

PH-101: Introduction to Philosophy
Moral Knowledge, or What you don't know can hurt you!

Course Overview

There are children here in the U.S. and around the world who are dying from hunger or preventable diseases. And the sad fact is that it would take only a small amount of money to make a big difference for these children—the difference between death and survival.

You have all heard about these or similar problems. And, even if you haven't seen it first-hand, you have been presented with evidence, in school or on news programming, that this is the case. You *know* it. You may not know a *particular* child who could be saved with a small donation, but you know the general fact, and you also know that you are in a position to do something about it, however small.

Does this knowledge alone place a moral obligation on you to *do* something? Or does moral obligation require more than mere knowledge of the facts? And, to get at a more fundamental question, what is it to *know* that some action is the right action? This question will be the focus of this class.

Since this is an introduction to philosophy, we will consider the ways this question has been answered by various philosophers in the history of philosophy. We will start by considering what knowledge *is*. What kinds of evidence and how much evidence is required in order for someone to *know* something (as opposed to merely believing it)? And does it matter whether we really *know* something or whether we merely *believe* something with good justification? Philosophers group these questions under the heading of **epistemology** or **theories of knowledge**.

We will then consider how our theory of knowledge intersects with our theory of moral obligation. So, we will consider questions about **moral action** and **character**. What is it for an action to be *good* or *right*? Or, as classical authors would put it, what does it take for a person to be *virtuous*? What sorts of preferences should one place on one's own interests in light of the interests of others? And how is it that we often *know* what the right action is, and yet we fail to do it?

These are all rather ambitious questions, and we will only be able to get a *start* on answers to these questions this semester. But by following these threads through philosophy, I hope to introduce you to some of the more interesting puzzles and problems that inspire a philosopher's reflection.

Course Texts

The following texts will be available at the Skidmore Shop:

Plato, *Protagoras and Meno* (Penguin Classics, ISBN: 978-0140449037)
Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Hackett Publ. Co., ISBN: 978-0872204645)
Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Hackett Publ. Co., ISBN: 978-0872202160)
Shelley, *Frankenstein: or the Modern Prometheus* (Oxford University Press, ISBN: 978-0199537167)
Vaughn, *Writing Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, ISBN: 978-0195179569)

Additional readings will be made available on the course website, which you can access at <http://blackboard.skidmore.edu>.

Course Objectives

The main objective of this class is for you to get a taste of what it is to *do* philosophy (as opposed to merely learning about philosophers). Doing philosophy involves a lot of reading and writing, but not the sort of reading and writing you will likely have done, say, in your literature class. Reading philosophy involves careful attention to detail, and it will require you to slow down and concentrate on the specific claims that are being made in the text. With that in mind, we will work together on developing the skills of *reading*, *writing*, and *discussing* philosophical texts.

Specifically, by the end of this class, you will be able to

1. Read a philosophical text.
 - a. Identify arguments in a philosophical text, isolating the claim being defended and the reasons given in support of that claim.
 - b. Recognize differences in the sorts of arguments being made, distinguishing deductive arguments, inductive arguments, and inferences to the best explanation.
 - c. Form preliminary evaluations of arguments.
2. Write a philosophical essay.
 - a. Paraphrase and reconstruct a philosopher's argument in your own words, following principles of interpretive charity.
 - b. Formulate a focused, clear, and substantive thesis sentence, with a scope suitable for a relatively short philosophical essay.
 - c. Provide a clear argument in support of your thesis.
 - d. Assess and respond to key objections to your thesis.
3. Engage in a philosophical discussion.
 - a. Present your own philosophical views and interpretations orally and articulate your reasons for thinking those views are true.
 - b. Respond orally to objections and questions that others raise for your views.
 - c. Raise questions for others, demonstrating a sense for how your classmates can build on or develop their views further and for where problems lie for their argument.

Course Requirements

The requirements for this course will be divided as follows:

1. Attendance, Participation, and Reading Responses (10%);
2. Two Exams (20% each);
3. Four Short Papers (10% each for the first three papers, 20% for the final paper).

Grading Policy

I will follow the evaluation rubric outlined in the course catalog (p. 49) when assigning grades:

A+, A	Distinguished work
A-, B+, B	Superior Work
B-, C+, C	Satisfactory Work
C-, D+, D	Passing, poor-quality work
F	Failure, no credit earned

Late Work: Any late work will be graded down by 1/3 of a grade for each day that it is late. You will receive no credit for work that is more than a week late.

Example: a B paper will receive a B- if handed in up to one day late; it will receive a C+ if it is handed in two days late; etc.

I do not allow make-up exams.

Papers

Each of the four papers will have a different format. The progression of formats is designed to take you in small steps towards writing a full-fledged philosophical essay. While most of you will have written a thesis-driven essay in the past, there are additional components of a good philosophical essay that you may not know. The readings in the *Writing Philosophy* text are intended to familiarize you with good philosophical writing, and the different formats for the papers will give you a chance to focus on specific elements.

