

Philosophy 231.15 Knowing, Being, and Doing: Philosophical Method and its Applications

Fall 2008, Tuesdays and Thursdays 8:15-9:30

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Office: 325T; office hours: by appointment

Course Description: This is a general introduction to philosophy. The course is divided into four units: (1) the existence of God; (2) knowledge and skepticism; (3) ethics; and (4) justice and political philosophy. After a brief introduction to philosophy we will begin with some traditional arguments for God's existence and their criticisms. Do miracles occur? If so, are they evidence that God exists? Is it possible to have a direct experience of God? Are there features of the universe that can only be explained if we assume that there is a supernatural creator or designer? Next we will ask what, if anything, we can know in the context of the work of the famous seventeenth century philosopher, René Descartes. Is it possible to tell the difference between waking and dreaming? Is it possible that I (or you) am alone in the universe? In the third unit, on ethics, we will be looking at several theories that philosophers have proposed for distinguishing right and wrong. We will be asking some of the following questions: Is morality relative to cultures? How might morality and religion be related? Might moral standards be independent of religion? Are some kinds of actions always wrong or does whether or not a kind of action is wrong depend on the circumstances in which it was performed? We will then apply the theories we've discussed by asking whether or not euthanasia is ever justified. In unit 4 we will focus on the relationship between justice and punishment. Should we have prisons? If so, what justifies putting certain people in them? Then we will look at arguments for and against the death penalty. Time permitting, we will finish with a discussion on death and the meaning of life.

Required texts:

Descartes, Rene. *Meditations on First Philosophy*, translated by J. Cottingham.

Moody, Todd. *Does God Exist?*

Rachels, James, and Stuart Rachels. *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, Fifth Edition. Other reading will be on Blackboard.

Written requirements:

1. Short, unannounced quizzes. As you've probably noticed, this class meets early. To encourage punctuality, from time to time I will begin class with ten to fifteen minute exercises, graded A, C, or F. These will cover both the reading and topics we have recently done in class. You'll be able to use your notebooks but not any texts, unless expressly permitted.

2. Midterm. Two essays.

3. Two formal papers (approx 800 words), one on the existence of God, the other on Descartes or ethics (you'll have a choice). What I am mainly interested in seeing in these essays is that you can present the ideas from class and the readings in clear prose and that you can use your own examples to support your case. I am happy to accept drafts, as long as you get them to me at least four days before the deadline. If you feel you need further help with your writing, you can go to The Writing Center (2307 North Hall) for a free tutorial.

4. Final exam, two hours. Two essays. This exam will cover everything we've done for the semester.

Other requirements: Reading and class participation. Philosophy is not a passive discipline. I expect you to come to class prepared to discuss the assigned reading as well as the relevant material that we've covered in recent classes. In other words you're required to do the reading before the class I've assigned it for. Reading philosophy demands a good deal of attention. I strongly urge you to do the reading twice before class and to take notes while doing so. Also, I expect you to bring the assigned readings to class. (Note: good reading notes will come in handy on the unannounced quizzes, since I will generally let you use your notes for these exercises.)

Assignment dates and percentage of final grades:

Quizzes and class participation: 15%

Two formal essays: essay 1 due September 25; essay 2 due November 25; 15% each

Midterm: October 28: 25%

Final: December 18, 8 AM – 10 AM: 35%

Blackboard. This course has a Blackboard site (available from the CUNY Portal, cuny.edu). There you will find the complete syllabus. I will be posting additional readings there. I will also be posting your reading assignments and further

information about your two formal essays and your exams there. You're responsible for checking Blackboard at least 24 hours before each class. Finally, I will post my lecture notes on Blackboard.

Class meetings. There will be no class on the following days: Tuesday, September 30, Thursday, October 9, Tuesday, October 14, and Thursday, November 27.

Rules:

Attendance. Attendance is required. Be on time. If you're more than fifteen minutes late, I will count you as absent for that day. Lateness within the first fifteen minutes will be counted as half an absence. You will be unable to complete the course if you miss more than four classes. Please note that all absences count toward the total allowable absences in class, including those due to late registration. These restrictions don't apply to those who, due to a disability, illness, or extreme hardship can't make it to class or can't get to class on time. However, in these cases I expected a legitimate, documented excuse.

