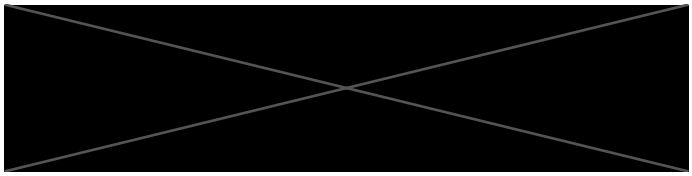
Common Sense and Skepticism in Philosophy



Course description: Almost all of us believe that there are hands, that arrows often fly through the air, and that Richard Nixon was once the president of the United States. But many philosophers – both historical and contemporary – have offered sophisticated arguments to the effect that *we do not know* these things, nor innumerable other run-of-the-mill tenets of common sense. Therefore, such skeptics would have it that philosophical argumentation can overturn even our most basic beliefs. In this course, we will ask: is philosophy powerful enough to overturn common sense? If not, why not? To assess these questions, we will look at arguments for and against several versions of philosophical skepticism throughout the history of philosophy. As we will see, how one responds to these arguments has significant ramifications concerning philosophy's role in understanding reality.

Required Texts: All course texts will be made available via the 'Files' tab on Canvas.

Assignments and grading

***Online journal*: ONCE** a week, I will provide you with a set of guiding questions that are related to the that week's reading. You will write a 100-200 word journal entry responding to *one* of those questions and post it to our online discussion forum by 11:59 PM the night before our next class meeting. **You will turn in ONE online journal post for each of our Wednesday class meetings, so your posts are due by Tuesday at 11:59 PM.** Late journal entries will not be accepted.

Additionally**, you must respond to ONE of your classmates's posts per week** – again, in 100-200 words. In responding to these posts, you should either (a) raise an objection to your classmate or, if you agree with your classmate, (b) raise critical concerns/questions with your classmate's post. Basically, you should treat your classmate's post as the text you're engaging with.

The guiding questions will vary. They will sometimes ask you about your own view on a subject; other times, they will ask you to consider the merits and demerits of a particular argument: and so on. However, answering them will be key to active classroom participation, and we will talk about the questions in class. Thus, they should not consist merely in a summary of the reading – they require critical engagement. That is, they should go beyond the course readings.

What does it mean to 'go beyond what was said in the course readings'? This will vary from prompt to prompt, but the basic idea is that you should ask your own questions of the material, or raise your own objections to a view, and so on. These replies do not have to be wholly original, but they must show that you've thought over the issues on your own terms.

Writing assignments: Three shorter assignments (~750-1000 words) and one longer assignment (~1250-1500 words). The shorter assignments are due on the first three Fridays, and the long assignment is due on the Saturday after our class ends.

Short Assignments: In these assignments, I'll ask you to engage with one of the objections we've considered in class. This will involve (i) explaining a view X, (ii) explaining why a particular objection to view X is an objection, and (iii) providing reasons to think that objection to view X is **successful** or **unsuccessful**. In effect, this amounts to you arguing **FOR or AGAINST a particular position.**

When I comment on them, I'll respond by either providing a defense of the position that you're objecting to, or objecting to the view that you defend.

Long Assignment: Your longer assignment will be similar to your shorter assignments, but you'll take it one step further. If you think that a particular objection is successful, **you will critically evaluate a reply on behalf of the view you are arguing against.** If you think that a particular objection is unsuccessful, **you will critically evaluate a reply on behalf of the objector you are arguing against.**

Here's what the structure should look like. First, you'll explain the view you're considering. Second, you'll explain an objection to that view and why that objection *is* an objection. Third, you'll provide some reasons that you agree or disagree with this objection. Fourth, you'll consider a reply on behalf of someone who holds the opposite view and present further reasons to think that their new reply is unsuccessful.

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.

You are allowed ***one*** unexcused absence. Each further unnotified absence will result in a **1/3rd of a letter grade** being deducted from your participation grade.

Grading scheme:

Journal: 10%
Short assignments: 15% each
Long assignment: 25%
Participation: 20%

Reading/assignment schedule

(All readings available through collab)

Week 1: Skepticism in the History of Philosophy

Monday (5/19) –N/A
Tuesday (5/20) – **Read:** Augustine, *Contra Academicos* (selection on Canvas). **Post:** Journal entry.

Wednesday (5/21) – **Read:** David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (selection on Canvas)
Thursday (5/22) – cont.
Friday (5/23) – **Read:** Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind* (selection on Canvas), **Submit:** Short Assignment 1

Week 2: On Moore's "Proof"

Monday (5/26) – **MEMORIAL DAY: NO CLASS**
Tuesday (5/27) – **Read:** G.E. Moore, "Proof of an External World"
Wednesday (5/28) – **Read:** Jim Pryor, "What's Wrong with Moore's Argument?". **Post:** Journal Entry.
Thursday (5/29) – cont.
Friday (5/30) – **Read:** Eli Hirsch, "Diabolical Mysticism, Death, and Skepticism". **Submit:** Short Assignment 2

Week 3: Can Philosophy Overturn Common Sense?

Monday (6/2) – **Read:** Susanna Rinard, "Why Philosophy Can Overturn Common Sense"
Tuesday (6/3) – **Read:** William Lycan, *On Evidence in Philosophy* (selection on Canvas) **Post:** Journal Entry
Wednesday (6/4) – cont.
Thursday (6/5) – **Read:** Bryan Frances, "Philosophical Proofs Against Common Sense"
Friday (6/6) – cont., **Submit:** Short Assignment 3

Week 4: Contemporary Skeptical Problems

Monday (6/9) – **Read:** Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (selection on Canvas)
Tuesday (6/10) – **Read:** Sharon Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value" **Post:** Journal Entry.
Wednesday (6/11) – cont.
Thursday (6/12) – **Read:** Nick Bostrom, "Are We Living in a Computer Simulation?"
Friday (6/13) – cont.
Saturday (6/14) – **Submit:** Long Assignment