

# Major Issues in Philosophy

Baruch College  
PHI 1500 – MNFA  
Class Number: 28443

Instructor: Yuval Abrams  
Email: [yabrams@gradcenter.cuny.edu](mailto:yabrams@gradcenter.cuny.edu)  
Meeting time: Friday 1:15-4:10  
Office hours: Friday 12-1:15 PM (by appointment)

Semester: SPRING 2018  
Classroom: Vertical 9-120  
Credits: 3.0  
Office: B5-272

## 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 classical questions have 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: a distinctive method and tradition of rigorous and analytical thought. We will be exploring some of the deepest, most difficult, and historically influential questions, whilst developing a mode of thinking that can be applied to almost any inquiry or question at all. 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:**

Steven M. Cahn (ed.), *Exploring Philosophy: An Introductory Anthology, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed*, Oxford University Press (2012), (Price: \$61.10), ISBN: 978-0199797271

### **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 on the Course Blackboard site:*

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 Blackboard Site:**

There will be a site for this course on Blackboard. The syllabus, some of the readings, and perhaps your grades, will be posted and accessible on that site. Additionally, you are required to post your online journal (see below on Course Requirements and Grading) on the Blackboard site.

### **Course Requirements and Grading**

1. Class participation: 10% Based on attendance (taken each class) and discussions.
2. First Exam: 20%, March 2<sup>nd</sup> in class
3. First Paper: 12.5%, due on March 23<sup>rd</sup> (you will receive a prompt at least two weeks in advance)
4. Second Exam: 20%, April 11<sup>th</sup> (in class)
5. Second Paper: 12.5%, due May 4<sup>th</sup> (**date subject to change**) (you will receive a prompt at least two weeks in advance)
6. Final Exam: 25%, May 18<sup>th</sup> 1-3 PM (**time subject to change**)

**The final grade will be curved.**

### ***Note on the Requirements***

#### **Class Participation** (10%).

- 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 your grade being affecting.**
- 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.

#### **Paper Assignments** (12.5+12.5=25%)

- The two paper assignments will be short essays where students will be asked to compare and evaluate material from a chapter not covered in class.
- **Papers are to be submitted electronically (via email or by Blackboard) only.**
- Papers are due 30 minutes prior to class meeting time.
- If you need more time, you may request an extension. Please do NOT miss class in order to complete an assignment. If you do, your absence will be unexcused.

#### **Exams** (20+20+25 = 65%)

- The three exams will consist of several short answer questions and essay questions.
- The final exam will be comprehensive (i.e. cumulative).

#### **Miscellaneous**

- Because this class meets for 3 hours once a week, we will have class on exam days after the exam.
- 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**

***Baruch College's Statement of Academic Integrity:***

Academic integrity in its best form involves upholding the principles and expectations of doing one's own work and giving credit to others for theirs. Academic integrity strengthens the educational environment by valuing original work and providing a fair environment for all students. (<http://www.baruch.cuny.edu/studentaffairs/AcademicIntegrity/>)

***Baruch College's Statement on Academic Dishonesty:***

Academic dishonesty is unacceptable and will not be tolerated. Cheating, forgery, plagiarism and collusion in dishonest acts undermine the college's educational mission and the students' personal and intellectual growth. Baruch students are expected to bear individual responsibility for their work, to learn the rules and definitions that underlie the practice of academic integrity, and to uphold its ideals. Ignorance of the rules is not an acceptable excuse for disobeying them. Any student who attempts to compromise or devalue the academic process will be sanctioned.

For more information on the definitions of Academic Dishonesty, see here

[https://www.baruch.cuny.edu/academic/academic\\_honesty.html](https://www.baruch.cuny.edu/academic/academic_honesty.html)

**CUNY Policy on Disability Services**

Baruch College is committed to providing access to all programs and curricula to all students. Students with disabilities who may need classroom accommodations are encouraged to register with the Office of Students with Disabilities. For more information, please contact the Office of Students with Disabilities, One Bernard Baruch Way, Newman Vertical Campus, Room 2-271, New York, NY 10010, phone number, 646-312-4950 or visit <https://www.baruch.cuny.edu/studentaffairs/ossd/disabilityServices.htm> .

