

PHL 310: Knowledge and Reality

Spring 2010

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Course Information:

The first half of the course will focus on the 'reality' half of our title. First, we'll ask about the nature of time, and address one famous argument for the paradoxical conclusion that time is not real. Then, we'll discuss the nature of our selves. Are we just our bodies, or could a person survive the destruction of her body? Next, we'll explore a debate about the reality of morality. Are moral facts part of the fabric of reality just as much as scientific facts are?

At this point, we'll start a gradual transition from questions about reality to questions about knowledge. We'll turn to the topic of god. Does the elegant design of the world we see around us constitute a compelling argument in favor of god's existence? If the argument is not compelling, is belief still permissible?

Our final two topics will concern radical skepticism about our knowledge of the world. First, we will examine the classic philosophical argument that we cannot really know whether there is an external material world containing rocks, trees, tables and chairs. And second, we'll examine the argument that we cannot, on the basis of past experience, draw any conclusions about the future. We'll evaluate the power of both kinds of skeptical argument, and we'll study some standard replies to each.

Readings:

All readings will be made available as PDFs on the course blackboard site, or else as links to websites. Make sure you have access to our blackboard site; email me if you do not.

(Sad to say, most of the readings are by white men. Philosophy needs a more diverse group of participants. The trends are only just starting to improve, and many of you can help with that!)

Assignments and Grading:

Students will submit three pieces of writing for grading. The first assignment will not be a conventional paper; it will be an argument analysis and commentary. (I'll explain this more when we get to it.) The second and third assignments will be conventional papers, 5 - 6 double-spaced pages each. These three items will be the only graded material for this class (but not the only factor affecting your final grade; read on). Pluses and minuses will be used.

Your work will be graded *blindly*. In other words, you will not write your name anywhere on your work, you'll only write an identification number, and our grader will read and grade it without knowing who wrote it.

Before submitting the two papers for grading, we will hold a class meeting dedicated to reading first drafts of each others' papers. These first drafts will not be officially graded; they are only meant to help you prepare your final drafts. However, attendance at both these peer review sessions is absolutely mandatory for all students. IF YOU MISS A PEER REVIEW SESSION WITHOUT AN EXTREMELY GOOD EXCUSE, YOUR GRADE FOR THE COURSE WILL BE REDUCED A THIRD OF A LETTER.

Class Participation:

Class participation is *extremely welcome*. Ask questions and share your thoughts. Never worry that your question sounds dumb, because (a) it won't affect your grade, and more importantly (b) it's almost certainly not a dumb question.

If your final grade from the papers is near a borderline, then it can be adjusted up or down. Multiple unexcused absences from lecture will put it below the borderline. A dramatically upward progress of grades on the three papers can put it above the borderline.

Late Work:

Any work handed in after the start of the class when it is due will be docked one-third of a letter grade. An additional one-third of a letter will be docked every 24 hours after that. Medical excuses for late work require written notice from your doctor to avoid docking.

Plagiarism:

Don't plagiarize! This course will have a zero tolerance policy for plagiarism.

Plagiarism happens whenever your work includes *words* or *ideas* that come from someone else, and you do not *explicitly* say what is coming from someone else (e.g. like I do with my footnote to the heading above). **Students are caught plagiarizing *all the time*.** If you plagiarize in this course, it will be caught, you will automatically fail the course, and you will be reported to the dean.

Disabilities:

“Students with disabilities may request appropriate academic accommodations from the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, Services for Students with Disabilities, 471-6259.” (quoted from a memo from Vice Provost Ritter.)

Course Schedule:

Topic: The Reality of Time

Week 1

Tuesday, Jan 19
no reading

Thursday, Jan 21

Sider, ‘Time’

Pryor, ‘How to Read A Philosophy Paper’ (<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html>)

Week 2

Tuesday, Jan 26

Van Inwagen, ‘Temporality’ (pp.71-81)

Thursday, Jan 28

McTaggart, ‘Time’

C.D. Broad, ‘Examination of McTaggart’s Philosophy’

Van Inwagen continued (pp.81-7)

Topic: The Reality of the Self

Week 3

Tuesday, Feb 2

Williams, ‘The Self and the Future’

Thursday, Feb 4
Parfit, 'Personal Identity'

Topic: The Reality of Morals

Week 4

Tuesday, Feb 9
Harman, 'Ethics and Observation'

Thursday, Feb 11
Sturgeon, 'Moral Explanations'

1ST ASSIGNMENT, ARGUMENT ANALYSIS, DISTRIBUTED TODAY

Look at Pryor's advice on writing a philosophy paper:

<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>

Week 5:

Tuesday, Feb 16 and Thursday, Feb 18
Van Inwagen, 'How to Think About the Problem of Free Will'

Topic: God and Design

Week 6

Tuesday and Thursday, Feb 23 and 25
Hume's Dialogues, parts 1, 2 and 3; <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/hd.html>
ARGUMENT ANALYSIS DUE TUESDAY, FEB 23rd, 3:30PM

Week 7

Tuesday and Thursday, March 2 and 4
Hume's Dialogues, parts 4 and 5; <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/hd.html>

Week 8

Tuesday, March 9
Collins, 'God, Design and Fine-Tuning'

Thursday, March 11

Dawkins, ch. 4 of *The God Delusion*

1ST PAPER TOPICS DISTRIBUTED

Reread Pryor's advice on writing a philosophy paper:

<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>

Week 9

Tuesday, March 16 and Thursday, March 18

Spring Break; no class

Topic: Skepticism about Our Knowledge of the External World

Week 10

Tuesday, March 23

Peer Review Session

Thursday, March 25

Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy (First Meditation: On What Can Be Called into Doubt)*

Klein 'Academic Skepticism'; <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skepticism/#3>

Week 11

Tuesday, March 30

Moore, 'Proof of an External World'

1ST PAPER DUE TODAY

Thursday, April 1

Pryor, 'What's Wrong with Moore's Argument?'

Week 12

Tuesday, April 6

Vogel, 'Cartesian Skepticism and Inference to the Best Explanation'

Thursday, April 8

Chalmers, 'The Matrix as Metaphysics'; <http://consc.net/papers/matrix.html>

Topic: Skepticism about Our Knowledge of the Future

Week 13

Tuesday, April 13

Hume, sections 4 and 5 of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*; <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdfbits/he1.pdf>

Thursday, April 15

Goodman, 'The New Riddle of Induction'

Week 14

Tuesday, April 20

Reichenbach, 'The Pragmatic Justification of Induction'

Thursday, April 22

Van Cleve, 'Reliability, Justification, and the Problem of Induction'

Week 15

Tuesday, April 27

DeRose, 'Contextualism: An Explanation and Defense'

Cohen, 'Contextualism and Skepticism'

Thursday, April 29

Conee, 'Contextualism Contested'

2ND PAPER TOPICS DISTRIBUTED. This assignment will address both the last two topics on skepticism about knowledge. Don't miss class!

Week 16

Tuesday, May 4

Peer Review Session

Thursday, May 6

(buffer)

2ND PAPER DUE **TUESDAY, MAY 11TH**, BY EMAIL BEFORE 3:30PM