

GENERAL PHILOSOPHY

Somerville College, MT2018
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General information on the classes

I. Course content

General philosophy is an introduction to philosophy and some of its core areas, viz. metaphysics and epistemology. It has two main goals. First, it explores topics, e.g. the problem of personal identity or of free will, which are immediately intellectually intriguing, and which have important existential consequences. Second, the course gives you the occasion to structure your thinking habits, e.g. by making you think about what can count as knowledge and what is a good explanation.

II. Assignments

On odd weeks, you will need to read the assigned papers and prepare questions for seminars. I will divide the cohort into two groups of roughly seven people. Please, make sure to have read the mandatory readings for the seminars.

On even weeks, you will write an essay of approximately 1500–2000 words on one of the two essay questions that I give for each topic, below. I recommend that you read the non-mandatory papers associated to the topic of your choice. You must email your essay to me and to your tutorial partner 48 hours before our meeting. During the class, you will quickly present your essay or the essay of your tutorial partner. Make sure you are able to sketch your arguments in less than five minutes.

Here are ten tips to help you writing your essays. (1) Reread your essay at least twice before sending it to me. (2) Use topic sentences, that is reread the first sentence of each of your paragraphs: ideally, this would give you a summary of your essay. (3) Upon rereading a sentence, if you do not immediately understand it, rewrite it. (4) Never write sentences that are longer than three lines. (5) Never use technical vocabulary without defining it. If you feel like there are too many definitions, try to cut down the number of technical words you are using. (6) Always illustrate abstract principles with examples. (7) If you present a counterexample, try not only to make it clear how it is a counterexample, but what structural reason we have for believing that the principle is false. (8) State your conclusions clearly at the beginning and end of the essay, and include plenty of ‘signposts’ throughout the essay so that the intended structure of your argument is easy to discern. (9) Spare us long and literary introductions. (10) Read the following guide and try to apply its lessons: <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.htm>

It is crucial that you do the readings, especially the mandatory readings (marked with a star (*)). Without them, tutorials will be much less valuable. There will be times (trust

me) when you regret not having read more (both during finals and after, when you're busy with other things).

III. Marking and late work

If you hand in your essay on time, I will read it and supply written comments, and email it to you in the tutorial or a few hours before. You get to decide whether you want me to give you a general grade (2.2, low-high-mid 2.1, first) or not. If your essay is late, I can't make any promises. It is still important that you hand your essay in even if I do not have time to comment on it, as I am required to report to your college how many pieces of work you have completed to a satisfactory standard. Notify me by email as soon as possible, and at any rate before the start of the tutorial, if you will be late handing in your essay, and/or unable to attend one of the tutorials, giving your reasons. If you are experiencing difficulties (academic or otherwise) that are affecting your ability to work at your normal standard, or you are concerned about your level of understanding of this topic, don't suffer in silence. Rather, let me know as soon as possible.

IV. Study questions and finals preparation

Finals questions are quite specific. They do not simply say 'write an essay on free will', and you cannot count on the Finals paper containing questions that happen to match your tutorial essay questions. Every single examiners' report complains that many students simply recycle their tutorial essays in response to Finals questions that were asking something quite different. To be well prepared for Finals, you will need to know (at least) two or three topics with enough depth and breadth that you can understand and intelligently discuss almost anything the examiners choose to ask on that topic. Study strategies vary, and only you can discover what works for you, but one sensible strategy would be:

1. As you read for tutorials: write out (in note form) your answers to the 'Study questions' that I have included with each topic. Try to identify other important questions. This will ensure that you are picking up most of the basic material from the readings.
2. During the vacations, when you have more time: choose the two or three topics that interest you most, and do further readings for that topic. Lay down your own views in detail and review your original answers to the study questions. Be critical – is there anything that you think the authors whose work you've read have been missing? Work out what you think each of the listed past finals questions is getting at, what you think about the issue it is raising, how you could structure an essay, answering precisely that question, that you could write in fifty minutes.
3. Read widely around the subject (beyond these reading lists) and keep an eye out for non-core lectures and seminars that interest you.

V. General introductory readings

Simon Blackburn, *Think* (Oxford UP, 1999)

Earl Conee and Theodore Sider, *Riddles of Existence* (Oxford UP, 2005)

Weeks 1 & 2: Scepticism and Knowledge

Study questions: What is scepticism? What is the difference between high standard scepticism and radical scepticism? What is contextualism? Is it a good response to scepticism? What is the difference between externalism and internalism? Can one be an internalist and avoid scepticism? Is knowledge closed under known entailment? What is a propositional attitude? Are there different kinds of knowledge? Is it a *reductio* of a theory if it entails scepticism about the external world? What is Moore's argument for the external world? What is a hinge proposition? What is the new evil demon problem? Do you understand what 'knowledge is factive' mean? Is there a difference between rationality and justification? Can we give a satisfactory response to scepticism? Can we give a response to the sceptic that would be acceptable to the sceptic's own terms? Can we transmit knowledge via testimony? If so, what sort? Can knowledge be defined?

