AN INTRODUCTORY COURSE TO PHILOSOPHY

CONTENTS

PART ONE: GENERAL INFORMATION

PART TWO: ASSIGNMENTS

PART ONE: GENERAL INFORMATION

1. Introduction

One of the greatest and most influential Ancient philosophers of the West, Aristotle of Stageira (384-322 BC) once said "Wonder is the beginning of philosophy". We have a habit of asking fundamental questions about our every-day lives, such as,

- Suppose I am certain that I am right about something, upon what is that certainty based?
- Suppose I am discussing a controversial matter with someone, what can objectively guarantee the stringency of my argument?

Thinking about and discussing questions such as these will force us to reconsider what we have always taken for granted. And ultimately they will lead us to more fundamental questions about the proper nature of Truth and Knowledge as such.

This course—an introduction into Western philosophy—is meant for people who would like to start thinking about philosophical issues, like the ones we just mentioned, in a systematic way. To think philosophically is not as sophisticated as you might think. All too often we hear people (not only philosophers) asking, "Why this?", "Why that?" These are questions people naturally tend to wonder about, particularly when they have misgivings about the usual way of dealing with them. So whenever some standard answer to one of these questions no longer appeals to us, the conditions for starting a philosophical discussion, with others or with ourselves, are favourable.

From the very beginning, in Antiquity, philosophical thought was revolutionary. It questioned common-sense opinions and quite often posed a threat to the Establishment. In fifth-century Athens, Socrates (469-399 BC) had the impertinence to ask people all kinds of questions, encouraging them to give unconventional answers, thus forcing them to abandon their common-sense ideas. This attitude ultimately cost him his life. Furthermore, the ways in which philosophers approached a problem often had ground-breaking results. Consider, for example, the huge developments instigated by the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), to whom we shall turn later on in the course.

Most of us have on occasion asked a philosophical question or participated in a philosophical discussion. In that sense we are more or less familiar with doing philosophy. But usually our first attempts at philosophy do not get us anywhere. More than once you must have got the impression that philosophising is nothing but sophistry. Philosophers are notorious for their ability and inclination to argue for any opinion whatsoever, no matter how

outlandish it might seem. How then are we supposed to tell the difference between philosophical practice and malpractice?

Philosophers are extremely ambitious: there is no field of human life that escapes their attention. Throughout the history of philosophy, the specialists came to mark off certain main areas of philosophical problems. All kinds of philosophical questions were reduced to one of the following three basic problems: the problem of truth and knowledge, the problem of value, and the problem of what is called 'reality'. You will soon discover that these main areas are closely related, to such an extent indeed that they form separate schools of thought, groups of philosophers who never see eye to eye on anything.

One of the aims of this course is to bring some sort of order in what on the face of it seems a chaotic asking of, "Why?" and "How?" The method used is the analytic one. Of every problem we shall begin by asking, "What exactly are we talking about?", "What are the notions featuring in particular questions (or rather, areas of questioning)?" Given our analytic approach, you are entitled to reduce any question to the following two. The first one is, "What exactly do you mean?" Once your opponent has managed to give a reasonably satisfactory answer, you are entitled to ask, "How do you know?" Thinking and talking about philosophical issues requires openness and fairness.

2. Schedule

The course lasts 8 weeks and consists of 2 weekly tutorial group meetings. There are no separate lectures; all the necessary information will be provided by the textbooks, and complemented during the meetings.

The tutorial group meetings are scheduled in Weeks **I-VII**. The midterm exam is scheduled in the second half of week **IV**. You are to hand in your final paper in Week **VII.** (The topics for this paper will be provided in the fifth week of the course.)