Here is a brief description of each of the three formats:

Paper One: *Paraphrase/Summary* – Paraphrase or summarize a selection from one of the philosophical texts we have read for the course. See pp. 13-15 of *Writing Philosophy* for guidelines on writing a good paraphrase or summary. (1-2 pages)

Paper Two: *Paraphrase/Summary plus Evaluation* – Paraphrase or summarize a selection from one of the philosophical texts we have read for the course and then evaluate the argument. See pp. 12-13 and Chapter 2 of *Writing Philosophy* for guidelines on evaluating a philosophical argument. (3 pages)

Paper Three: *The Skeleton of the Argumentative Structure* – Start the essay with a one-sentence introduction, the claim you want to endorse. Then provide your reasons for believing this claim. You should also consider one objection to the claim. So, using the structure given on p. 56 of *Writing Philosophy*, this paper should include only IA, II, and III. (3-4 pages)

Paper Four: *Basic Argumentative Structure* – This essay should follow the basic structure of a full paper, complete with an introduction that includes a thesis statement, an argument in favor of the thesis, consideration of objections, and a conclusion. So, this paper should include *all* of the elements given in the structure on p. 56 of *Writing Philosophy*. (5-7 pages)

I will distribute more detailed guidelines for each of these formats as they come up on the schedule.

Paper FAQ

Q: How will you grade the papers?

A: Each paper will receive a letter grade (A to F). I am generally *not* considered an “easy grader” on papers. One of the most common mistakes students fall into with their writing is in thinking that their first draft is pretty close to their final draft. In my experience (both personally and in working with other students), a first draft is a *long way* from being a final draft, and it often takes several rounds of careful revision before you have something close to a good final draft.

Q: How much time should I put into each paper?

A: You should allow yourself plenty of time for your papers, since revision will be the key to improving your writing. Start early and revise often. The earlier papers you will write are shorter, but they are not any less formal than a term paper. So you will need to put some time into them in order to do well.

Q: May I get help on the papers?

A: YES! Feel free to come to my *office hours* to talk to me about them, go to the *Writing Center*, talk to *friends and family* about the topic, stop *strangers* in the street to ask them what they think, etc., etc. The main requirement is that you give credit where credit is due: any resources you use should be properly cited and any words that are not your own should be set off in quotation marks and cited. If you have any questions about citations, please come and talk to me.

Attendance & Participation

Attendance and participation will be graded as follows:

You will receive up to 2 points per class session. You will receive 1 point for being present, and 1 point for being prepared (you've read the material, you're ready to discuss it, etc.). No points will be given if you are absent (whether excused or unexcused).

If you arrive more than 10 minutes late for class or leave more than 10 minutes early for class, you will receive at most 1 point for the class session.

The Precipice: Any student who misses 6 or more classes, whether or not any of those absences are excused, will automatically fail the class.

Reading Responses

Starting after the first paper is due, you will be required to write reading responses for any class session that does not have an exam or a paper due. The primary goal of this assignment is to have everyone prepared for a lively discussion in class.

The format of the reading response is the same as I've given for Paper Two above. First summarize or reconstruct an argument from the reading and then analyze/evaluate it. In class, I will often randomly select several students to read their responses aloud. Your classmates and I will respond to your presentation, kicking off a discussion of the readings themselves.

Grading of the responses: Keep your responses in a folder or binder dedicated for this purpose. I will collect the folders 3-4 times during the semester to ensure that you have an entry for each required response, and I will provide general comments on what you're doing well as well as how your responses could be improved.

Honor Code

In keeping with the Honor Code, I must give you some sense of what constitutes "honesty and integrity" in your work for this class. The main things I would be concerned about in this class are:

- a. Papers: any sources that you use in your paper must be properly quoted and cited. I don't expect you to do any outside research for the papers in this class. But if you do happen to consult other sources (whether formal research materials in the library or less formal research materials such as online write-ups), you *must* identify the source. If there is any uncertainty about what constitutes plagiarism or unauthorized aid on the papers, you should discuss it with me.

Of course, you are free to make use of peer reviews, visits to the Writing Center, meetings with me, etc., to sharpen your paper. In fact, **I encourage wide use of such aids.**

- b. Exams: you may study together (again, I encourage it!), but you may not make use of any notes or help from others (in any form) during the exams.

If you are in doubt about whether anything else constitutes a violation of the honor code, it is your responsibility to consult with me first. Any violation of the honor code will result in failure of the class.

Tentative Schedule

Note: The readings and schedule may change through the course of the semester. I will announce any changes in class.