Essay question:

Can I know that there is an external world? OR

What do Gettier cases teach us?

Readings:

I. Scepticism

(*) Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy* (trans. John Cottingham), Meditation I.

(*) Nozick, Robert. 'Knowledge and Skepticism', in Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Oxford UP, 1981), pp. 167–185. Reprinted in: Sven Bernecker and Fred Dretske (eds.) *Knowledge: Readings in Contemporary Epistemology* (Oxford UP 2000), pp. 347–54.

(*) Russell, Bertrand. *The Problems of Philosophy*, ch. 1-2 (up to p. 27),
<http://www.llmc.com/docDisplay.aspx?set=09099&volume=0001&part=001>

Moore, G.E. 1939. 'Proof of an External World'. *Proceedings of the British Academy* 25 (5): 273–300.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1974. *On Certainty*. Oxford: Blackwell.

II. Justification

(*) Gettier, Edmund L. 1963. 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?' *Analysis* 23 (6): 121–23.

(*) Armstrong, D. M. 'The Thermometer Model of Knowledge', in Sven Bernecker and Fred Dretske (eds.) *Knowledge: Readings in Contemporary Epistemology* (Oxford UP 2000), pp.72-85. Originally published in Armstrong, *Belief, Truth and Knowledge* (Cambridge UP, 1973), pp.162-175,178-183.

(*) Bonjour, Laurence. 'Externalist Theories of Empirical Knowledge', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 5 (1980), pp. 53-73. Reprinted in Sven Bernecker and Fred Dretske (eds.) *Knowledge: Readings in Contemporary Epistemology* (OUP 2000).

Williamson, Timothy. 2000. 'Introduction', *Knowledge and Its Limits*. Oxford University Press, pp. 1-20.

Weeks 3 & 4: Free Will

Study questions: What are physical, psychological, social, biological determinisms? Are they all similarly threatening to freedom or responsibility? What is free will? Is it just a sort of will (if so, what is the will)? Is there a difference between acting freely and exercising one's free will? What is the link between free will and moral responsibility? What is the link between moral responsibility and blameworthiness? What are compatibilism and incompatibilism and what are the main arguments for each? What are sourcehood and leeway? Is there a difference between having the ability to do otherwise and having alternate possibilities? What are abilities? What are Frankfurt-type counterexamples? Is free will a moral concept? When Luther said he could not do otherwise but to denounce some of the Catholic Church's faults, did he mean he was unfree to do otherwise? Are *free will* or *moral responsibility* historical or structural concepts? What are the laws of nature? Can they constrain? Is indeterminism conducive to freedom? What is the Consequence Argument? What is the Basic Argument? What is the Mind Argument?

Essay question:

If physical determinism is true, does it follow that we lack the ability to do otherwise? OR
Does moral responsibility require the ability to do otherwise?

Readings:

I. Determinism and Free Will

(*) Hume, David. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section VIII.

(*) A. J. Ayer, 'Freedom and Necessity', in Ayer, *Philosophical Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1954), pp. 271–84. Reprinted in Gary Watson (ed.), *Free Will*, 1st edition (Oxford UP, 1982).

(*) Vihvelin, Kadri. 2017. 'Arguments for Incompatibilism' (especially §1, §2, §5) in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Chisholm, Roderick. 'Human Freedom and the Self', reprinted in Gary Watson (ed.), *Free Will*, 1st and 2nd editions (Oxford UP, 2003); and in Robert Kane (ed.), *Free Will* (Blackwell, 2002).

Lewis, David. 1981. 'Are We Free to Break the Laws?' *Theoria* 47 (3): 113–21.

Van Inwagen, Peter. 'The Power of Rational Beings', in van Inwagen, P., *Metaphysics*, 2014, OUP.

II. Free Will and Responsibility

- (*) Frankfurt, Harry. 'Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility', *Journal of Philosophy*, 66 (1969): pp. 829-839. Reprinted in Gary Watson (ed.) *Free Will*, 2nd edition (OUP 2002), pp. 167-176; and in Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge UP, 1988).
- (*) Strawson, P.F. 2008. *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (ch. 1). Routledge.
- (*) Wolf, Susan. 1993. *Freedom within Reason* (ch. 6). Oxford University Press.
- Alvarez, Maria. 2009. 'Actions, Thought-Experiments and the "Principle of Alternate Possibilities"'. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1): 61–81.
- McKenna, Michael. 2005. 'Where Frankfurt and Strawson Meet'. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 29 (1): 163–80.
- Nelkin, Dana Kay. 2011. *Making Sense of Freedom and Responsibility* (ch. 1 & 6). Oxford University Press.
- Strawson, Galen. 1994. 'The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility'. *Philosophical Studies*, no. 75: 5–24.
- Widerker, David. 2000. 'Frankfurt's Attack on the Principle of Alternative Possibilities: A Further Look'. *Philosophical Perspectives* 14: 181–201.