The entire schedule is listed below:

Week 1
Meeting 1
Meeting 2
Week 2
Meeting 3

Meeting 4
Week 3
Meeting 5
Meeting 6
Week 4
Meeting 7
Midterm Written Exam (Plenary)
Week 5
Meeting 8
Meeting 9
Week 6
Meeting 10
Meeting 11
Week 7
Deadline Take Home (Paper)

3. Structure of the course

During the weekly meetings we shall deal with two of the three basic philosophical problems mentioned above:
(1) the nature of truth and knowledge: basic topics from the philosophic disciplines *epistemology* and *logic*;
(2) philosophic problems concerning values and ethical standards: basic topics from *axiology* and *ethics*.
The vast and complex area of *ontology* and *metaphysics* will only be addressed within the context of our discussion of (1) and (2).

In this course we will look at specific problems featuring in systematic philosophy. This approach to philosophy involves a focus on identifying, explaining, and attempting to solve philosophical problems from the domains we mentioned. We do not intend to offer a systematic course on contemporary or past philosophical theories. However, we shall devote some attention to a set of indispensable philosophic notions; the historical development of these theoretical ingredients will be discussed only if they help you understand them properly. The material used in our course (see the textbooks mentioned in our item 5, below) is intended to familiarize you with basic philosophic problems, to present different solutions to these problems, and to provide you with the tools to critically evaluate them.

Assignments:

The **Introduction** is on the nature of philosophy. Given our practical approach to all philosophical subject-matters, this question comes down to asking, "How should we address specific problems in a philosophical manner?" We will devote the very first meeting to the nature of philosophy. For the second meeting of week 1 you will prepare by reading the assigned literature and formulating initial answers to some guiding questions in the course manual. The questions are not exhaustive and should serve mainly as a starting framework for our discussion.

Assignment I concerns Pontius Pilate's famous question, 'What is Truth?'

Assignment II is about the nature of knowledge.

Assignment III, the final one, considers different philosophical approaches to ethical problems, all centred round the basic question, "Where does morality derive its authority?"

4. Course objectives

This general aim of this course is to make you familiar with the practice of philosophy, and thus to help you develop a skill. Thus the focus is not on providing you with a lot of information about past and contemporary philosophical developments. In a word, the course has three (closely related) objectives:

* to make you familiar with the basic notions required for any serious philosophic discussion;
* to make you familiar with the basics of valid and invalid argumentation;
* to introduce you to some of the decisive moments in the history of philosophy (e.g. Descartes, Hume, Kant).

5. Course material

<u>Basic textbooks:</u>

Blackburn, Simon
1999. *Think.* A Compelling Introduction to Philosophy. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (available in reading room)

Blackburn, Simon

2001. *Being Good.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. (available in reading room)

Creel, Richard E

2001. *Thinking Philosophically*. An Introduction to Critical Reflection and Rational Dialogue. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc.

Horner, Chris & Emrys Westacott

2000. *Thinking through Philosophy. An Introduction.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Creel's book is the product of a lifetime practice of introducing students to philosophy; it is very informative, and therefore serves as an excellent first introduction. Moreover, the author has the noble ambition to "ultimately leave you free to make your own decisions" (see p. 4) about the alternative solutions. While philosophically speaking Creel's approach is not always up to scratch, it is a wonderful tool to sharpen your analytic skills. Hence we shall use Creel both as an introductory text, but also as a didactic device to raise your critical awareness. Horner & Westacott provide an excellent introduction in philosophy; their work contains plenty of information, including the main historical issues, and also provides critical assessments of the different positions. Being true philosophers themselves, the authors offer a fine complement to the exemplary schoolmaster Creel. However it is important to acknowledge the underlying epistemological, axiological and metaphysical positioning of all these sources. **All participants should purchase their own copies of these two books (Creel; Horner & Westacott) and bring them to class**.

The reading material listed under each meeting is arranged in alphabetical order. It is up to you to decide where you wish to start. Occasionally a reading guide has been added. Unfortunately it was impossible to select an equal amount of reading material for each meeting. **It is up to you to finish the reading for each meeting on time, so make sure you figure out the work load well in advance!**

Additional material available online and/or in the reading room, and/or on EleUM:

Anscombe, G.E.M.