In class behavior. Show respect for both your teacher and your fellow students.

Make-ups. There will be no make-ups for the unannounced quizzes. If you're late for a quiz, you won't be allowed to take it. I expect you to produce a legitimate, documented excuse to make up the exams. Without one, you won't be able to take a make up.

Late work. Assignments are due during class meeting time of the due date. You will lose a third of a grade for every class day that your work is late. For instance, if an assignment is due on Tuesday and you hand it in anytime after class on that day until class time on Thursday, an A becomes an A-, an A- a B+ and so on. I will accept nothing by electronically.

Plagiarism and cheating. Cheating on an exam will result in an automatic F for the exercise. I will also pass your name along to the college's student disciplinary committee for possible further sanctions. Plagiarism is any attempt to pass someone else's ideas or research off as your own, through either unattributed direct quotation or paraphrasing. It's a kind of theft. Plagiarism on either of the essays will also result in an automatic F for the assignment, and I will again pass your name along to the student disciplinary committee. Plagiarism doesn't pay: if you try it, you will almost certainly get caught. See "CUNY Policy on Academic Integrity" below.)

Turn-it-in. If I suspect plagiarism I will ask that you submit your essay to Turn-it-in.

Classroom rules. CUNY's rules and regulations for the maintenance of public order apply at all times. Also, no eating in class. Please shut off all phones and other electronic gadgets during class. Please ask me if you'd like to record a class. Any student violating these rules will be subject to the following range of sanctions: absent mark, warning, expulsion from class, over-all grade reduction, or suspension from school.

CUNY POLICY ON ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/english2/plagiarism.html>

Academic Dishonesty is prohibited in The City University of New York and is punishable by penalties, including failing grades, suspension, and expulsion.

Cheating is the unauthorized use or attempted use of material, information, notes, study aids, devices or communication during an academic exercise.

The following are some examples of cheating, but by no means is it an exhaustive list:

- * Copying from another student during an examination or allowing another to copy your work.
- * Unauthorized collaboration on a take home assignment or examination.
- * Using notes during a closed book examination.
- * Taking an examination for another student, or asking or allowing another student to take an examination for you.
- * Changing a graded exam and returning it for more credit.
- * Submitting substantial portions of the same paper to more than one course without consulting with each instructor.
- * Preparing answers or writing notes in a blue book (exam booklet) before an examination. Allowing others to research and write assigned papers or do assigned projects, including use of commercial term paper services. o Giving assistance to acts of academic misconduct! dishonesty
- * Fabricating data (all or in part).

- * Submitting someone else's work as your own.
- * Unauthorized use during an examination of any electronic devices such as cell phones, palm pilots, computers or other technologies to retrieve or send information.

Plagiarism is the act of presenting another person's ideas, research or writings as your own.

The following are some examples of plagiarism, but by no means is it an exhaustive list:

- * Copying another person's actual words without the use of quotation marks and footnotes attributing the words to their source..
- * Presenting another person's ideas or theories in your own words without acknowledging the source.
- * Using information that is not common knowledge without acknowledging the source.
- * Failing to acknowledge collaborators on homework and laboratory assignments.

Internet plagiarism includes submitting downloaded term papers or parts of term papers, paraphrasing or copying information from the internet without citing the source, and "cutting & pasting" from various sources without proper attribution.

Obtaining Unfair Advantage is any activity that intentionally or unintentionally gives a student an unfair advantage in his/her academic work over another student.

The following are some examples of obtaining an unfair advantage, but by no means it is an exhaustive list:

- * Stealing, reproducing, circulating or otherwise gaining advance access to examination materials.
- * Depriving other students of access to library materials by stealing, destroying, defacing, or concealing them.
- * Retaining, using or circulating examination materials which clearly indicate that they should be returned at the end of the exam.
- * Intentionally obstructing or interfering with another student's work.

Adapted with permission from Baruch College : A Faculty Guide to Student Academic Integrity.

