

Knowledge, Reality and Values

CORC 1210

Instructor: Yuval Abrams
Email: yabrams@gc.cuny.edu
Section: R12
Office hours: Th 3:30-6:15 (by appointment)
Office: 3316B

Semester: Spring 2013
Classroom: 3412B
Meeting time: Th 1-3:30
Credits: 3.0

SYLLABUS

Introduction

This course engages some of the broader questions that we ask ourselves. What is the nature of reality? What can I know? Is there a divine being? Is there a distinction between my mind and body? What is the basis of a good life? What is the right thing to do? These have all been central questions addressed by philosophers for millennia. This course attempts to lay the foundations for thinking about these types of questions in a philosophical manner. The course aims to provide both a foundation for future philosophical study at the university level and critical thinking skills that will remain useful in quite disparate future academic and professional endeavors.

Learning Objectives

- 1) Students will improve critical thinking by developing skills of explaining, critically examining, and responding to philosophical theories, issues, and claims in the philosophical areas of epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics.
- 2) Students will improve writing skills by explaining, exploring, and critically examining philosophical theories, issues, concepts, and arguments relating to the philosophical areas of epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics clearly in writing.
- 3) Students will improve communication skills by explaining orally philosophical theories, issues, claims, concepts, and arguments relating to the philosophical areas of epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics.
- 4) Students will improve skills of interpreting and evaluating philosophical writings.
- 5) Students will develop an openness to having their beliefs challenged, will learn to hear and comprehend the views of others, and to entertain objections to their own views.
- 6) Students will be able to explain several classic ethical theories, to compare and contrast ethical theories, and to apply these to justify conclusions relating to concrete moral issues.
- 7) Students will acquire a familiarity with and an understanding of some classic and contemporary philosophical literature and some fundamental philosophical issues, and will be able to explain important contributions to the history of philosophy and their relation to present viewpoints.
- 8) Students will be able to explain several classic epistemological theories, and to compare and contrast theories of what knowledge is and how it is acquired.
- 9) Students will be able to show that issues may be regarded from multiple viewpoints,

and will be able to present reasons in support of each viewpoint.

10) Students will improve reasoning skills and ethical decision making skills by acquiring an understanding of ethical theories and philosophical concepts that will enable them to develop their own opinions on conceptions and practices of moral interaction and democracy.

11) Students will develop a conceptual foundation for future learning by exploring philosophical theories and arguments and will acquire related critical thinking and communication skills.

Required Text :

Adler & Elgin (ed.), *Philosophical Inquiry: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, , Hackett (2007), ISBN: 0872208672

Optional Texts:

Additionally, the following two books are recommended (but not required) as supplementary reading; both are short, accessible, cheap, and easily available. I will be posting excerpts of these books online:

Blackburn, Simon, *Think: A Compelling Introduction to Philosophy*, Oxford (1999), ISBN: 0192100246

Nagel, Thomas, *What Does It All Mean? A Very Short Introduction to Philosophy*, Oxford (1987), ISBN: 9780195052169

Course Requirements and Grading

1. Class participation: 10% **Based on attendance (taken each class) and discussions.**
2. First paper: 10% **Due March 7th.**
3. Midterm exam: 30% **March 21.**
4. Second paper: 10% **Due May 2nd**
5. Final exam: 40% **May 24th 1-3 PM (Please note: the final exam is NOT during regular class time)**

Note on the Requirements

I will take attendance at the beginning of every class. Still, students will need to participate in discussions in order to get a passing grade for attendance (cell phones should be on silent mode). Repeated absences will be taken note of. **You are allowed 3 unexcused absences without it affecting your grade.** Lateness should be avoided, but better that you attend late than not at all. If you must enter late, please make an effort not to disturb the class as you get to your seat.

The two paper assignments will be short essays where students will be asked to compare and evaluate some of the material already covered in class. Students will not be allowed to revise and resubmit the essays. The essays can, however, be submitted for comments 4 or more days before the given deadline and then the student can revise his or her paper appropriately before handing in a final version. Papers are to be submitted electronically (via email) only. The two exams will consist of several short answer questions and essay questions. The final exam will be comprehensive. The final grade will be curved.