1958. Modern Moral Philosophy.
Text is available at the following address:
http://www.philosophy.uncc.edu/mleldrid/cmt/mmp.html

Aristotle

Nichomachean Ethics. Books I and II. Translation by W.D. Ross.
Available at the following address:
http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.html

Bird, Alexander

Thomas Kuhn.
Text is available at the following address:
http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/thomas-kuhn/

David, Marian
2009. The correspondence theory of truth.
Text is available at the following address:
http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth-correspondence/
Haack, Susan
1998. Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate, University of Chicago Press. (ch. 2)
Text is available on EleUM.
Huggett, Nick
Zeno's Paradoxes.
Text is available at the following address:
http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/paradox-zeno/
Hume, David
1999. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by Tom L. Beauchamp. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Text also available at the following address:
http://18th.eserver.org/hume-enquiry.html
Hursthouse, Rosalind
2010. Virtue Ethics.
Text is available at the following address:
http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/
Irwin, Terrence (ed.)
1999. *Classical Philosophy.* Oxford: Oxford University Press; pp. 64-83.
Hard copy in reading room.
Kuhn, Thomas S.
(1977). 'Second Thoughts on Paradigms', in *The Essential tension*. Selected Studies in Scientific Tradition and Change. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp.293-319.
Text is available at the following address:
http://eu.pravo.hr/_download/repository/Second_Thoughts_on_Paradigms.pdf
James, William
(1907). *Pragmatism.* A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking.
Lecture II, What pragmatism means.
Text is available at the following address:
https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/james.htm
Russell, Bertrand
1912. *The Problems of Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Text is also available at the following address:
http://www.ditext.com/russell/russell.html
Young, James O
2008. The coherence theory of truth.
Text is available at the following address:
http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth-coherence/

Websites:

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, available at the following address:
http://plato.stanford.edu/
The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, available at the following address:
http://www.iep.utm.edu/

6. Tutorial Group Meetings

The assignments are mostly based upon selections from Creel's book, to which other sources have frequently been added. All the reading material listed in the assignments should be carefully studied and analysed, in writing. Be sure to make a note of any difficulties you may have with the reading material or about the precise use of basic philosophical notions.

During each meeting we will critically discuss the reading material. Creel is quite straightforward, but you must read very carefully: evaluate what he says critically, and try to come up with counterarguments. The questions listed at the end of each meeting can be used as study material.

7. Assessement

The examination consists of a plenary exam in the fourth week and a final paper at the end of the course.

The plenary exam will consist in open (essay-)questions. Its aim is first to establish whether you have understood the reading material read and are able to reproduce the basic philosophic notions under scrutiny. A second aim is to establish whether you are able to critically assess the philosophic theoretical positions you have studied. The exam will be graded according to three criteria:

- Does the answer display a clear understanding of the material under consideration?
- Is the student able to critically analyse the philosophic positions at issue?
- Is the answer written in clear and correct language and supported by cogent arguments?

The final paper is meant to help you come to terms with some of the main themes of the second part of the course in your own way. You will be encouraged to take up your own position and to defend that position in a logically structured way, on the basis of clear and accurate argumentation and relevant sources.

The final grade:

The midterm exam counts for 60% and the final paper for 40% of the final grade.

More information about the exams will be provided in the second week of the course.

8. Attendance requirements

The minimum attendance requirement is 85%. We have 11 tutorial group meeting in total, so you are not allowed to miss more than one meeting. If you miss 30% of the meetings (3 meetings), you will automatically fail the course.

8. Re-sit policy

You are entitled to a re-sit if your final grade is below 5.5.
The re-sit will consist in a written examination, to be scheduled in the resit week. The re-sit grade will replace your grade for the midterm plenary exam (regular). Your final grade for the re-sit is based on the grade for your paper (regular) and the grade for your written examination (re-sit).