Class Schedule
Phil 231.15
Fall 2008

Unit One: The Existence of God

August 28

- I. Background
 - A. The concept of God; why there has to be some consensus at the outset
 - B. The Burden of proof
 - C. Logic and Argument
 - 1. Argument
 - a. Premises
 - b. Conclusion
 - 2. Validity
 - 3. Soundness

Handouts: *Times* letters on atheism and faith; “Civitavecchia Journal: **Crying Madonna**, Blood And Many, Many Tests,” *New York Times*, April 8, 1995; Vocabulary on “Miracles” in Moody. (All will be posted on Blackboard, under Readings.)

September 2

- II. Miracles
 - A. Laws of nature/physical laws
 - 1. What are they?
 - 2. Examples
 - B. Miracles
 - 1. What are they?
 - 2. Relationship to the laws of nature
 - 3. How are they supposed to be evidence of God’s existence
 - C. Oscar’s criticisms
 - 1. Trust science
 - 2. The unreliability of testimony (Hume’s criticism)

Reading: Moody, 1-9; 61-71

Suggested reading: Hume, “Of Miracles” (This essay is from Section X of *The Enquiry Concerning the Human Understanding*; it’s also easily available through Google.)

September 4

- D. Theist’s response
- E. Faith and science

III. The argument from religious experience

- A. What is religious experience?
- B. How is it supposed to be evidence for God’s existence?
- C. Criticism: God not the only explanation
 - 1. Drugs
 - 2. Fasting
 - 3. Sleep deprivation

D. Response: God not ruled out

E. Faith and science

Reading: Moody, 1-9; 73-80; Hobbes (in Readings on BB)

September 9

IV. The argument from design

- A. The argument itself
 - 1. What analogy does the argument try to establish between human-made machines on the one hand and components of the universe on the other?
 - a. Cleanthes (Hume)

- b. Paley
 - 2. Why does the defender of the argument claim we have to appeal to God?
 - B. Sophie and Oscar's criticisms in Moody
 - C. Hume's (Philo's) criticisms
 - 1. No reason to suppose that God is perfect
 - a. The universe doesn't seem perfect.
 - b. Even if the universe is perfect, still no reason to assume that God is.
 - 2. No reason to assume that there's only one God
- Reading: "Hume on the Argument from Design" and "Paley on the Argument from Design" (both in Readings on BB)
 Suggested listening: <http://www.philosophytalk.org/pastShows/BelievingGod.html>

September 11

- D. Darwin's theory of evolution and the argument from design
 - 1. Why before Darwin there was no serious explanation for the appearance of intelligent design in the organic world
 - 2. The fundamentals of Darwin's theory
 - a. Random, heritable mutations
 - b. Natural selection
 - 3. Why Darwin's theory makes appeal to any kind of a designer unnecessary in explaining the variety of species or how well adapted individuals are to their environments.
 - E. David on order
 - 1. Why we need to assume that God exists to account for the order/design that we find in the universe
 - 2. Sophie's criticism of this
 - F. Sophie's defense of the argument from design
 - 1. Natural selection can't account for . . .
 - a. Human intelligence
 - b. Consciousness
 - c. Morality
 - 2. Therefore they need a supernatural explanation
- Reading: "Dawkins on Evolution" and "Dawkins from *The Blind Watchmaker*" (both in Readings on BB); Moody, 31-45

September 16

- E. Criticism of Sophie's position: it raises more questions than it answers
 - 1. How did God confer consciousness (or intelligence) on us?
 - 2. How did God acquire his consciousness (or intelligence)?
 - 3. How did God acquire his sense of right and wrong?