Weeks 5 & 6: Mind and Body

Study questions: What is the knowledge argument? What are naturalism, reductionism, epiphenomenalism, and dualism? What is the open question argument and its main responses? Are there different sorts of knowledge and if so does it help to respond to the knowledge argument? What are eliminativism and epiphenomenalism? What is the difference between Jackson's argument and Nagel's point about the fact that we cannot know what it is like to be a bat? Is Cartesian dualism plausible? Can non-physical facts be explanatorily relevant? Can they have a causal role?

Essay question:

Is the 'knowledge argument' successful against physicalism? OR

Was Descartes right when he argued that we were thinking things?

Readings

I. Qualia, Knowledge, and Physicalism

- (*) Jackson, Frank. 1982. 'Epiphenomenal Qualia', *Philosophical Quarterly* 32, 127–136; reprinted in Peter Ludlow, Yujin Nagasawa and Daniel Stoljar, eds. *There's Something About Mary* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004).

- (*) Moore, G. E. 1903. *Principia Ethica*, ch. 1.
- (*) Nida-Rümelin, Martine. 2015. 'Qualia: The Knowledge Argument'. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2015. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/qualia-knowledge/>.
- Long, Alex. 2010. 'Phaedo'. In *Plato*, by Alex Long, edited by David Sedley, 42–116. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lewis, David. 'What Experience Teaches', in William G. Lycan (ed.), *Mind and Cognition* (Blackwell: 1990); reprinted in Lewis, *Papers in Metaphysics and Epistemology* (Cambridge UP, 1999), 262–90; in David Chalmers (ed.), *Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford UP, 2002); in Tim O'Connor and David Robb (eds.), *Philosophy of Mind: Contemporary Readings* (Routledge, 2003); and in Ludlow et al., *There's Something About Mary*.
- II. The Self
- (*) Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy* (trans. John Cottingham), Meditations II and VI.
- (*) Kenny, Anthony. 1992. *The Metaphysics of Mind* (ch. 1 & 2). Oxford University Press.
- (*) Strawson, P. F. 1964. 'Persons' in *Individuals*. London, Kingdom: Routledge.
- Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes, 2007, *The Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes*, Lisa Shapiro (ed. and transl.), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 61-73.
- Anscombe, Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret. 1975. *The First Person*. Clarendon Press.

Weeks 7 & 8: Personal Identity

Study questions: What is personal identity? Is there a difference between what is necessary for our persistence and what constitutes our essence? What is the difference between numerical and qualitative identity? What are Leibniz's laws? Does personal identity matter? What is the difference between psychological continuity and psychological connectedness? What is the obvious problem with Locke's point about the child and the general? Do people exist as substances or are we just bundles of sensations? What is the problem of Theseus ship? What are some of the troubling teleportation and transplant cases?

Essay question:

What is the criterion of persistence? OR

Does personal identity matter?

Readings:

I. Persistence and Identity

- (*) Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II, Chapter XXVII.
- (*) Shoemaker, Sydney, ed. 1984. 'Personal Identity'. In *Personal Identity: A Materialist's Account*, 89–97. Oxford: Blackwell.
- (*) Thomson, Judith Jarvis. 2008. 'People and Their Bodies'. In *Contemporary Debates in Metaphysics*, edited by Theodore Sider, John Hawthorne, and Dean W. Zimmerman. Blackwell.

Olson, Eric T. 2015. 'Personal Identity', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-personal/>

Schechtman, Marya. 2011. 'The Narrative Self'. *The Oxford Handbook of the Self*, February.

II. The Importance of Personal Identity

- (*) Korsgaard, Christine. 1989. 'Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency: A Kantian Response to Parfit' (read Parfit first)
 - (*) Parfit, Derek. 'Why Our Identity is Not What Matters', in Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford UP, 1984), Chapter 12, pp. 245-280. Reprinted in Raymond Martin and John Barresi (eds.) *Personal Identity* (Blackwell, 2003), pp. 115-143.
 - (*) Whiting, Jennifer. 1986. 'Friends and Future Selves'. *Philosophical Review* 95 (4): 547–80.
- Sosa, Ernest. 1990. 'Surviving Matters'. *Noûs* 25 (1): 297–322.
- Williams, Bernard. 1970. 'The Self and the Future', *Philosophical Review* 79, pp. 161–180. Reprinted in Williams, *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge UP, 1973); in John Perry (ed.), *Personal Identity* (University of California Press, 1975); and in Raymond Martin and John Barresi (eds.) *Personal Identity* (Blackwell, 2003).