Absence from classes does not affect the due dates for the assignments or your exam dates. If you miss an exam your grade will be zero for that exam, unless you contact me beforehand in an attempt to work out an alternative. Late assignments handed in **within 2 weeks** of the due date (i.e. before I return the papers to the rest of class) will receive a **single letter-grade deduction unless an extension has been granted** prior to the due date. **Assignments handed in later than that will only be accepted after talking to me first.**

Please be aware of the NY State Education Law, which provides that:

1. Any student in an institution of higher education who is unable, because of their religious beliefs, to attend classes on a particular day or days shall, because of such absence on the particular day or days, be excused from any examination or any study or work requirements.
2. It shall be the responsibility of the faculty to make available to each student who is absent from school, because of religious beliefs, an equivalent opportunity to make up any examination, study or work requirements which they may have missed because of such absence on any particular day or days
3. Any student who is aggrieved by the alleged failure of any faculty or administrative officials to comply in good faith shall be entitled to maintain an action or proceeding in the supreme court of the county in which such institution of higher education is located for the enforcement of their rights

CUNY Policy on Academic Integrity

The faculty and administration of Brooklyn College support an environment free from cheating and plagiarism. Each student is responsible for being aware of what constitutes cheating and plagiarism and for avoiding both. The complete text of the CUNY Academic Integrity Policy and the Brooklyn College procedure for implementing that policy can be found at this site:

<http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/bc/policies>. If a faculty member suspects a violation of academic integrity and, upon investigation, confirms that violation, or if the student admits that violation, the faculty member **MUST** report the violation.

CUNY Policy on Disability Services

In order to receive disability-related academic accommodations, students must first be registered with the Center for Student Disability Services. Students who have a documented disability or suspect they may have a disability are invited to set up an appointment with the Director of the Center for Student Disability Services, Ms. Valerie Stewart-Lovell at 718-951-5538. If you have already registered with the Center for Student Disability Services, please provide me with the course accommodation form and discuss your specific accommodation with me immediately.

Reading Schedule

Week 1 (January 31): Introduction; Logic, Reasoning, and Evaluating Arguments

No Reading Required

Week 2 (February 7th): Descartes & Rationalism

- Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (50-76)
- *Recommended Reading*: Nagel Chapter 2 (Available on Blackboard)
- *Recommended Reading*: Blackburn Chapter 1 (Available on Blackboard)

Week 3 (February 14th): No Class (Classes follow a Tuesday Schedule)

Week 4 (February 21st): Empiricism

- Locke, *Origins of Our Ideas and Knowledge* (115-140)
- Berkeley, *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*
- *Recommended Reading* Nagel Chapter 3 (Available on Blackboard)
- *Recommended Reading* Blackburn Chapter 7 (Available on Blackboard)
- **First Paper Assigned**

Week 5 (February 28th): Skepticism & Induction

- Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (175-206)
- Russell, *On Induction* (216-219)

Week 6 (March 7th): Kant and the A Priori

- Kant, "The Nature of Knowledge" (27-31)
- Russell, "How A Priori Knowledge is Possible"

First Paper Due (10%)

Week 7 (March 14th): (1) Ethics of Belief; (2) Midterm Review

- Pascal, *The Wager* (784-786)
- Williams, *Deciding to Believe* (802-812)
- **Midterm Review**

Week 8 (March 21st): Midterm / Moral Motivation

- **MIDTERM (30%)**
- Plato, *The Ring of Gyges* (online on Blackboard)
- Darwall, *Hobbes* (529-541)

Week 9 (March 28th): No Class (Spring Recess)

Week 10 (April 4th): Ethics: Theories of the Good

- Plato, *The Myth of the Cave* (23-26)
- Plato, *Euthyphro* (450-458)
- Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics* (459-473)

Week 11 (April 11th): Kant and Deontology

- Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* (474-493)

Week 12 (April 18th): Utilitarianism and Consequentialism

- Bentham (online on Blackboard)
- Mill, *Understanding and Defending Utilitarianism* (493-502)
- **Second Paper Assigned (10%)**

Week 13 (April 25th): Meta-Ethics

- Hume, *The Emotive and Social Basis of Ethics* (546-554)
- Mackie, *The Subjectivity of Values* (554-565)

Week 14 (May 2nd): Mind / Body Problem

- **Second Paper Due (10%)**
- Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (50-76)

- Smart, *Sensations and Brain Processes* (384-390)
- *Recommended Reading*: Nagel Chapter 4 (on Blackboard)
- *Recommended Reading*: Blackburn Chapter 2 (on Blackboard)

Week 15 (May 9th): Free Will and Determinism

- Laplace (Available on Blackboard)
- Darrow (Available on Blackboard)
- *Recommended Reading*: Nagel Chapter 6 (on Blackboard)
- *Recommended Reading*: Blackburn Chapter 3 (on Blackboard)

Week 16 (May 16th): To be determined / Review

FINAL EXAM IS FRIDAY 5/24 FROM 1-3 PM