V. Believing in God without proof
 Reading : Moody, 81-91

Unit 2: Descartes

September 16-October 23

- I. Introduction to Descartes's *Meditations*

September 18

- I. Introduction to Descartes's *Meditations* (continued)

Reading: Blackburn, 15-18 (in Readings on BB)
 Recommended: Sorrell, Descartes, 63-66 (top) (in Readings on BB); *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Ref B41.E5), Volume 2, 354-61; *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Ref B 51.R68), Volume 3, 6-13; "Descartes's Epistemology," Sections 2-8, from *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes-epistemology>)
- II. Extreme doubt: *Meditation 1*
 - A. Why Descartes has decided to try to place all of his beliefs in doubt: *Meditation 1*, paragraph 1; Descartes text, page 66.1.
 - B. Why offer skeptical arguments at all? 1.2
 - C. Apple analogy: Descartes text, p. 63.1
 - D. Sense deception argument

1. D's presentation: 1.3

September 23

2. Insanity and D's rejection of the sense deception argument: 1.4

E. Dream argument

1. D's presentation: 1.5

September 25:

First essay due

2. D's rejection of the dream argument: 1.6-1.8

F. Deceptive God argument: 1.9-1.11

G. The evil demon: 1.12

Additional reading: Blackburn, 18-19; 22-28 (in Readings on BB)

III. Initial absolute ("metaphysical") certainties: *Meditation 2*

A. Summary of the results of Med 1: 2.1-2.2

B. The cogito: 2.3; Discourse 4.1-4.3 (in Readings on BB)

October 2 (no class September 30)

C. Related beliefs that survive extreme doubt: 2.4-2.9

Additional reading: Blackburn, 19-20; 28-30.2 (in Readings on BB)

IV. God's existence and the attempt to remove extreme doubt: *Meditation 3*

A. Descartes's attempt to prove God's existence

1. D's criterion of truth: 3.2; Blackburn, 32-33 (in Readings on BB)

2. God's existence and the removal of extreme doubt: 3.4; 5.12-5.16

October 7

3. The attempt to show that some of D's ideas must be caused by something other than himself or the demon

a. First effort and why it fails: 3.7-3.12

b. Second effort: Trademark argument

i. Ideas vs. what they represent: 3.13

ii. Why D thinks God must exist: 3.22 and 3.23; 3.37-3.39; Blackburn, 32-37 (in Readings on BB)

(a). What characteristics must God have if he exists?

(b). Why does Descartes think he couldn't have made up the idea of God?

4. Why God isn't a deceiver: 3.37 and 4.2; Descartes text, p. 104.1-104.2

V. Why God isn't a deceiver: *Meditation 4*

A. Summary of the results of *Meds* 1-3: 4.1

B. The "problem of error:" 4.2-4.4

C. D's proposed solution to the problem of error

1. Appeal to the notion of the best of all possible worlds: 4.5-4.7

2. Explanation of the cause of error: 4.8-4.11

3. Explanation of why God isn't responsible: 4.12-4.17; Descartes text, p. 104.1-104.2

October 16 (no class October 9 or October 14)

VI. Arnauld's criticism (The Cartesian Circle), Descartes text, 106.2-106.3; Blackburn, 37-40

A. What is it?

B. Why does it raise serious problems for Descartes's attempt to discover truths beyond his own existence?

C. Blackburn's coffee analogy

Additional reading: Blackburn, 37-40 (in Readings on BB)

VII. The External World (6.10 and 6.23)

- A. Why D needs to offer evidence that it exists
- B. Possible explanations for why we think there's an external world
 - 1. God
 - 2. "Some other creature"
 - 3. The external world itself
- C. D's explanation

October 23

XI. Assessment of Descartes

Reading: Blackburn, 40-48 (eres); first four paragraphs of the "Synopsis" of the *Meditations*

XII. Review for midterm

Suggested Listening: Ronald Rubin, "Descartes" (<http://www.philosophytalk.org/pastShows/Descartes.htm>)

Questions to bear in mind as you read Descartes

1. What are D's overall goals in the *Meditations*?
2. What role does extreme doubt play in D's project?
3. What role do skeptical arguments play in the execution of extreme doubt?
4. What are the main skeptical arguments that D presents in *Meditation 1* and what does he make of them?
5. What is it about D's existence in particular that resists extreme doubt?
6. Given that D can be absolutely ("metaphysically") certain that he exists, what else does he think that he can be absolutely certain of? (See *Meditation 2.4-2.9*.)
7. What criterion of truth does D claim to discover? What's the relationship between D's acceptance of this criterion and the existence of a non-deceiving God?
8. What is D's (first) proof for the existence of God? How does Arnauld criticize this?
9. Why does D think that God isn't responsible for human error?
10. Why does D think that he has to offer reasons for the existence of the external world? Which explanation does he accept? Why?
11. Is the moral of Descartes's "story" that there is no way to overcome complete skepticism?