9. Course coordination

Course coordinator: Joke Spruyt, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Dept. of Philosophy
e-mail: joke.spruyt@maastrichtuniversity.nl

PART TWO: ASSIGNMENTS

Preliminary remarks:

Preparation:

To prepare for the first tutorial group meeting, please read the introduction of the course manual. For the remainder of the meetings you should prepare carefully, by

* working through and writing a short **summary of the reading material**; focus on the authors' message;

* preparing the **questions** in writing;

* making a list of things you have **difficulties** with;

* formulating **criticism** against and formulating **your own arguments** with regard to the philosophic positions under discussion.

In class we shall go through the reading material together.

INTRODUCTORY

THE NATURE OF PHILOSOPHY

Instead of searching for a well-polished definition of philosophy, it is better to start by exploring specific philosophical issues. Hands-on experience with philosophical questioning will allow you to acquire a better understanding of what doing philosophy is all about. To discover what philosophising comes down to is the main objective of the present course.

WEEK 1

Meeting 1:

The first meeting is special in that you will do some reading and answer some questions as a follow-up to the in-class meeting (for all other meetings you read and prepare prior to the meeting). This has two reasons. The first is to enable a form of open pre-discussion of the course in general before diving into the literature. The second reason is logistic in that you are not required to do any preparation prior to the first meeting. Thus the following texts are to be read immediately following our first meeting and preliminary answers to the following questions formulated in writing. You will then proceed with normal preparations for the second meeting.

During our first meeting you will be asked to present your own ideas as to

- why you have chosen this introductory course on philosophy;
- the introduction of the course manual;
- the question what philosophy is, as opposed to other disciplines.

Please read the following texts carefully, and answer the questions for yourself. If you have any difficulties with the material, please bring them up during the second meeting. Again, for the second meeting your will also read the material listed there **before we meet in class**.

Introductory (post-meeting) reading assignment:

Introduction of the course manual.

Blackburn, *Think*, pp. 1-13.

Creel (2001), p. 6; pp. 15-23; pp. 64-74.

Horner & Westacott (2000), pp. 248-255: relevant items.

Russell (1912), ch. 15.

Study questions Introductory (post-meeting) Reading Assignment:

1. Explain the *philosophic* nature of the issues presented by Creel (p. 15) as "the basic areas and problems of philosophy" (see also Creel, p. 6).

2. Explain how all the areas and questions mentioned by Creel are related to one another. What *exactly* do we mean by 'philosophising', i.e., what does it mean to address problems philosophically?

3. Describe the *philosophic* nature of the detailed questions listed in the last section of Creel, p. 17 (on ethics and axiology). Explain the difference between a philosophical approach and a scientific and/or theological approach to these questions.

4. Categorise the various items mentioned by Blackburn, pp. 2-3, and connect them with the classification of the philosophical (sub-)disciplines featuring in Creel, pp. 16, 19, and pp. 22-23.

6. Evaluate Russell's take on the aim and value of philosophy.

To wind up your work on the first meeting, proceed as follows:

- Check whether you are now in a better position to understand the items sub **1.-3.** (in Creel p. 15 & pp. 21-23), and also what has been said in our Introduction, above.
- Explain the connection between Blackburn's remarks (particularly pp. 6 ff.) and the findings of our first meeting. Mark the links with the matters previously dealt with.
- Make a list of technical terms or key words mentioned in the texts you have read (including their philosophic relevance) with which you still feel uncomfortable or do not understand.

Preparation for meeting 2:

The preparatory work for meeting 2 includes

- the readings and study questions listed above;
- the readings and study questions listed for meeting 2.

ASSIGNMENT I

WHAT IS TRUTH?

If you are having a (rational) discussion with someone (whether profound or superficial), it is important to consider the following: (1) Is what you are saying true? (2) How do you know that what you are saying is true? and (3) Is your argument sound? The first question is the subject-matter of the present **Assignment**; the other two will be dealt with in **Assignment II**.