Tuesday, Jan. 26: Introduction to the Course: *You Must Know Everything!*

I. Theory of Knowledge

Thursday, Jan. 28: Can virtue be taught? (Part I)

Readings: Plato, *Meno*, pp. vii-xiii, xix-xxiv, and 81-113
Writing Philosophy, pp. 3-13

Tuesday, Feb. 2: Can virtue be taught? (Part II)

Readings: Plato, *Meno*, pp. 113-134
Writing Philosophy, pp. 13-20

Thursday, Feb. 4: Knowledge as true belief plus an "account"

Readings: ☞ Plato, *Theaetetus* (selections)
Paper One due

Tuesday, Feb. 9: Problems with knowledge and a rationalist response

Readings: ☞ Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditations 1 & 2
Writing Philosophy, pp. 21-27

Thursday, Feb. 11: An empiricist response: no innate ideas

Readings: Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book I, selections from chapters 1 & 2
Writing Philosophy, 28-38

Tuesday, Feb. 16: An empirical theory of knowledge

Readings: Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II, selections from chapters 1 & 8
Writing Philosophy, 39-42

Thursday, Feb. 18: An empirical theory of the good

Readings: Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, selections from Book I, chapter 3 and Book II, chapters 20, 21 and 28.
Writing Philosophy, pp. 43-54

Interlude: The Moral Education of a Monster

Tuesday, Feb. 23: *Frankenstein*, Part I

Readings: Shelley, *Frankenstein*, pp. 13-89
Paper Two due

Thursday, Feb. 25: *Frankenstein*, Part II

Readings: Shelley, *Frankenstein*, pp. 90-164

Tuesday, Mar. 2: *Frankenstein*, Part III

Readings: Shelley, *Frankenstein*, pp. 165-223

Thursday, Mar. 4: **Midterm Exam**

Tuesday, Mar. 9: First Disputation

Readings: TBD

Thursday, Mar. 11: Evaluation of the Disputation and Looking Ahead

Readings: TBD

Spring Break: Mar. 13 – Mar. 21

III. Moral Wisdom

Tuesday, Mar. 23: Moral Relativism: *Pro*

Readings: 📖 Benedict, "In Defense of Moral Relativism"

Thursday, Mar. 25: Moral Relativism: *Con*

Readings: 📖 Rachels, "The Challenge of Cultural Relativism"

Writing Philosophy, pp. 55-68

Tuesday, Mar. 30: Virtue *is* a kind of knowledge

Readings: Plato, *Protagoras*, pp. xiii-xix and 352a-362a (pp. 65-80)

Writing Philosophy, pp. 68-80

Thursday, Apr. 1: Happiness and the Human Good

Readings: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 1-13, pp. 1-18

Writing Philosophy, pp. 85-89

Tuesday, Apr. 6: Virtues of character

Readings: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II, 1-9, pp. 18-30

Writing Philosophy, pp. 90-95

Paper Three due

Thursday, Apr. 8: Virtue and voluntary action

Readings: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III, 1-5, pp. 30-40

Tuesday, Apr. 13: Bravery and Temperance

Readings: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III, 6-12, pp. 40-49

Thursday, Apr. 15: Virtues of thought

Readings: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 1-6, pp. 86-90

Writing Philosophy, pp. 96-102

Tuesday, Apr. 20: The relation of virtues of thought to virtues of character (or *knowing don't make it so*)

Readings: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII, 1-10, pp. 99-114

Writing Philosophy, pp. 105-117

Thursday, Apr. 22: The moral demands of today's world: We *must* do better

Readings: 📖 Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality"

Writing Philosophy, pp. 118-125

Tuesday, Apr. 27: The moral demands of today's world: Why *don't* we do better?

Readings: ✓ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book II, Part III, Section III and Book III, Part I, Section I

Thursday, Apr. 29: Cultivating a moral sensibility

Readings: ✓ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, Part I, Section II

Tuesday, May 4: Second Disputation

Readings: TBD

Paper Four due

Tuesday, May 11, 6-9 p.m.: Final Exam

**Planning Calendar
for
PH-101 – Introduction to Philosophy**

Spring Semester 2010

Week	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
1 Jan. 24		Jan. 25 Classes Begin	1 – Jan. 26		2 – Jan. 28	Jan. 29 Drop/Add Deadline	
2 Jan. 31			3 – Feb. 2		4 – Feb. 4 Paper One Due		
3 Feb. 7			5 – Feb. 9		6 – Feb. 11		
4 Feb. 14			7 – Feb. 16		8 – Feb. 18		
5 Feb. 21			9 – Feb. 23 Paper Two Due		10 – Feb. 25		
6 Feb. 28			11 – Mar. 2		12 – Mar. 4 Midterm Exam		
7 Mar. 7			13 – Mar. 9		14 – Mar. 11		
Mar. 14	Spring Break (March 13 – March 21)						
8 Mar. 21			15 – Mar. 23		16 – Mar. 25		
9 Mar. 28			17 – Mar. 30		18 – Apr. 1		
10 Apr. 4			19 – Apr. 6 Paper Three Due		20 – Apr. 8		
11 Apr. 11			21 – Apr. 13		22 – Apr. 15	Apr. 16 Withdrawal Deadline	
12 Apr. 18			23 – Apr. 20		24 – Apr. 22		
13 Apr. 25			25 – Apr. 27 Paper Four Due		26 – Apr. 29		
14 May 2			27 – May 4 Last Day of Classes				
May 9			May 11 Final Exam 6-9 p.m.				