October 28

Review for midterm; introduction to ethics

Unit 3: Ethics

October 30-November 20

October 30

I. What is ethics?

Reading: Rachels, 11-15; 47.5-50.1; Singer (in Readings in BB), 1-6.

II. Cultural Relativism

- A. What is it?
- B. Argument for: the argument from cultural diversity
- C. Objection to the argument from cultural diversity: disagreement about moral standards doesn't show that neither society is correct.
- D. General criticisms: Consequences of taking CR seriously (*reductio ad absurdum*)
 1. We can't say that the moral practices of some cultures are superior or inferior to our own.
 2. We could tell whether an action was right or wrong just by looking at the standards a given culture.
 3. We have to deny that there could be moral progress.

Reading: Rachels, 16-23

November 4

E. Why there's less disagreement than there seems

1. Inuits and infanticide

2. Inuits and the elderly
- F. Criticizing other cultures
 1. Female circumcision (FM)
 2. How do cultures practicing FM claim that it's beneficial to their society?
 3. Criticizing FM
 - a. Is it beneficial?
 - b. Is it more beneficial than some alternative social arrangement that doesn't involve FM?
 4. Why some people are reluctant to criticize FM
 - a. Reluctant to “interfere” in other cultures
 - b. Feel that they should be tolerant of other cultures
 5. Wife-beating in Africa
 6. Women in Saudi Arabia
- G. Values that all cultures have in common
 1. Care for young
 2. Rules against lying and deception
 3. Stern prohibitions against murder

Reading: Rachels, 23-34; also, “Forced to Marry before Puberty African Girls Pay Lasting Price” (in Readings in Blackboard) and “Women in Saudi Arabia” (in Readings in BB).

November 6

III. The Divine Command Theory

- A. What is it?
- B. Reason in favor
- C. Criticisms
 1. Plato's criticism
 - a. Problem with claiming that actions are right or obligatory because God commands them
 - i. Mysterious
 - ii. Arbitrary
 - iii. Wrong reasons
 - b. Problem with claiming that God commands us to do certain things because he can see that they're obligatory.
 2. Bentham's criticisms
 - a. How do we determine what God's will is?
 - b. Traditional sacred texts ignore many pressing moral issues of today.
 - c. In order to know whether something is permitted (or forbidden) by God we first have to know whether it's right (or wrong).
 3. Rachels on Scripture
 - a. Scripture seems wrong in places.
 - b. People look to Scripture to confirm their previously held moral convictions.

Reading: Bentham, From The Principles of Morals and Legislation (e-res), 21.3; Rachels, 52-58; 50.2-51; 62-67

November 11

IV. Two types of moral theory

- A. Deontology
- B. Utilitarianism
- C. Kant's deontology
 1. The categorical imperative
 2. Criticism of utilitarianism
- D. Criticism of Kant

Reading: Rachels, 117-127.1; 130-133.2

November 13

V. Utilitarianism

- A. Fundamentals of the theory
 1. The principle of utility

2. Equal consideration of interests
 3. Rules of thumb
 - B. Application of utilitarianism: animals
 1. Kant's position
 2. Aquinas's position
 3. The utilitarian position
 - a. Why do animals count morally?
 - b. What implications might this have for the way we typically treat animals?
- Reading: Rachels, 89-99; Singer (in Readings on BB), 8-15.

