

Introduction to Philosophy (PHIL 2-14)

Tufts University

Fall 2022, Tuesdays and Thursdays, 4:30-5:45pm, Miner Hall, Room 224

Course Website: <https://canvas.tufts.edu/courses/39776>

Instructor: Ben Roth, Benjamin.Roth@tufts.edu (I will usually respond within 24 hours on weekdays, but please check the syllabus and course website for answers to questions first.)

Office Hours: Tuesdays 6-6:30 and Thursdays 3-4 in Miner 111.

Course Description: Do we really know what we think we do? What role do habit and character play in acting ethically? Does a social contract place obligations on us, even if we never agreed to it? What should we do when we think the law is unjust? Do art and culture fruitfully direct our attention, or distract us from more important concerns? Through a consideration of these and related questions about how we should live, this section will introduce students to a diverse range of historical and contemporary approaches to Western philosophy, while helping them develop their writing skills through regular short papers, feedback, and revisions.

Expectations:

— That you will attend class and contribute regularly to our discussions.

— That, before each class, you will have read the assigned selections carefully and critically, multiple times (on purpose, a limited number of pages are assigned each week). I do not expect you to fully understand the readings on your own, but I do expect you to spend enough time with them that you have an initial understanding, have a sense of where you need clarification and further explanation, and have questions and objections.

— That we will all treat each other and the readings with respect, but also skepticism. Philosophy does not care about a view simply because someone believes it, but because of the quality of reasons that can be provided for that view.

— That you will not simply write up the first paper idea that comes to you, but spend some time considering different possible arguments and then develop the most promising one as deeply as you can, having considered objections to it.

— That you will turn papers in on time (by uploading them to Canvas).

Books:

All of the course readings will be available on Canvas as .pdfs. There are no required books. But if you would prefer not to read on a screen as often, the following editions should be available at the [Tufts Bookstore](#).

Plato, *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, 3rd ed., Hackett 9780872205543

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 3rd ed., Hackett 9781624668159

Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 3rd ed., Hackett 9780872201927

Pereboom, ed., *Free Will*, 2nd ed., Hackett 9781603841290

Blaisdell, ed., *Essays on Civil Disobedience*, Dover 978-0486793818

Plagiarism:

Plagiarism is presenting others' language or ideas, intentionally or unintentionally, as your own. If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism, ask. Suspected cases will be investigated thoroughly and punished significantly if proven. In general, I would encourage you *not* to pursue outside sources (including idly googling things) until we have discussed a topic and you have written your paper on it. If you do draw on any outside sources, you must cite them, or you are guilty of plagiarism. But our papers do not ask for someone else's, rather than your own, explanations or

arguments. Thus if you rely on and cite outside sources, instead of your own thinking, you haven't really completed the assignment. Our readings are not easy—you will need to read them carefully, and multiple times—but everything you need to write your papers is in the texts themselves. There is a lot of nonsense written about philosophy on the internet, even on what might seem to be reputable websites (the best internet resource for philosophy is the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, at <https://plato.stanford.edu>). If a topic piques your interest, I would be very happy to guide you to related readings.

Technology:

Phones should be turned off and put away, and I recommend reading off-screen as much as possible (it is empirically well established that people struggle to read as attentively on devices). Our class meetings will be primarily grounded in discussion and, since there are no exams, you won't need to take extensive notes, just jot down a few ideas that will be relevant to your papers.

Accessibility:

If you need accommodation for a documented disability, talk to me at the beginning of the semester.

Evaluation:

Over the first half of the semester, you will write four short papers, and then revise the third or fourth based on feedback from both me and your peers (meaning you will also be giving peer feedback). Over the second half of the semester, after we read a set of texts about civil disobedience, you will propose a final paper topic, which I will give you feedback on, get and give peer feedback (which will be graded now that you've had practice) on a draft, and then turn in a revised version. Except in cases of medical emergencies, late papers will be docked a third of a letter grade per day, and will not be accepted after a week. There are no quizzes or exams. Each paper prompt includes a specific length guideline (based on the posted formatting instructions). If you are significantly short of this, then you are not answering the question in sufficient detail, or haven't developed your argument fully enough. I will stop reading if you go more than 25% over the guideline, and we will talk about how and why some ruthless editing makes almost all writing better. It is your responsibility to make sure your papers upload correctly (Canvas allows you to view what has uploaded); accidentally uploading the wrong file, or a corrupted one, is not a valid excuse. N.B.: don't upload papers directly from Pages, as it gives me only a link, not the actual paper, such that I can't comment on it in Canvas's interface—first export it as a .docx or .pdf, then upload that. Here is the grading breakdown:

Paper 1: 10%

Paper 2: 10%

Paper 3: 10%

Revision of Paper 2 or 3: 25%

Final Paper Proposal: 5%

Peer Feedback on Draft of Final Paper: 5%

Revision of Final Paper: 35%

Since this is small, discussion-based seminar, everybody should be talking every class. Your participation grade—based on your questions, contributions to discussions, and the quality of your first two batches of peer feedback—can slide your final grade up or down 1/3 of a letter grade (e.g., a B+ can become an A- or B). Chronic unexcused absences and/or tardiness will lower your grade.

Course Schedule (subject to slight revisions):

What Do We Really Know?

Tuesday, September 6

Course Introduction

Plato, “The Allegory of the Cave” from *The Republic*

Thursday, September 8

Nguyen, “Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles”

Tuesday, September 13

Descartes, Meditation One

Thursday, September 15

Descartes, Meditation Two

Further Reading: Mediations Three-Six

Tuesday, September 20

O’Gieblyn, “Algorithm”

Paper 1 (2 pages) due before class on Thursday, September 22:

Briefly describe an important belief that you sincerely hold, but worry could be false.

What should you do to check your reasoning? Will you actually do so? Why or why not?

Reference to our readings can either be explicit or left implicit.

Character, Habit, and Virtue

Thursday, September 22

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I

Recommended: *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II

Tuesday, September 27

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III.6-9 (bravery), Book IV.3 (magnanimity)

Jesus, The Beatitudes: Matthew 5:3-12, Luke 6:20-22

Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 260

Further Reading: Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Book I

Thursday, September 29

model Aristotle paper

Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person”

Tuesday, October 4

Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person”

Thursday, October 6

Appiah, “The Case Against Character,” pp. 33-50

Kamtekar, “Situationism and Virtue Ethics on the Content of our Character,” pp. 462-466

Further Reading: the rest of Kamtekar's essay

Paper 2 (2 pages) due before class on Tuesday, October 11

Is it bad to be a wanton? Why or why not? To start, you will need to explain Frankfurt's term. But he at most implies what he thinks about this normative question—to which I want to hear what you think (not what he does), backed up with an argument.

The Modern Social Contract and Its Critics

Tuesday, October 11

Hobbes, from *Leviathan*

Thursday, October 13

Graeber and Wengrow, "Wicked Liberty: The Indigenous Critique and the Myth of Progress"

Further Reading: Rousseau, First Discourse or Second Discourse

Peer Feedback on Paper 2 (1 page) due by 9pm on Friday, October 14

Tuesday, October 18

Rawls, from *Theory of Justice*

Thursday, October 20

Mills, from *The Racial Contract* (pp. 1-19 required, 19-40 optional)

Paper 3 (2 pages) due before class on Tuesday, October 25:

Explain and critically evaluate the purpose of Rawls's "veil of ignorance." You can build on Mills's criticisms but should not merely summarize them; you can also take a completely different tack. Either way, make sure to offer your own argumentative contribution, in the form of a critique and (optionally) a Rawlsian rebuttal.

Civil Disobedience

Tuesday, October 25

Plato, "Crito"

Further Reading: Plato, "Apology"

Thursday, October 27

Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet"

Further Reading: Osterweil, from *In Defense of Looting*

Peer Feedback on Paper 3 (1 page) due by 9pm on Friday, October 28

Tuesday, November 1

Kant, "What Is Enlightenment?"

Thursday, November 3

Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience"

Further Reading: Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*

Revision of Paper 2 or 3 (3 pages) due before normal class time on Tuesday, November 8

Tuesday, November 8: substitute Friday schedule, our class does not meet

Start working on your final paper proposal

Thursday, November 10
Gandhi, from *Hind Swaraj*

Tuesday, November 15
MLK, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"
Further Reading: Delmas, "In Defense of Uncivil Disobedience"

Final Paper Proposal (1 page) due before normal class time on Thursday, November 17

Thursday, November 17
Individual paper proposal meetings on Zoom instead of class

Tuesday, November 22
Individual paper proposal meetings on Zoom instead of class

Thursday, November 24: Thanksgiving, No Class

Culture and Attention

Tuesday, November 29
Zuboff, from *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*
Smith, "A Sudden Acceleration"