The question "What is Truth?" is a genuinely philosophical question. We are not interested in individual instances of truth, but in truth as such. Given our analytical approach, we do not wish to contemplate the sublime nature of Truth (whatever that may be). Instead we shall deal with the question from the semantic point of view (which is precisely the way Aristotle had tackled the problem). Hence we are interested in answers to the following questions:

- What do the expressions 'true' and 'truth' mean in the statements, 'This is (not) true,' 'This is the truth'?
- What do we mean by 'a true statement' (or 'the truth of an assertion') or 'true friendship'?
- And, consequently, what are the requirements for using the expressions 'true' and 'truth' in the correct way?

Meeting 2:

Reading assignment:

Creel (2001), chapter 10.

Russell (1912), chapter 12.

Further reading:

David (2009).

Study questions:

1. Explain the way in which the expression 'true' is used in philosophy (consult Creel).

2. Explain the three requisites any theory of truth must meet according to Russell.

3. Explain Russell's common sense conception of truth, also known as the correspondence theory.

4. Explain why Russell adopts the correspondence theory of truth.

WEEK 2

Meeting 3:

Reading assignment:

Creel (2001), pp. 93-100.

James (1907). Lecture II.

Further reading:

Young (2008).

Haack (1998), ch. 2.

Reading guide:

Start with Creel, then continue with James (pragmatism).

Study questions:

1. Describe in your own words the three competing conceptions of truth (Creel, pp. 96-98) and clarify the differences between them.

2. How does Creel (implicitly) take sides in the philosophic problem of truth? (Consult the defence of the correspondence theory as brought forward by Russell (1912), in Creel, pp. 96-99).

3. What is the fundamental objection against the correspondence theory brought forward by the coherence camp? (Consult Russell and Creel.)

4. Evaluate Creel's and Russell's reports of the usual criticism against the coherence theory.

5. Consider what Aristotle wrote more than two thousand years ago (in the opening chapter of a treatise dealing with sophistic arguments and how to solve them). When we talk about things, he says, we cannot introduce the things themselves, but we need names to represent them. However, the use of names for the things we talk about can, in principle, lead to misrepresentation, misunderstanding, and erroneous reasoning:

> "It is impossible in a discussion to argue by introducing the things themselves that are under discussion: we rather use their names as symbols in their place; and doing so we assume that what follows in the domain of names, follows in the things as well, just as people who calculate assume it is the case with regard to their counters. However, the two cases (names and things) are not alike. For names are finite in number, and so is the sum-total of expressions, while things are infinite in number. Inevitably, then, the same expression, and the single name too, signify a plurality of things. Accordingly just as, in counting, those who are not well-versed in managing the counters are taken in by the experts, in the same way in arguments too those who are not well acquainted with the force of names become victims of false reasoning, both in their own discussions and when they are listening to others". (Aristotle, *Sophistic Refutations*, Ch. 1)

Explain why and how Aristotle's words (in the quote) can be connected to the issue of the correspondence *versus* the coherence theory of truth.

6. Explain the main ideas behind the pragmatist conception of truth. (Consult James (1907) [and Haack (1998), ch. 2].)

7. The correspondence theorist's objection to the pragmatist theory of truth roughly runs, "No doubt, a true belief will work, but it will work because it is true, and not the other way round" (i.e., "a belief is true because it works", as the pragmatist maintains). Would the coherence camp agree or disagree with this objection? Explain your answer.

ASSIGNMENT II

KNOWLEDGE AS A BASIC PHILOSOPHIC PROBLEM

When we say that we know something, what we generally mean is that we are in some way familiar with something. The opposite of 'knowledge' is 'ignorance'. In the philosophic discipline called *epistemology* the term 'knowledge' is used in a more narrow sense, meaning something like 'justified true belief'. Hence in philosophy the notions of knowledge and truth are closely related.

To study epistemology we shall proceed as follows. First we shall use the excellent chapter ("Theory of Knowledge") in Horner & Westacott (2000), pp. 28-61, to study the notions of truth and knowledge as they featured in the history of philosophy since René Descartes (1596-1650) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). In order to fully comprehend the philosophic problem of knowledge we shall first pay attention to the basics of argumentation. This Assignment on Knowledge will conclude with a meeting on the notion of 'paradigm'.

