

Course: Introduction to Philosophy

Instructor: Brandon Ashby

1. Textbooks and reading materials

Required:

Fritz Allhoff, Ron Mallon, & Shaun Nichols, (2013) *Philosophy: Traditional & Experimental Readings*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

All other required reading will be made available as PDFs on the course website.

2. Course Content

This course examines a number of classic and contemporary philosophical topics. For example, according to our commonsense way of understanding of the world, there are people; they take free actions that are (often) indicative of their characters and who they are as persons; these actions can be morally right or wrong; and individuals can and should be held responsible for their actions (unless there are extenuating circumstances). But, according to our scientific understanding of the world, our beliefs, desires, and personalities are all implemented by the electrochemical operations of the brain. Moreover, these electrochemical operations are, in principle, no different from the sorts of chemical and electrical reactions that occur in car batteries. And, in the end, these electrochemical processes are what dictate how our muscles will flex and thereby decide what actions we perform. Can we accommodate our current and expected future understanding of neuroscience, developmental psychology, endocrinology, evolutionary biology, etc. with our commonsense understanding of ourselves as free and responsible agents who bring about right and wrong actions? Or is this commonsense understanding of ourselves an illusion? If our commonsense understanding is an illusion, is it one that we can cast off, as we cast off our beliefs in weather gods and witches? Or, is our commonsense understanding of the world so deeply ingrained in our capacities for thinking about how we can and should act that we simply could not deliberate about how to act without it? These are the kinds of questions that will occupy us in this course.

3. Assignments

- Micro-exams, worth 40% of your final grade.
- Essays, worth 42.5% of your final grade.
- Syllabus quiz, worth 2.5% of your final grade.
- Discussion forum questions, worth 5% of your final grade.
- In-class clicker questions, worth 10% of your final grade.

3.1 Micro-exams:

You will have a micro-exam every week. Micro-exams can cover any course material (lectures, readings, in-class discussions) presented in the last four weeks of the course. You will have two attempts to take each micro-exam. You will receive the highest score of your two attempts. I drop your two lowest micro-exam scores. Micro-exams will be worth 40% of your final grade. Micro-exams will be administered online via the course website. You will be able to see what questions you got wrong on a micro-exam, but you will not be told the answers to the questions.

3.2 Essays:

You will have five essays over the course of the term. Each will be 750 words in length. You will have the option of submitting a draft of the first two papers before you submit them for a final grade. The essays are worth 42.5% of your final grade and are evenly weighted.

I do not drop any essay scores. However, if you are satisfied with the grade that you receive on your first four essays, then you have the option of applying your combined score on your first four essays to your fifth essay. In other words, if you do well-enough on your first four essays, then you don't have to do the fifth. I do this to encourage you to work hard on your first four essays and polish them.

3.3 Syllabus quiz:

You will have a quiz on the syllabus and course structure at the end of your first week of term. It is worth 2.5% of your final grade.

3.4 Discussion forum questions:

The class will be divided into two groups. You'll get your group number on the first day of class. For every reading, one of the two groups will be required to post or upvote three questions about that reading on the course website. Discussion forum questions will be worth 5% of your final grade. Your questions must be uploaded before 11:59PM the day before we discuss that reading in class. Your questions will be listed anonymously. Only I will be able to see your names attached to the questions. So, do not worry about asking "dumb" questions in front of the other students.

3.5 In-class clicker questions

You will periodically be asked questions about the reading material or lecture material in class. Clicker questions are worth 10% of your final grade. (Clickers will also be used to survey students' opinions on a range of topics. Survey questions are not graded.)

4. Course Schedule

Week 1: Introduction to the Course; Personal Identity, Part 1

- Introduction to the course
- §7.3: David Hume, 'Treatise of Human Nature', pp. 408-415
- §7.4: Derik Parfit, 'Divided Minds and the Nature of Persons', pp. 415-421
- [Syllabus quiz](#).
- [Micro-exam 1](#)

Week 2: Personal Identity, Part 2

- Course website: David Lewis, 'Survival and Identity' in his *Philosophical Papers*, Volume 1, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 55-72.
- Textbook: §7.5: Paul Bloom, 'First Person Plural', pp. 421-428.
- Course website: Nina Strohminger & Shaun Nichols, (2015) 'Neurodegeneration and Identity', *Psychological Science*, 26(9): 1469-1479.
- [Micro-exam 2](#)

Week 3: Free Will and Moral Responsibility

- Course website: David Lewis, 'Are We Free to Break the Laws?', in his *Philosophical Papers*, Volume II, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 299-304.
- Course website: P. F. Strawson, 'Freedom and Resentment', in his *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*, London: Routledge, pp. 1-28.
- Textbook: §6.3 Galen Strawson, 'The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility', pp. 350-358.
- [Micro-exam 3](#)

Week 4: Causation

- Textbook: §3.2: David Hume, 'Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding', pp. 141-154.
- Textbook: §3.4: David Lewis, 'Causation', pp. 167-174.
- Textbook: §3.5: Laura Schulz, Tamar Kushnir, and Alison Gopnik, 'Learning from Doing', pp. 174-190.
- [First essay is due.](#)
- [Micro-exam 4](#)

