# Introduction to Philosophy

PHL 101-001

Spring 2021

MWF 10:20-11:10am, Online

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**Catalog Description**

This course will introduce students to a selection of philosophical theories about knowledge, values, and reality. Topics such as objectivity, moral responsibility, and social and political philosophy will be explored.

**Overview**

In practice, this course will be a historical examination of some of the most vexing and important metaphysical and epistemological questions in the Western philosophical tradition, from the ancient Greeks to the contemporary period. More broadly, the course is meant to be a general introduction to philosophy (including its methods, some of its canonical source material, and its key questions). We will be looking at topics including (though not limited to): our knowledge of the external world; the nature of our mathematical and scientific knowledge as well as the nature of inference; the nature of belief and truth; what sorts of things exist at the most basic level; the nature of mind in a physical world; and what may count as viable sources of knowledge.

Not only will the course be devoted to these topics, it will also be a “tutorial” of sorts for students who may be interested in pursuing philosophy as a major: what is philosophy, and how does one go about doing it? For the non-majors (or for those who don’t yet know what you want to do), we will show the various ways that philosophical ideas are attached to other disciplines, and how philosophical modes of thinking and arguing (with a focus on clarity, criticism, and rigor) can be used to great effect in other disciplines.

**Course Goals and Learning Outcomes**

Philosophy majors and non-majors alike will populate this course. The overarching goals are that everyone learns some specifics about metaphysics and epistemology, and a specific philosophical toolkit for dealing with these matters. These skills include (amongst others) good reading and writing skills, good critical reflection skills, and the ability to construct good arguments.

Upon completion of this course, students should be able to:

1. Define key concepts utilized in metaphysics and epistemology.
2. Understand the historical development of key philosophical ideas regarding our knowledge of the world.
3. Critically analyze course material.
4. Characterize critiques of traditional metaphysics and epistemology  
   Make connections between historical problems from the Ancient and Modern periods to current topics of philosophical concern in the philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, and philosophy of science (in preparation for the particular study of each of those sub-disciplines in upper year courses)

**Readings**

All readings will be available on D2L. These include selections from:

Primary Sources:

Plato: *Theaetetus* and *The Republic*

Aristotle: *On Ideas* and *Metaphysics*

Galileo: *The Starry Messenger*

Descartes: *Meditations on First Philosophy*

Hume: *The Treatise* and *The Enquiry*

Kant: *Critique of Pure Reason*

Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations*

Quine: *The Web of Belief*

Secondary Sources:

“What Is in It for Me?” by Carla Fehr

*Einstein for Everyone* by John Norton

“How Diversity Makes Us Smarter” by Katherine W. Phillips

*Great Minds Don't Think Alike* by Ted Richards

**Evaluation**

Your performance in the course will be evaluated by means of unit quizzes, exams and group work.

Unit Quizzes: 30%

Unit quizzes will be multiple choice, administered through D2L.

Exams: 60%

There will be three exams, worth 20% each. Probable format will be fill in the blank, but there may be some multiple choice, true/false, or short answer questions as well. More information will be supplied in class prior to the midterm exam. The exams will be administered through D2L.

Group Work: 10%

Every Wednesday will be mandatory, synchronous group-work. This will be done in breakout rooms on zoom. Groups have been randomly assigned on zoom. A list of questions will be supplied that day, and submissions will have to be made before the end of class on D2L.

**Course Policies**

### Communication

This class has synchronous meetings which will take place over Zoom and use the breakout room function for parts of the class. Asynchronous content is available over D2L. Communication outside of class will primarily be through MSU email via D2L. Be sure to actively monitor your MSU email and the D2L site (<https://d2l.msu.edu/d2l/loginh/>) for any course updates.

Attendance via Zoom

Attendance to the synchronous class meetings is required if you want to gain credit for group work assignments. You will also be responsible for the material covered in class for the quizzes, the final exam, and the paper. Failure to reflect course material in your work will substantially harm your grade. Zoom links to synchronous class meetings are posted on D2L and are not to be shared beyond members of the class. When you join our class meetings, please be sure your microphone is muted until you want to talk to the class. Be sure as well to edit your name on Zoom so that it reflects what you would like to be called by other members of the class. You can do so for all your MSU Zoom meetings through your Profile settings (<https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/201363203-My-Profile>).