Meeting 4:

Reading assignment:

Blackburn, *Think*, pp. 15-21.

Horner & Westacott (2000), pp. 28-61.

Huggett (2010), par. 3.

Irwin (1999), pp. 69-83.

Reading guide:

Start with Irwin (for a general account of the Ancients' doubts about the possibility of certain knowledge), and proceed with Huggett. Then continue with Blackburn and finish up with Horner & Westacott.

Introduction:

The line of thought that later became known as the 'epistemological turn' has been extremely influential in the development of philosophy. Philosophers came to argue that before we can even begin to consider the nature of Reality, we first need to answer a number of more fundamental questions, such as, "Are we capable of knowing at all?" and "How can our claims to knowledge be justified?", or "What are the implications of the idea that there is such a thing as justifiable true knowledge?" These questions and related ones are dealt with in the philosophic discipline of *epistemology*, or the theory of knowledge.

We shall next study the epistemological turn and take a look at the tremendous impact it had in the development of Western philosophy. Let Horner & Westacott, pp. 28-61, be our guides.[1] But we shall begin with some pertinent issues brought up in Ancient philosophy, and more specifically look at the so-called paradoxes.

Study questions:

1. Explain in what ways reflection upon the nature of knowledge gave rise to scepticism in Antiquity. (See Irwin (1999), pp. 69-83.)

2. Explain two famous paradoxes of Zeno (the Arrow; Achilles and the Tortoise). What exactly do these paradoxes aim to prove? Explain how they are connected with scepticism in Antiquity.

3. Give a brief description of the epistemological turn. (See Horner & Westacott, pp. 28-34, and Blackburn, *Think*, pp. 15-21.)

4. What was Descartes' — to his mind uncontroversial — foundation of knowledge? Has Descartes truly succeeded in providing a secure foundation of knowledge? (Consult Horner & Westacott, pp. 35-37.)

5. Explain the connection between the leading ideas underlying the correspondence theory of truth on the one hand, and the notion of representative realism brought forward in Horner & Westacott, pp. 34-61, on the other.

6. Explain the justification programme of knowledge. Explain the relativists' conception of knowledge. Explain why the coherence theory of knowledge can be marked as a relativist position. (Consult Horner & Westacott, pp. 53-61.)

---

[1] Please note that he opening lines of Horner & Westacott's observations contain a serious flaw (which shows how little they know about the history of Western philosophy before Descartes): "From the time of the ancient Greeks to the end of the middle ages [they write (28)], this [the fundamental nature of reality, being the proper subject of metaphysics] was usually the central area of enquiry around which the rest of philosophy was organised. But in the seventeenth century […] philosophy took what has been called an 'epistemological turn'". Horner & Westacott are two of the many philosophers who, misled by the post-Medieval origin of the technical terms 'criteriologia' and 'epistemologia', jumped to the conclusion that the theory of knowledge was not a central area in Medieval philosophy. On the contrary, from as early as the second half of the thirteenth century, epistemological issues ("How is knowledge possible, and what does it consist in, and how, and to what extent can its efficacy be warranted?", and the like) were at the focus of interest in both theological and philosophical debates. What is typical of the 'epistemological turn' instigated by Descartes, however, is his method of radical doubt. Descartes used this method in order to escape scepticism, and to secure the unique position of the human soul.

Additional preparation:

To lay the foundations for the next reading assignment, we shall wind up this meeting with a more in-depth discussion of the notion of 'reality'. Prepare yourself for this discussion by considering the following:

1. Define 'statement': do the contents of a statement have an extra-mental reality?

2. Define 'object': does an object as such exist in the outside world?

3. Define 'event': what kind of entity is an event?

4. Define 'state of affairs': what kind of entity is a state of affairs?

WEEK 3

Meeting 5:

Reading assignment:

Creel (2001), pp. 112-125.