Thursday, December 1
Adorno, "Free Time"
Slouka, "Quitting the Paint Factory"
Further Reading: White, from *The Middle Mind*

Draft of Final Paper (~4 pages) due by 9pm on Friday, December 2

Tuesday, December 6
Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over other Concepts"

Thursday, December 8
Nagel, "The Absurd"
Further Reading: Gallegos, "Seriousness, Irony, and Cultural Politics"

Peer Feedback (1-2 pages) on Draft of Final Paper due by 9pm on Friday, December 9

Revision of Final Paper (6-7 pages) due by 9pm on Friday, December 16

An Introduction to Writing Philosophy Papers

This is a writing-intensive course, meant both to improve your writing generally and to introduce you to writing in philosophy. Like all disciplines, philosophy has values and conventions specific to it, which sometimes overlap with, and sometimes are in tension with, those in other kinds of writing. Keep that in mind as you learn and practice writing in philosophy in this course. We will discuss writing issues, especially when papers are assigned, and look at some model student essays. You will receive feedback from me about matters of form and rhetoric, in addition to content, on your papers; we will also have a few bouts of peer feedback, when you are revising papers. Here are some important initial guidelines about writing in philosophy:

Philosophy values **clarity** and **precision** very highly. You should choose your words carefully and define or explain uncommon, unfamiliar, and technical terms (think of your audience as generally well educated and curious, but not specifically familiar with our readings). It is often helpful to make distinctions, so your reader knows you mean X rather than—similarly but importantly differently—Y. Work to make sure your sentences cannot reasonably be interpreted to mean other than what you intend them to mean. Don't trust that your reader will be charitable; make your sentences literally mean what you intend. Since philosophy often deals with complex and abstract issues, it is all the more important to use straightforward and plain language whenever possible. Don't falsely inflate your diction, syntax, or tone in an effort to sound smart or cover over vagueness in your thinking.

Philosophy values **reasons** and **argument** very highly. When discussing an existing view (from our readings), it is not enough to explain *what* is claimed. Rather, you will almost always be asked to explain *why* a philosopher claims what he or she does, what reasons are put forward to defend that claim as being true. When writing about your own views in philosophy, it is not enough to merely state your opinion, *that* you think X, or *that* someone is wrong to claim Y. Rather, you need to argue *why* X is true, *for what reasons* Y is false, so that your reader has rational grounds for accepting your claim. In making arguments, it is better (especially in short papers of the sort assigned in this course) to develop one unified argument for your claim, or criticism of someone else's, than it is to list numerous partially developed ones. Pick your strongest reason and develop it as fully as you can. A common mistake in philosophy papers is merely offering your opinion, not an argument that it is true. Another common mistake is thinking that an earth-shatteringly original claim is better than a more modest but still interesting one, carefully defended.

Think about what **form** best captures the shape of your idea. Given how short the papers in our class are, you need to use space efficiently: don't include broad summary and background information—start exactly on topic. But you shouldn't assume that your reader has seen the prompt. You need to succinctly frame the issue for them to start the paper, and their comprehension will be aided enormously if you forefront your main claim early in the paper as a clear and contentious thesis statement.

My Paper's Title

This is how I would like you to format your papers. Use a normal font (like Times New Roman or Garamond) in 12-point size, and one-inch margins on all sides. Single-space your header information (if you are using *Word*, go to “Format,” “Paragraph,” and check “Don’t add space between paragraphs of the same style”), and include it only on the first page, then double-space the body of the paper. Length guidelines are based on this formatting. Give your paper an interesting and informative title—one that gives your reader some hint of your argument, not just topic or question. Include page numbers at the bottom of the page.

Citation-wise, I don’t need anything for assigned works beyond parenthetical page numbers for quotations and paraphrases. For example, King writes that “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” (359). In quoting Plato and Aristotle, it is traditional to use the standardized page numbers included in the margins of every respectable edition. For example, Euthyphro at one point defines piety as “what is dear to the gods” (7a). If you refer to any source beyond those assigned, you should provide enough bibliographical information in a footnote that I can track it down—though this should be relevant, if at all, only for the final paper. For example, Heidegger writes, “By its very essence, death is in every case mine.”¹ Note that citations aren’t necessary for references to common knowledge, or general claims about well-known works like, say, *Hamlet*.

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Collins, 1962), 284.