**Student Academic Consulting Center (SACC)**

SACC's mission is to help undergraduates of Baruch College succeed academically and in their chosen professions. This includes tutorial services. For more information, visit <https://www.baruch.cuny.edu/sacc/>

**Reading Schedule** (All Readings are in the Cahn text, followed by page number, unless indicated otherwise) (Note: **Schedule subject to revision. Please keep track via Blackboard**)

- Week 1** February 2: Introduction to the Class; What is Philosophy?; Reasoning  
READINGS:  
(1) Beardsley, What is Philosophy? (3)
- Week 2** February 9: Logic and Reasoning (continued); Test Case one: The relationship between God and Morality  
READINGS:  
READINGS:  
(1) Salmon, The Scope of Logic (43)  
(2) Barker, Improving Your Thinking (50)  
(3) Plato: Euthyphro (248)
- Week 3** February 16: Proofs for the Existence of God: (1) The Ontological Argument; (2) Cosmological Argument; (3) The Argument from Design  
READINGS:  
(1) Anselm and Gnilo: The Ontological Argument (265)  
(2) Aquinas: Summa Theologiae (273)  
(3) Paley: Natural Theology (175)
- Week 4** February 23: Knowledge: Descartes and Rationalism  
READINGS:  
(1) Descartes Meditations on First Philosophy (87)  
(2) Descartes Meditation on First Philosophy (151)  
(3) *Optional Reading*: Nagel Chapter 2 (Available on Blackboard)  
(4) *Optional Reading*: Blackburn Chapter 1 (Available on Blackboard)
- Week 5** March 2: Knowledge: Empiricism  
READINGS:  
(1) Locke: An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (91)  
(2) Berkeley: A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge (98)  
(3) Hume: An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (108)  
(4) *Optional Reading* Nagel Chapter 3 (Available on Blackboard)  
(5) *Optional Reading* Blackburn Chapter 7 (Available on Blackboard)  
**First Exam (20%) in Class March 2<sup>nd</sup>**
- Week 6** March 9: Empiricism, Skepticism, and Induction  
READINGS:  
(1) Hume (continued) (108)  
(2) Kant: Critique of Pure Reason (117)  
(3) Russell: The Problem of Induction (82)
- Week 7** March 16: Mind  
READINGS:  
(1) Descartes: Meditations (continued) (151)  
(2) Ryle: The Ghost in the Machine (127)  
(3) Taylor: The Mind as a Function of the Body (131)  
(4) Nagel: What is it Like to be a Bat? (138)  
(5) Searle: Do Computers Think? (148)  
(6) *Optional Reading*: Nagel Chapter 4 (on Blackboard)  
(7) *Optional Reading*: Blackburn Chapter 2 (on Blackboard)
- Week 8** March 23: Free Will  
READINGS:  
(1) Nagel: Free Will (161)  
(2) Stace: Free Will and Determinism (166)

- (3) Cahn: Freedom or Determinism? (169)
- (4) Frankfurt: The Principle of Alternative Possibilities (179)
- (5) *Optional Reading*: Nagel Chapter 6 (on Blackboard)
- (6) *Optional Reading*: Blackburn Chapter 3 (on Blackboard)

**First Paper (12.5%) Due**

- Week 9** March 30: **NO CLASS (SPRING BREAK)**
- Week 10** April 6: **NO CLASS (SPRING BREAK)**
- Week 11** April 11 (Wednesday): Ethics: Kant and Deontology  
 READINGS:  
 (1) Kant: Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals (413)  
 (2) O'Neill: Kant's Ethics (383)
- Week 12** April 13: Ethics: Utilitarianism  
 READINGS:  
 (1) Mill: Utilitarianism (418)  
 (2) Pojman: Assessing Utilitarianism (386)  
 (3) Cahn: A Supreme Moral Principle? (393)
- Week 13** April 20: Ethics: Virtue Ethics  
 READINGS:  
 (1) Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics (408)  
 (2) Mayo: Virtue Ethics (398)
- Week 14** April 27: Ethics: Challenges  
 READINGS:  
 (1) Rachels: The Challenges of Cultural Relativism (369)  
 (2) Regan: How Not to Answer Moral Questions (379)  
 (3) Plato, "Ring of Gyges" (on Blackboard)  
 (4) Vitrano: Happiness and Morality (405)
- Week 15** May 4: Politics, Justice, and the Social Contract  
 READINGS:  
 (1) Hobbes: Leviathan (567)  
 (2) Locke: Second Treatise of Government (574)  
 (3) Rawls: A Theory of Justice (529)  
 (4) Nozick: Distributive Justice (533)
- Second Paper (12.5%) Due**
- Week 16:** May 11: TBA

**FINAL EXAM (25%) May 18<sup>th</sup> from 1-3 PM (Tentative: This is subject to revision – stay tuned)**