Horner & Westacott (2000), pp. 92-105.

Hume (1999), Section IV, parts I and II.

Reading guide:

Start with Creel, and then continue with David Hume. Conclude your reading with Horner & Westacott.

Introduction:

A closely-related metaphysical issue is presented to us in the philosophy of Kant (or "How the mind shapes the world"). Kant was inspired by the writings of the British empiricist David Hume; this philosopher had managed to show, according to Kant, that certain "laws of nature" are in fact not part of nature at all, but are the products of our own mental activities.

In order to fully comprehend Hume's argument about the status of human knowledge, it is vital that we first pay attention to the notion of valid and invalid argument (see Creel, pp. 112-125; Horner & Westacott, pp. 92-105).

Study questions:

1. Explain the connection between truth and argumentation.

2. What is an 'argument' in logic? What precisely does the stringency of an argument consist in?

3. What is a deductive argument?

4. What is an inductive argument?

5. What is the essential difference between deduction and induction in terms of their conclusiveness? Are there compelling reasons to prefer one to the other?

6. When we talk about inductive argument we are likely to address issues taken from the philosophy of science, particularly the remarkable phenomenon of scientific progress. Explain Hume's argument that our knowledge of cause and effect cannot be based upon reason and that it cannot be based upon empirical evidence either. Explain to what extent Hume's position can be described as scepticism.

7. Explain the three problems listed by Horner & Westacott, p. 99.

8. Try to explain in what sense scientific enquiry can be called rational.

Meeting 6:

Reading assignment:

Blackburn, *Think*, pp. 253-269.

Horner & Westacott (2000), pp. 21-27.

Russell (1912), ch. 8.

Introduction:

Let us now return to the philosophic problem of knowledge. Suppose you accept the coherence theory, an obvious reaction would be, "If we can't have any knowledge whatsoever of reality as existing independently of our perception of it, how can we know it even exists?" Although Kant greatly admired the philosophic efforts of David Hume, the German philosopher refused to accept Hume's sceptical conclusion. Kant instead looked for a secure foundation of knowledge, but without recurring to the type of "empty" speculation his rationalistic predecessors were guilty of.

Kant indeed believed that he had come up with a secure foundation, in the form of human Reason. But the question we are now left with is (in Kantian terminology), "How does the 'thing in itself' (*das Ding an sich*) play a role in epistemology and metaphysics?"

Study questions:

1. Explain Kant's fundamental idea that it is the mind that shapes the world. (See Horner & Westacott, pp. 21-27.)

2. Explain Kant's distinctions between 'analytic' vs. 'synthetic', and 'a priori' vs. 'a posteriori' propositions. What do these distinctions have to do with the idea that it is the mind that shapes the world?

3. Explain Kant's 'revolution'. (See Blackburn (*Think*), pp. 253-59.)

4. Evaluate Russell's criticism of Kant.

5. Explain the notions of realism, conceptualism and nominalism. (See Blackburn (*Think*), pp. 265-269.)

6. As we saw in the previous meeting, when we talked about induction, the philosopher Nelson Goodman (1906-98) distinguishes between two kinds of hypothesis, viz. legitimate inductive generalisations and illegitimate ones. The former are described as "projections expressing laws of nature". As an example of the latter, Goodman mentions the formula, "All water freezes at zero degrees Celsius". The following questions are meant to help you evaluate this claim and to check whether you have fully understood Kant's epistemological position:

(a) What is the origin of the concept of ‘zero degrees Celsius’, and how does it relate to the concept of ‘the freezing point of water’?

(b) Would Kant identify the proposition “All water freezes at zero degrees Celsius?” as a genuine inductive generalisation? Explain.

(c) What, in your view, is an appropriate name for such a proposition?

WEEK 4

Meeting 7:

Reading assignment:

Horner & Westacott (2000), pp. 105-118.

Kuhn (1977).