November 18

C. Questions on Mill's *Utilitarianism*

1. What does Mill mean when he says that "as between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested spectator"? (see p. 22, paragraph 3.)
 2. What does Mill mean when he claims that "utility would enjoin...that laws and social arrangements should place the happiness or...interest of every individual as nearly as possible in harmony with the interests of the whole." (See p. 22, paragraph 3.)
 3. A common criticism of utilitarianism is that its standard is "too high for humanity." How does Mill respond to this criticism? (See p. 23, para 2.)
 4. What does Mill mean when he says that "utilitarians are also aware that a right action does not necessarily indicate a virtuous character and that actions which are blamable often proceed from qualities entitled to praise"? Can you give examples of each type of action? (See p. 23 (bottom) - p. 24 (top); p. 25, paragraph 2.)
 5. How does Mill respond to the objection to utilitarianism "that there is not time, previous to action, for calculating and weighing the effects of any line of conduct on the general happiness"? What role do so-called rules of thumb play in Mill's response? What role do the traveling and navigational analogies play in his response? (See p. 30, paragraph 2.)
- Reading: Mill, from *Utilitarianism* (in Readings on BB)

D. Criticisms of utilitarianism

1. Is pleasure all that matters?
 2. Are consequences alone relevant to the rightness/wrongness of actions?
 - a. Rights
 - b. Voyeurism
- Reading: Rachels, 100-110.2; 112.3-116.

November 20

3. Is utilitarianism too demanding?
- #### E. The utilitarian response

VII. Applications: euthanasia

A. Active euthanasia

1. Active voluntary euthanasia:
2. Active involuntary euthanasia:

B. Arguments against active euthanasia

1. Active vs. passive euthanasia
 - a. Killing as inherently worse than letting die
 - b. Rachels' response in "Active and Passive Euthanasia"
2. Playing God
3. Sanctity of human life
4. Slippery slope

Reading : Rachels, 1-11.2; 91.3-94.2; Rachels, "Active and Passive Euthanasia" (in Readings on BB); "The Trolley Problem" (in Readings on BB)

November 25: Second essay due
 VII.
 5. Transplants and the trolley case
 C. Final words on euthanasia

Unit 4: Justice and Punishment
November 25-December 16

I. Is punishment ever justified?
 A. Retributivism
 1. Tenets
 2. Criticisms
 a. Generally impossible to find a punishment that fits the crime
 b. Punishment involves harming the undeserving.
 c. Sometimes impossible to impose the "appropriate" punishment even if we can determine the punishment that fits the crime
 Reading: Rachels, 130-40

December 2

B. Utilitarianism
 1. Tenets
 2. How the utilitarian can avoid the criticisms that retributivism is subject to (see I.A.3 above)
 3. Criticism
 a. Case of the innocent execution
 b. Why this case raises a problem for the utilitarian
 i. Justice vs. utility
 ii. Utilitarianism doesn't heed certain fundamental rights
 c. Utilitarian response
 i. Why we might sometimes have an obligation to ignore justice
 ii. Choosing the lesser evil
 Reading: Bentham, from *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*, 170 (in Readings on BB); Lewis, from *God in the Dock*, 287-294 (in Readings on BB); Menniger, "The Crime of Punishment," 253-61 (in Readings on BB)

December 4

C. Final remark on the utilitarian theory of punishment

II. Death penalty

A. Arguments in favor
 1. Retribution
 2. Protection
 3. Deterrence
 4. Save money
 Reading : Primoratz, "A Life for a Life," 125-130 (in Readings on BB)
 Suggested listening: Robert Weisberg, "Capital Punishment"
<http://www.philosophytalk.org/pastShows/CapitalPunishment.html>

December 9

B. Arguments against the death penalty
 1. Necessary for protection?
 2. Does it deter better than long-term imprisonment?
 3. Is the death penalty discriminatory?
 4. Does the death penalty save money?
 Glover, "Execution and Assassination, 228-240 (in Readings on BB)

December 11

III. Death and the meaning of life

A. Death and immortality

B. The meaning of life

1. Death

2. God

Reading: Rachels, 191-92.2, Hume, "Of the Immortality of the Soul," and Nagel, "The Meaning of Life" (in Readings in BB), and Suggested listening: Howard Wettstein, "Meaning of Life"

<http://www.philosophytalk.org/pastShows/MeaningofLife.htm>

December 16

Review for final

December 18

Final exam, 8AM-10AM