance, a paper that's turned in a week late will lose $2\frac{1}{3}$ letter grades. This means that I will grade it starting at a C+.

- If you send me an email, you can expect a reply from me within 24 hours (except for weekends; I'll reply first thing Monday morning).

- I will evaluate extension requests on your behalf should unexpected circumstances arise. Note: the fact that you may have similar due dates for other courses isn't an unexpected circumstance. I'm sympathetic to the vicissitudes of your lives – but plan accordingly!

- You're not permitted to use generative AI in writing your papers for this course. If I suspect the use of AI in your work, I reserve the right to request a meeting with you.

- If you're reading the syllabus this closely, great job! Email me a picture of your favorite food.

- You don't need an appointment to meet with me during my official office hours. Feel free to stop by! Talking through your writing projects, or the course material more generally, is one of the best ways to succeed in this course.

Learning area(s)

This course is a part of the Written Communication and Literary & Textual Inquiry components of the University of Richmond's general education curriculum. Here's some more information on these components:

"Writing-intensive courses are distinguished by the intentionality of the course design; they recognize and employ writing as a technology of thought. They are not simply courses that require a certain amount of writing; rather, they focus on enhancing the ability of students to communicate effectively as a core learning goal. They use writing as a primary means of understanding, exploring, distilling, analyzing, synthesizing, interpreting, and reflecting on what is being taught and learned.

They draw on a range of pedagogies to develop writing capacities for a variety of learners at all levels. Students will employ writing effectively across the curriculum to communicate their understanding and analysis of course content while also developing original insights and ideas.

Learning Outcomes:

1. Students will produce written work that reflects disciplinary conventions and attention to audience and situation.
2. Students will produce written work with a clear perspective and, where appropriate, forward claims supported by evidence, and cite sources responsibly.
3. Students will produce written work undergoing an iterative process, where content evolves (creation, drafting, and revision) and improves based on feedback from the faculty member.
4. Students will compose written work with clarity, cohesion, concision, and minimal error."

"Literary and textual inquiry courses raise questions about how meaning is made, focusing especially on one or more modes, such as literary works, film, media, and other forms of textuality. They engage diverse genres and cultural traditions, helping students situate themselves and others as products of and participants in literature (writ large) and culture.

Courses satisfying the literary and textual inquiry requirement are centrally concerned with the textual analysis of primary works. They may consider a variety of interpretive frameworks and attend to one or more collateral areas of investigation, including the study of the process by which texts are created or received; the aesthetic, historical, cultural, experiential, or philosophical contexts in which they are created or received; and their relationships to each other and to other fields of experience and analysis. This area of inquiry brings its perspectives and methods to bear on imaginative and non-imaginative works alike.

Learning Outcomes:

1. Students will demonstrate their ability to apply at least two interpretive frameworks to objects of literary or textual analysis.
2. Students will demonstrate their ability to analyze objects of literary or textual analysis in one or more mode or style.
3. Students will demonstrate an understanding of the ways in which texts are created or received to serve specific ends.
4. Students will demonstrate their ability to interpret and analyze specific texts in relation to one another and/or to other fields of experience within aesthetic, cultural, historical, philosophical, or experiential contexts."

Reading and writing philosophy

You'll find that reading philosophy, and writing philosophy papers, is quite different than reading and writing papers on other subjects in the humanities. I encourage you to reach out via email or stop by my office hours if you have any questions, want to discuss paper structures, etc. Additionally, here are some external resources that you may find helpful:

- Connie Rosati, "Some Suggestions for How to Approach Reading a Philosophical Article or Book"
- Jim Pryor, "Guidelines on Reading Philosophy"
- Jim Pryor, "Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper"
- Elijah Chudnoff, "A Guide to Philosophical Writing"

Reading/Assignment Schedule

Week 1: August 25, 27 (What is an argument?)

- **Read:** Korman, Introduction, Appendices A and B

Part 1: God

Week 2: September 1, 3 (Pascal's wager)

- **Read:** Lycan & Schlesinger, "You Bet Your Life: Pascal's Wager Defended"
- **Optional:** Korman, ch. 2

Week 3: September 8, 10 (The problem of evil)

- **Read:** Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence"
- **Optional:** Korman, ch. 1

Part 2: Morality

Week 4: September 15, 17 (Moral theory)

- **Read:** Foot, “The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect”
- **Optional:** Korman, ch. 10

Week 5: September 22, 24 (Veganism)

- **Read:** Norcross, “Puppies, Pigs, and People”
- **Optional:** Korman, ch. 9

Part 3: Political economy

Week 6: September 29, October 1 (Prisons and taxes)

- **Read:** Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (selections)
- **Optional:** Korman, ch. 7

FIRST ARGUMENT RECONSTRUCTION DUE MIDNIGHT ON SUNDAY, OCTOBER 4

Week 7: October 6, 8 (Socialism)

- **Read:** Cohen, *Why not Socialism?*

Week 8: October 13, 15 (Mid-term)

- **10/13: FALL BREAK: NO CLASS**
- **10/15: IN-CLASS MID-TERM**

Part 4: Free will and the self

Week 9: October 20, 22 (Free will)

- **Read:** Wolf, “Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility”
- **Optional:** Korman, ch. 5

Week 10: October 27, 29 (Personal identity)

- **Read:** Parfit, “Personal Identity”
- **Optional:** Korman, ch. 3

Part 5: Metaphysics, mind, and world

Week 11: November 3, 5 (No objects?)

- **Read:** Merricks, *Objects and Persons*, ch. 3

SECOND ARGUMENT RECONSTRUCTION DUE MIDNIGHT ON SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 8

Week 12: November 10, 12 (Can machines think?)

- **Read**: Dennett, "Can Machines Think?"

Part 6: Skepticism

Week 13: November 17, 19 (External world skepticism)

- **Read:** Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (selections)
- **Optional:** Korman, ch. 6

Week 14: THANKSGIVING BREAK — NO CLASS

Week 15: December 1, 3

- **Read:** Moore, "Proof of an External World"

Week 16: December 8

- Paper workshopping

FINAL PAPERS DUE BY 5:00PM MONDAY DECEMBER 14