Classes will be a mix of lecture, discussion, and breakout rooms with your assigned groups. You are not required to have your camera turned on at any point during class, but if you can, having it on with your breakout group would be optimal for discussion. We all know the tech can be glitchy at times, so please let me know if something is not working and help each other communicate via these platforms. Some parts of the class may be recorded (and posted later on D2L), but recordings will not have any student images visible. You can ask questions during class at any time via the chat function, as well as asking directly by unmuting yourself.

As the MSU statement on diversity and inclusion notes, “MSU welcomes a full spectrum of experiences, viewpoints, and intellectual approaches because they enrich the conversation, even as they challenge us to think differently and grow. However, we believe that expressions and actions that demean individuals or groups compromise the environment for intellectual growth and undermine the social fabric on which the community is based.” This class will be a mixture of lecture and discussion, and as such, the classroom should be a space where ideas and their implications can be collectively and critically explored. Please come to class prepared for engaging constructively in this kind of discussion.

Illness

Regular attendance and consistent completion of assignments on time is important to doing well in the course. Thus, it is in your interest to attend class regularly. Because we are not meeting in person, you can attend class on line even if you are ill. However, if you are too ill to make sense of what is happening in class, please let me know so that I can provide ways for you to catch up once you have recovered. Your weekly assignments have some flexibility built in so that you can miss a few and it will not hurt your grade. In order to successfully request adjustments for any graded items, you will need to provide documentation of illness.

### Grades

Your final grade will be first determined on a 100-pt. scale based on the weightings given above, rounded to the nearest whole number (0.5 rounds up, 0.4 rounds down), and then converted to a 4.0 scale according to the tabulations below. For example, a final grade of an 94% corresponds to a 4.0 and a 89% corresponds to a 3.5.

4.0 90% and above

3.5 85–89%

3.0 80–84%

2.5 75–79%

2.0 70–74%

1.5 65–69%

1.0 60–64%

### Incompletes

The MSU policy for incompletes is as follows:

*The I-Incomplete may be given only when: the student (a) has completed at least 6/7 of the term of instruction, but is unable to complete the class work and/or take the final examination because of illness or other compelling reason; and (b) has done satisfactory work in the course; and (c) in the instructor’s judgment can complete the required work without repeating the course.*

You must document your compelling reasons in your request for an incomplete.

### Limits to Confidentiality

Materials submitted for this class are generally considered confidential pursuant to the University’s student record policies. However, students should be aware that University employees, including instructors, may not be able to maintain confidentiality when it conflicts with their responsibility to report certain issues based on external legal obligations or that relate to the health and safety of MSU community members and others. As instructors, we must report the following information to other University offices if you share it with us in material submitted or a conversation:

* + Suspected child abuse/neglect, even if this maltreatment happened when you were a child
  + Allegations of sexual assault or sexual harassment when they involve MSU students, faculty, or staff, and
  + Credible threats of harm to oneself or to others.

These reports may trigger contact from a campus official who will want to talk with you about the incident that you have shared. In almost all cases, it will be your decision whether you wish to speak with that individual.

If you would like to talk about these events in a more confidential setting you are encouraged to make an appointment with the MSU Counseling Center.

*MSU Counseling Center*: 517-355-8270

*24 Hour Sexual Assault Crisis Line*: 517-372-6666

*Counseling Center Sexual Assault Program*: 517-355-3551

*MSU Safe Place*: 517-355-1100

<http://endrape.msu.edu>

<http://safeplace.msu.edu>

### Mental Health Services

College students often experience issues that may interfere with academic success such as academic stress, sleep problems, juggling responsibilities, life events, relationship concerns, or feelings of anxiety, hopelessness, or depression. If you or a friend is struggling, we strongly encourage you to seek support. Helpful, effective resources are available on campus, and most are free of charge.

* If you are struggling with this class, please contact me by email at rich1079@msu.edu.
* Check-in with your academic advisor if you are struggling in multiple classes, unsure whether you are making the most of your time at MSU, or unsure what academic resources are available at MSU.
* Access CAPS Services for new counseling and psychiatric services by making a [**CAPS Phone Request**](https://msu.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9GNsDVC3VlH3wnr)**.**
* **CAPS is providing remote crisis services 24/7/365. Students can call CAPS at 517-355-8270 and press “1” at the prompt to speak with a crisis counselor.**Other prompt options are available for those not in crisis.
* Visit [https://caps.msu.edu](https://caps.msu.edu/) for additional information and resources.

