

# Central Problems in Philosophy

Philosophy UA 1, Fall 2019

GM Johnson



**Instructor:** Gabbrielle Johnson [Gabby]

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**Office:** TBA

**Time:** MW 9:30-10:45am

**Place:** SILV 206

## Course Overview:

This course will provide an introduction to some of the classic and enduring problems in philosophy and to the methods that philosophers use for tackling them. Our readings, writing assignments, and class discussions will be structured around four central questions: What is knowledge? What is the relationship between the human mind and the physical body? Is our world causally determined, and does that preclude the possibility of free will? What is required for moral responsibility? We will compare historical discussions of each of these issues with work by more recent philosophers.

The course is divided into four units:

UNIT ONE: SKEPTICISM

UNIT TWO: MIND + BODY

UNIT THREE: ACTION + IDENTITY

UNIT FOUR: THE MEANING OF LIFE

## Course Materials:

**All required and supplementary materials (including readings, quizzes, and writing assignments) will be available through the course website. It is very important to check it regularly for updates.**

There is no required textbook for the course. Those looking for an introductory guide to the topics covered in this class are encouraged to check out the following textbook:  
Rosen, Byrne, Cohen, and Shiffrin, 2015, *The Norton Introduction to Philosophy*

### **Course Policies:**

Regarding classroom etiquette, the most important policy to keep in mind is to always abide by the **Principle of Charity**. Formally, the principle requires that you interpret a speaker's statements in the most persuasive way possible, so as to render those statements rational and worthy of philosophical engagement. Intuitively, this requires that you give everyone you interact with the benefit of the doubt. A student following the Principle of Charity, for example, would not speak over their fellow student or be outright dismissive of the points they're intending to convey. This applies not only to your fellow students, but also those readings with which we'll be engaging. The primary aim of the principle is ensure a respectful, worthwhile, and collaborative intellectual environment. Thus, all students will be expected to always act in ways that further these aims.

Here are some additional course policies, the explanations for which are available on the course website and will be covered on the first day of class:

- No electronics (cell phones, laptops, tablets, etc.) are permitted in class.
- Participation and attendance are mandatory.
- Late writing assignments will be penalized for each day they are late.
- Students are expected to follow section policies put forward by TAs.

### **Course Requirements:**

Final grades will be calculated on the basis of 6 assignment categories:

- |                                 |                           |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------|
| (1) daily comprehension quizzes | (5% of your final grade)  |
| (2) participation grade         | (5% of your final grade)  |
| (3) first paper, 1-2 pages      | (15% of your final grade) |
| (4) second paper, 3-4 pages     | (20% of your final grade) |
| (5) third paper, 5-6 pages      | (25% of your final grade) |
| (6) fourth paper, 5-6 pages     | (30% of your final grade) |

As you can see, this class requires a lot of writing. Philosophy is at its best when students are given the opportunity to engage deeply and critically with a topic—skills you will develop over time and with each assignment. The rising percentage distributions reward progress on these skills.

### **Daily Quizzes:**

Students will be expected to complete daily quizzes (starting with the second class). These quizzes are administered through the course website. There are two each week, and they must be completed before class begins. Each quiz will consist of two multiple choice questions. One question is about the material covered in the previous lecture; you won't be able to answer this question on the reading alone. The other question is

about the content of the reading for that day. The purpose of the quiz questions is to test comprehension; they should be easy so long as you actually did the reading and attended class (provided you paid attention with each).

### **Written Assignments:**

Prompts and details for written assignments will be made available at least one and a half weeks before the assignment is due. All written assignments will be graded anonymously by TAs.

### **Tentative Schedule:**

This schedule might change—always consult the course website for updates

## **UNIT ONE: SKEPTICISM**

### **Week One**

- Wed., Sept. 4th: Introduction and Overview of the Philosophical Method
- 1) Lewis Carroll - "The Two Clocks"
  - 2) Jennifer Nagel - WiPhi - "Gettier Cases"

### **Week Two**

- Mon., Sept. 9th: Evil Demons and Brains in Vats
- 1) Descartes - Meditations I
  - 2) Robert Nozick - Knowledge and Skepticism

- Wed., Sept. 11th: Response to Skepticism
- 1) Susanna Rinard - "Reasoning One's Way out of Skepticism"

### **Week Three**

- Mon., Sept. 16th: Certainty of Mind
- 1) Descartes - Meditations II
  - 2) Ibn Sina - Floating Man
- Wed., Sept. 18th: Uncertainty of Other Minds
- 1) Westworld Clip
  - 2) Stanislaw Lem - "The Star Diaries: The Eleventh Voyage"

### **Week Four**

- Mon., Sept. 23rd: Consciousness I
- 1) Zoe Drayson - "The Philosophy of Phenomenal Consciousness: An Introduction"
  - 2) Daniel Dennet - "A visit to the Phenomenological Garden"
  - 3) Thomas Nagel - "What is it like to be a bat?"
- Wed., Sept. 25th: Consciousness II
- 1) Frank Jackson - "Epiphenomenal Qualia"

- 2) Nagasawa and Stolijar - "Introduction to *There's Something About Mary*"
- 3) David Chalmers - "The Hard Problem of Consciousness"

