

Philosophy 20209

Knowledge and Mind

Spring 2007

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Office information

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This course

The goal of this class is to develop an understanding and appreciation of questions about human knowledge. We all are interested in understanding the world we live in and our place in it. However, a little reflection on how such understanding is possible turns up many philosophical problems: Are there defensible grounds on which we can distinguish truth from falsity? If so, what kind of defense is this, and what justification can be given for *its* reliability? Is the world that we come to understand independent of us or somehow shaped by our acts of understanding? Is our way of knowing scientific, historical, and other descriptive features of the world similar to or different from our way of knowing our proper place in the world? What does a theoretical account of human knowledge tell us about the nature of the human mind and its relationship to the world as a whole? Can we come to understand ourselves as knowers by settling questions about how knowledge works?

We are going to address these questions by reading a few very influential and very different philosophical works from different time periods. On the one hand we will be interested in the traditional philosophical project of determining how our authors answer these questions and what arguments

they muster in support of their answers. We will evaluate their arguments and determine whether they give us a deeper or different understanding of human knowledge. On the other hand we will work to appreciate these philosophical works as literary and human achievements. Since the authors lived in different times and places from one another, and since they were living under such different religious and social conditions, there is perhaps as much to be learned from which questions about human knowledge they found most pressing as from how they answered them. We will ask what sorts of assumptions our authors made that seem unusual to us and how these might color the way they thought of their place in the world. We also will ask what sorts of assumptions we have made about ourselves and the world that we want to reevaluate after exploring our authors' different world-views.

Texts

You should read (and study) all of the texts below. I trust your ability to acquire copies of the four books listed; I will provide copies of the three short selections. The readings are listed in the order that we will discuss them in class, which also is their chronological order. Notice that I'm not including a weekly breakdown of readings. That's because I like for the entire class to determine the pace in which we work through the material. I don't think we'll have a problem covering all the reading, because there's not a whole lot of it. So I want to reserve time for us to delve more deeply in matters that interest you.

- René Descartes *Meditations on First Philosophy*
- David Hume *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*
- Immanuel Kant *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*
- Søren Kierkegaard "Subjective truth, inwardness" from *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*
- Charles Sanders Peirce "The fixation of belief"
- Ludwig Wittgenstein *On Certainty*
- Charles Margrave Taylor "Overcoming epistemology"

Requirements

Keep up with the readings—trying to stay a little ahead. Attend class regularly and participate in discussions. Write two short essays (a few pages should do) according to guidelines I will explain to you. Write a third, more developed essay, submitting first a draft and later a final version. *If you notice that you are having trouble meeting these requirements, or if you foresee that you will, take care to let me know as soon as possible. You must meet the requirements in order to pass the class.*

In addition you have the option of writing a final exam.

Your grade will reflect the value of your contribution to class, the quality of your short essays, your performance on the final exam, the degree to which you improved and developed your thoughts throughout the semester, and above all the quality of your third essay.

My goal is to help you appreciate and analyze human knowledge. I believe that if you mull over the works that we're reading, you'll come up with some interesting ideas. If I know that you're engaged in this endeavor in good faith, then I will work with you on rewrites or extra short essays to help you improve your showing in the class. If, by the end of the course, you've developed some theses that interest you and communicated them to me well in formal writing and classroom discussions, then you should do pretty well.

Important dates

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|-------------|--------------------------|
| February 14 | first essay due |
| March 9 | second essay due |
| March 12 | no class (break) |
| March 14 | no class (break) |
| March 16 | no class (break) |
| April 2 | no class (holiday) |
| April 4 | no class (holiday) |
| April 6 | no class (holiday) |
| April 9 | no class (holiday) |
| April 13 | draft of third essay due |
| May 2 | third essay due |

Note

Please be aware of the University's policies regarding academic honesty, anti-discrimination, and access to education for students with disabilities.

Here is the web-page of the office for students with disabilities:

<http://www.nd.edu/~osd/NEWHOME PAGE.htm>

Here is the Philosophy Department's web-page devoted to academic honesty, with links to information about plagiarism and the University's honor code.

<http://philosophy.nd.edu/undergraduate-program/honesty/>

In addition I am someone you can approach if you have concerns about discrimination or proper scholarly behavior, whether or not the concern is related to this course.