### Academic Integrity

Academic integrity is central to any learning environment. As the Spartan Pledge[[1]](#footnote-1) makes clear, violations of academic integrity damage both your learning and the learning community in which you are participating. Any cheating, whether on an exam or plagiarism on a paper, will minimally result in an automatic failure of that assignment. More about academic integrity can be found here:

<https://ombud.msu.edu/resources-self-help/academic-integrity>

### Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

Michigan State University is committed to providing equal opportunity for participation in all programs, services and activities. Requests for accommodations by persons with disabilities may be made by contacting the Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities at 517-884-RCPD or on the web at [https://rcpd.msu.edu](http://rcpd.msu.edu/). Once your eligibility for an accommodation has been determined, you will be issued a verified individual services accommodation (“VISA”) form. Please send this form to me at the start of the term or at least two weeks prior to the accommodation date (exam, assignment due date, etc.). Requests received after this date will be honored whenever possible.

Online SIRS Course Evaluation

Michigan State University takes seriously the opinion of students in the evaluation of the effectiveness of instruction and has implemented the Student Instructional Rating System (SIRS) to gather student feedback (<https://sirsonline.msu.edu>). Because student feedback is vital to future versions of this course, I utilize the online SIRS system, and hope you will participate in providing your evaluation of the course. You will receive an e-mail during the last two weeks of class asking you to fill out the SIRS web form at your convenience. Instructors do not see any SIRS responses until after the end of the all grade submissions, and all responses are anonymous. Lack of participation in the online SIRS system involves grade sequestration, which means that the final grade for this course will not be accessible on STUINFO during the week following the submission of grades for this course unless the SIRS online form has been completed. Alternatively, you have the option on the SIRS website to decline to participate in the evaluation of the course. I hope, however, that you will be willing to give us your honest, thoughtful, and constructive feedback. If you access the online SIRS website and complete the online SIRS form (or expressly decline to participate), you will receive the final grade in this course without sequestration once final grades are submitted.

**Other Stuff**

• Don’t Fall Behind! If you don’t understand something don’t let it slide. There is a lot of material to be covered and the material builds, so if you don’t grasp something early you’ll find yourself in an inescapable hole. Ask questions. Do all the reading. Ask questions. Attend all the classes. Ask questions. To do anything else is certain death (not literally, but GPA wise, trust me I’m a professional).

• If you know you can’t make a scheduled examination, make arrangements with me at least one week before the exam, two weeks before the final exam.

• Grades are non-negotiable. If I have made an arithmetic error, please let me know and I will correct it. If you are dissatisfied with your grade, please make an appointment with me so we can improve your future work.

**Tentative Schedule**

Readings

Jan 20 Introduction Richards: Prelude, Ch 1

22 Introduction

25 Plato Richards: Ch 2; Plato: *Theaetetus*

27 *Group*

29 Plato

Feb 1 Plato Richards: Ch 2; Plato: *The Republic*

3 *Group*

5 Plato

8 Aristotle Richards: Ch 3; Aristotle: *On Ideas, Metaphysics*

10 *Group*

12 Aristotle

15 Aristotle Richards: Inter 1; Galileo: *The Starry Messenger*

17 *Group*

19 Galileo

***Exam 1***

22 Descartes Richards: Ch 4; Descartes: *Meditation 1, 2*

24 *Group*

26 Descartes

Mar 1 Descartes Richards: Ch 4; Descartes: *Meditation 3*

3 **NO CLASS**

5 Descartes

8 Hume Richards: Ch. 5; Hume: selections

10 *Group*

12 Hume

15 HumeRichards: Ch. 5; Hume: selections

17 *Group*

19 Hume

***Exam 2***

22 KantRichards: Ch. 6; Kant: *Critique of Pure Reason*

24 *Group*

26 Kant

29 KantRichards: Ch. 6; Kant: *Critique of Pure Reason* 31 *Group*

Apr 2 Kant

5 E&W Richards: Inter 2, 3; Einstein; Wittgenstein

7 *Group*

9 E&W

12 Quine Richards: Ch 7; Quine: *Web of Belief*

14 *Group*

16 Quine

19 Social Fehr; Phillips

21 Social

Final Exam: Thursday, Apr 29, Time TBA

1. “As a Spartan, I will strive to uphold values of the highest ethical standard. I will practice honesty in my work, foster honesty in my peers, and take pride in knowing that honor in ownership is worth more than grades. I will carry these values beyond my time as a student at Michigan State University, continuing the endeavor to build personal integrity in all that I do.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)