

Philosophy 169: Nozick's *Philosophical Explanations* (DRAFT, revised 1/3/24)
Harvard University, Spring 2024

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Course Description:

A close reading of Harvard philosopher Robert Nozick's neglected masterpiece *Philosophical Explanations*. Topics include philosophical methodology, the identity of the self, why there is something rather than nothing, knowledge and skepticism, free will and determinism, the foundations of ethics, and the meaning of life.

Time and Place: Tuesdays, 12:00–2:00 p.m., in [location TBD]

There will be no weekly discussion section.

Course Website: <https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/127359>

All handouts and assignments will be made available on the course website. Note that you must login using your HarvardKey to see all of the site's content. If you do not have a HarvardKey, you can visit <<https://key.harvard.edu>> for more information on how to obtain one.

Admission Policy:

This is a proseminar, which is a seminar-style class aimed at undergraduates. Enrollment in the course will be capped at 24 students, with a preference given to undergraduate students, and among undergraduate students, to those with more background in philosophy than others. Auditors will only be allowed to attend class meetings if there are fewer than 24 students taking the course for credit.

Texts:

The following book will be available for purchase in the textbook section of the Harvard Coop:

Nozick, Robert. *Philosophical Explanations*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981.

We aim to read this book in its entirety. There will be no other assigned readings.

Requirements:

The breakdown of grades will be as follows:

25% *Seminar attendance and participation.*

Evaluation will be based on attendance, preparation (i.e. having done all of the reading), and contributions to discussion. For those of you who don't feel comfortable talking during class, discussing material from the course during office hours may count toward your contributions to discussion.

60% *Term paper.*

A 12–18 page (double-spaced) term paper on some portion of Nozick’s book will be due at a date and time during Exam Period to be determined by the Harvard Registrar. Students are highly encouraged to meet with the instructor or teaching fellow during the course of the semester to discuss their final paper topic.

15% *Response paragraphs.*

For each meeting of the seminar other than the first one and one other session of your choosing, students are expected to write a short paragraph responding to some part of the week’s reading assignment. These response paragraphs will provide a springboard for our class discussion, and they should be uploaded to the course’s website by 11:59 p.m. the night before the seminar meets each week (i.e. by 11:59 p.m. on Monday night). Some of the things you could do in your response paragraph:

- provide an overall reaction to the assigned reading, or to some subportion of it (such as one particular chapter or one particular subsection);
- raise an objection to one claim and/or one argument made by Nozick or by one of the authors he discusses;
- further expound on a point made by Nozick or by one of the authors he discusses, or defend that point against possible objections;
- bring up a potential point of interpretation of some crucial passage;
- ask some questions about a portion of the reading you didn’t fully understand;
- connect some part of the assigned text to material we read earlier in the course, or to material you’ve read in other philosophy classes.

In particular, note that the first of these is only one option among many—it’s really up to you what you want to write about in your paragraph, and you shouldn’t feel obligated to always (or really ever) pass judgment on each week’s reading as a whole.

Note, also, that everyone gets one “get out of jail free” card: on one week of your choosing, you are allowed to skip the response paragraph.

Late assignments will be penalized one-third of a letter grade per day in the case of term papers (e.g. from a B+ to a B) and one increment on the check-plus/check/check-minus scale per day in the case of response paragraphs (e.g. from a check-plus to a check). Extensions will be granted only under exceptional circumstances, and only if an extension is requested *before* the due date of the assignment.

Fulfillment of Distribution Requirements:

Undergraduate students who are philosophy concentrators may use this course to fulfill a distribution requirement either in Contemporary Metaphysics and Epistemology (i.e. “M&E”) or in Moral and Political Philosophy and Aesthetics (i.e. “M/P/A”), regardless of the topic of their term paper.

Graduate PhD students may use this course to fulfill a distribution requirement in Contemporary Theoretical Philosophy if they write a term paper on a topic from Chapters 1–3 of Nozick’s book, and they may use it to fulfill a distribution requirement in Practical Philosophy if they write a term paper on a topic from Chapters 4–6.