Week 5: Normative Ethics, Part 1: Traditional Philosophical Arguments

- Textbook: §9.4: John Stuart Mill, 'Utilitarianism', pp. 523-532.
- Course website: Peter Unger, (1996) excerpts from *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusions of Innocence* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Textbook: §9.2 Immanuel Kant, 'Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals', pp. 516-523.
- Textbook: §9.1 Aristotle, 'Nichomachean Ethics', pp. 506-516.
- Textbook: §9.4 John Doris, 'Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics', pp. 532-543.
- [Micro-exam 5](#)

Week 6: Normative Ethics, Part 2: Empirical Connections

- Course website: Judith Jarvis Thomson, (1985) 'The Trolley Problem', *The Yale Law Journal*, 94(6): 1395-1415.
- Course website: Joshua D. Greene, (2008) excerpts from 'The Secret Joke of Kant's Soul', in W. Sinnott-Armstrong (ed.), *Moral Psychology, Volume 3, The Neuroscience of Morality: Emotion, Brain Disorders, and Development*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 35-80.
- Course website: Shaun Nichols, Shikhar Kumar, Theresa Lopez, Alisabeth Ayars, & Hoi-Yee Chan, (2016) excerpts from 'Rational Learners and Moral Rules', *Mind and Language*, 31(5): 530-554.
- [Micro-exam 6](#)

Week 7: What is Justice?

- Course website: Plato, 'Book II' in *The Republic*, G. M. A. Grube and C. D. C. Reeve (trans.), Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, pp. 32-59.
- Course website: John Rawls, (1971) excerpts from *A Theory of Justice*, London: Harvard University Press.
- Course website: Robert Nozick, excerpts from *Anarchy, State & Utopia*, New York: Basic Books.
- [Second essay is due.](#)

- [Micro-exam 7](#)

Week 8: Metaethics: Is Morality Real? If So, Then How Do We Know What's Moral?

- Textbook: §8.4: J. L. Mackie, 'Error Theory', pp. 453-459.
- Textbook: §8.4: Michael Smith, 'The Moral Problem', pp. 459-465.
- Course website: Gilbert Harman (January 1975) 'Moral Relativism Defended', *The Philosophical Review*, 84(1): 3-22.
- Textbook: §8.6: James Rachels, 'The Challenge of Cultural Relativism', pp. 465-473.
- [Micro-exam 8](#)

Week 9: Skepticism

- Textbook: §2.1: Sextus Empiricus, 'Outlines of Pyrrhonism', pp. 79-84.
- Textbook: §2.2: René Descartes, 'Meditation 1: Concerning Those Things That Can Be Called into Doubt', pp. 79-84.
- Textbook: §2.4: G. E. Moore, 'Proof of an External World', pp. 87-92.
- Textbook: §2.5: Edmund Gettier, 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?', pp. 96-98.
- Textbook: §2.6: Alvin Goldman, 'What is Justified Belief?', pp. 98-106.
- [Micro-exam 9](#)

Week 10: The Nature of Thought

- Textbook: §4.6: Jerry Fodor, 'The Persistence of the Attitudes', pp. 229-235.
- Textbook: §4.7: Daniel Dennett, 'Real Patterns', pp. 235-252.
- Textbook: §4.8: Alison Gopnik and Henry M. Wellman, 'Why the Child's Theory of Mind Really Is a Theory', pp. 252-272.
- [Third essay is due.](#)
- [Micro-exam 10](#)

Week 11: Consciousness, Part 1

- Textbook: §5.4: Frank Jackson, 'Epiphenomenal Qualia', pp. 296-302.
- David Lewis, 'What Experience Teaches', in his *Papers in Metaphysics and Epistemology* (1999), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 262-290.
- Daniel Dennett's (2005) 'What RoboMary Knows' in his *Sweet Dreams*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 103-130
- [Micro-exam 11](#)

Week 12: Consciousness, Part 2

- Textbook: §5.5: David Chalmers, 'The Puzzle of Conscious Experience', pp. 302-309.
- Thomas Nagel's (1971) 'Brain Bisection and the Unity of Consciousness', *Synthese*, 22(May): 396-413.
- Textbook: §5.8: Justin Sytsma, 'Folk Psychology and Phenomenal Consciousness', pp. 321-331.
- [Micro-exam 12](#)

Week 13: Religious Belief

- Textbook: §1.5: Peter van Inwagen, 'The Argument From Evil', pp. 29-37
- Textbook: §1.8: Deborah Keleman, 'Are Children 'Intuitive Theists'?', pp. 50-59
- Textbook: §1.9: Daniel Dennett, 'Breaking the Spell', pp. 59-68

- [Fourth essay is due.](#)
- [Micro-exam 13](#)

Week 14: The Philosophy of Philosophy

- Textbook: §10.1 Plato, 'Meno', 556-564.
- Textbook: §10.2 Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'Philosophical Investigations', pp. 564-567.
- Textbook: §10.3 Stephen P. Stich, 'Plato's Method Meets Cognitive Science', pp. 567-572.
- Course website: Timothy Williamson, excerpts from 'Philosophical Criticisms of Experimental Philosophy', in J. Sytsma & W. Buckwalter (eds.), *A Companion to Experimental Philosophy*, Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.
- [Micro-exam 14](#)

Week 15: Contents to be determined by class vote on which of the above topics to do more on

- TBD
- [Fifth essay is due.](#)
- [Micro-exam 15](#)

Week 16: Fall/Spring Break [MOVE TO APPROPRIATE LOCATION]

- No new material