**Fri., Sept. 27th: PAPER ONE DUE**

## **UNIT TWO: MIND + BODY**

### Week Five

Mon., Sept. 30th: Dualism

- 1) Jaegwon Kim - "Why Minds and Bodies are Distinct"
- 2) Descartes - The Passions of the Soul

Wed., Oct. 2nd: Dualism vs Naturalism

- 1) *Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth and Descartes*
- 2) Jaegwon Kim - "Princess Elisabeth Against Descartes"
- 3) Tim Crane - "Body"

### Week Six

Mon., Oct. 7th: Behaviorism and Identity Theory

- 1) Carl Hempel - "The Logical Analysis of Psychology"
- 2) U.T. Place - "Is Consciousness a Brain Process"
- 3) J.J.C. Smart - "Sensations and Brain Processes"

Wed., Oct. 9th: Objections to Behaviorism and Identity Theory

- 1) Jerry Fodor - "Something on the State of the Art" (part one)

### Week Seven

Tues., Oct. 15th: Functionalism

- 1) Jerry Fodor - "Something on the State of the Art" (part two)
- 2) Ned Block - "What is Functionalism?"

Wed., Oct. 16th: Troubles with Functionalism

- 1) Ned Block - "Troubles with Functionalism"

### Week Eight

Mon., Oct. 21st: Introduction to Cognition

- 1) Tim Crane - "The Puzzle of Representation"
- 2) John Pearce - "Navigation"
- 3) Tim Crane - "The Mechanisms of Thought"

Wed., Oct. 23rd: Unconscious Cognition

- 1) John Searle - "The Unconscious and the Explanation of Behavior"
- 2) Beatrice de Gelder - "Uncanny Sight in the Blind"
- 3) Banaji and Greenwald - "Blindspot"

### Week Nine

Mon., Oct. 28th: Implicit Bias and Skepticism

- 1) Jennifer Saul - "Skepticism and Implicit Bias"

### **UNIT THREE: ACTION + IDENTITY**

Wed., Oct. 30th: Free Will and Determinism

- 1) Ted Sider - "Free Will and Determinism"

**Fri. Oct. 11th: PAPER TWO DUE**

Week Ten

Mon., Nov. 4th: Free Will

- 1) Galen Strawson - "Free Will"

Wed., Nov. 6th: Free Will and Moral Luck

- 1) Thomas Nagel - "Moral Luck"

Week Eleven

Mon., Nov. 11th: Freedom and the Self

- 1) P.F. Strawson - "Freedom and Resentment"
- 2) Roderick Chisholm - "Human Freedom and the Self"

Wed., Nov. 13th: Personal Identity

- 1) John Perry - "A Dialogue on Personal Identity"

Week Twelve

Mon., Nov. 18th: Personhood and Psychology

- 1) Derek Parfit - "Personal Identity"
- 2) Thomas Nagel - "Brain Bisection and the Unity of Consciousness"

### **UNIT FOUR: THE MEANING OF LIFE**

Wed., Nov. 20th: Death and the Afterlife

- 1) Niko Kolodny - "Introduction to Death and the Afterlife"

**Fri., Nov. 22nd: PAPER THREE DUE**

Week Thirteen

Mon., Nov. 25th: Death and the Meaning of Life

- 1) Bernard Williams - "The Makropoulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality"
- 2) Ursula K Le Guin - "The Island of the Immortals"

Wed., Nov. 27th: Thanksgiving Break!

- 1) Optional Reading: Isaac Asimov - "The Last Question"

Week Fourteen

Mon., Dec. 2nd: Death and the Afterlife

1) Samuel Scheffler - "Death and the Afterlife (Part Three)"

Wed., Dec. 4th: Death and Value

1) Seana Shiffrin - "Preserving the Valued or Preserving Valuing?"

Week Fifteen

Mon., Dec. 9th: Why Do What's Right?

1) Judith Jarvis Thomson - "Why Ought We Do What Is Right?"

Wed., Dec. 11th: Wrapping up

1) Thomas Nagel - "The Absurd"

**Fri. Dec. 20th: PAPER FOUR DUE**

### **Academic Misconduct:**

Students are expected to know and to follow the university's guidelines for academic honesty. Academic misconduct can occur in a variety of ways, including (but not limited to) cheating, fabrication, and plagiarism. When in doubt about whether some academic practice is acceptable, ask your TA or the instructor for assistance. Always err on the side of avoiding misconduct. **Any suspected violation of university policy regarding academic conduct will be reported directly to the CAS Associate Dean for Students.** (This is a course policy, and it is not subject to revision by your TA.)

### **Academic Accommodation:**

Students needing academic accommodations based on a disability should contact the Henry & Lucy Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at <https://www.nyu.edu/students/communities-and-groups/students-with-disabilities/academic.html> or in person at 726 Broadway, 998-4980.

### **University Resources:**

For more information, check out the following resources:

University Learning Center:  
[www.nyu.edu/ulc](http://www.nyu.edu/ulc)

Guidelines for Academic Integrity:  
<http://cas.nyu.edu/page/ug.academicintegrity>

NYU Writing Center:  
<http://cas.nyu.edu/ewp.html>

Henry & Lucy Moses Center for Students with Disabilities:  
<https://www.nyu.edu/students/communities-and-groups/students-with-disabilities/academic.html>