Electronic Devices:

The use of laptops, tablets, cell phones, etc. during lectures and section meetings is strictly prohibited (except in cases of medical necessity, in which case follow the guidelines given below for students with disabilities).

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities:

Harvard University values inclusive excellence and providing equal educational opportunities for all students. Our goal is to remove barriers for disabled students related to inaccessible elements of instruction or design in this course. If reasonable accommodations are necessary to provide access, please contact the Disability Access Office (DAO). Accommodations do not alter fundamental requirements of the course and are not retroactive. Students are advised to request accommodations as early as possible, since they may take time to implement. Students should notify DAO at any time during the semester if adjustments to their communicated accommodation plan are needed.

Academic Integrity Policy – Collaboration Permitted in Written Work:

Discussion and the exchange of ideas are essential to academic work. For assignments in this course, you are encouraged to consult with your classmates on the choice of paper topics and to share sources. You may find it useful to discuss your chosen topic with the course instructor, your TF, or your peers, particularly if you are working on the same topic as a classmate. However, you should ensure that any written work you submit for evaluation is the result of your own research and writing and that it reflects your own approach to the topic. In particular, we specifically forbid the use of ChatGPT or any other generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools at all stages of the work process, including preliminary ones. Violations of this policy will be considered academic misconduct. We draw your attention to the fact that different classes at Harvard might implement different AI policies, and it is the student's responsibility to conform to the expectations for each course.

Departmental Writing Fellow: Eva Yguico

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Website: <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/phil-dwf>

The Department Writing Fellow (DWF) is a resource for undergraduate students enrolled in Philosophy Department courses who would like help with their writing. Whether you need assistance starting a paper, formulating an argument, editing a draft, or figuring out the conventions of philosophical writing, the DWF can help. To learn more about one-on-one consultations, please visit the above URL.

At a date, time, and location TBD, the DWF will be giving a lecture on the nuts and bolts of writing philosophy papers. All are welcome to attend.

Meeting and Reading Schedule:

[Note: it is also expected that you read the endnotes for each assigned chunk of text.]

- Tue., Jan. 23:* Introduction (pp. 1–24)
- Tue., Jan. 30:* Chapter 1: The Identity of the Self, Part I: Personal Identity through Time (pp. 27–70)
- Tue., Feb. 6:* Chapter 1: The Identity of the Self, Part II: Reflexivity (pp. 71–114)
- Tue., Feb. 13:* Chapter 2: Why Is There Something Rather than Nothing? (pp. 115–164)
- Tue., Feb. 20:* Chapter 3: Knowledge and Skepticism, Part I: Knowledge; and Part II: Skepticism, 1st half (pp. 167–227)
- Tue., Feb. 27:* Chapter 3: Knowledge and Skepticism, Part II: Skepticism, 2nd half; and Part III: Evidence (pp. 227–288)
- Tue., Mar. 5:* Chapter 4: Free Will, Part I: Choice and Indeterminism; and Part II: Determinism and Aligning with Value, 1st half (pp. 291–341)
- Tue., Mar. 12:* NO CLASS (Spring Break)
- Tue., Mar. 19:* Chapter 4: Free Will, Part II: Determinism and Aligning with Value, 2nd half; and Part III: Retributive Punishment (pp. 342–397)
- Tue., Mar. 26:* Chapter 5: Foundations of Ethics, Part I: Ethical Push (pp. 399–450)
- Tue., Apr. 2:* Chapter 5: Foundations of Ethics, Part II: Ethical Pull; and Part III: The Structure of Ethical Pull (pp. 451–504)
- Tue., Apr. 9:* Chapter 5: Foundations of Ethics, Part IV: The Life of Value; Part V: Fact and Value; and Part VI: The Basis of Value (pp. 505–570)
- Tue., Apr. 16:* NO CLASS (instructor out of town)
- Tue., Apr. 23:* Chapter 6: Philosophy and the Meaning of Life (pp. 571–647)