Further reading:

Bird, Alexander

"Thomas Kuhn". *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2006 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

Introduction:

We have seen how David Hume challenged the idea that induction could be rationally justified. But this would mean that science itself, which obviously needs induction, cannot be considered a rational enterprise. The twentieth-century philosopher Karl Popper attempted to come up with an alternative, non-subjective foundation of science. In a more contemporary way, a relativist could escape the conclusion that knowledge is purely subjective by introducing the notion of 'paradigm'.

Study questions:

1. Explain Popper's idea of science. (Consult Horner & Westacott, p. 106.)

2. Explain the principle of falsification. (Consult Horner & Westacott, p. 107-108.)

3. Explain the wider implications of the principle of falsification. (Consult Horner & Westacott, p. 107-108.)

4. Briefly return to the philosophical notion of 'realism' and 'non-realism'.

5. Explain Kuhn's notion of *paradigm*. (Consult Kuhn.)

6. Explain how the workings of our paradigms (see the article by Alexander Bird) will save us from radical relativism (scepticism).

Concluding remarks:

In the previous meetings on truth we confined ourselves to the basics of the correspondence coherence and pragmatic theories concerning truth and knowledge. However, things are far more complicated. The coherence theory has adherents among — and is given various, often divergent interpretations by — a variety of philosophic schools, including idealists as well as logical positivists.

One of the champions of the correspondence theory, Alfred Tarski (1902-1883) claims that a sentence is true or false within the domain of some particular language. He also points out — his education in Polish academic environments happily made him familiar with the mainstream of Medieval logic — that even the Schoolmen[2] were sensitive to this fundamental aspect of propositional truth. Eventually, all thinkers (even the realists) come to realise that to grasp what is regarded as the real world *indispensably* requires linguistic tools, conceptualisation in particular.

The main conclusion of the meetings on knowledge should be that it is impossible for us to maintain that we are able to acquire knowledge of the world *as it is in itself*. Instead we have made a case for a relativist position, to the effect that to acquire truth and knowledge is only possible within a context of conceptualisation. Yet this by no means forces us to embrace the kind of subjectivism that would make a search for certainty illusory. On the contrary, it is precisely the more or less fixed conceptual paradigms which, by really *determining, regulating and 'objectifying*' our ways of thinking, save us from radical subjectivism and scepticism. Thus in decidedly rejecting any idea of 'mere subjectivity', we oppose to it the notion of 'objectivation' rather than 'objectivity'.

[2] He mentions John Buridan (c.1292- c.1361), who was born in the Southern Netherlands and active as a professor of philosophy at the university of Paris).

ASSIGNMENT III

ETHICS AND MORALITY

Preliminary remarks

So far we have been concerned with philosophic questions about the world we live in. One of elements that entered our discussion was the nature of 'facts'. In the present assignment we shall turn to another important area in philosophy, namely that of values and moral standards.

In philosophy the term 'ethics' is used in three different (albeit related) ways, as referring to:

(1) a general pattern or way of life,

(2) a set of rules of conduct or a particular moral code, and

(3) an enquiry about ways of life and rules of conduct, including fundamental questions about the nature of right and wrong, good and evil, and particularly the foundation of morality.

In the present **Assignment**, it is ethics taken in the third sense we are interested in.

WEEK 5

***Meeting 8*:**

Reading assignment:

Creel (2001), pp. 159-199.

Introduction:

We shall now address in a philosophic manner the question how *to act* in this world. It is not practical questions about how to act in particular cases we are interested in. Instead our focus is on questions that should precede any ethical argument, such as "What do moral concepts like 'good' and 'bad' mean?" or "Are moral judgements objectively true or false, or do they merely express subjective preferences?", or as Creel (p. 162) phrases the leading question of this problem area, "What gives morality its authority?" We shall start with the preliminary question of how to assess the branch of philosophy called 'Ethics' within the domain of philosophic disciplines. Next we shall discuss whether 'ethical absolutism' is the only answer to ethical subjectivism or scepticism.

Study questions:

1. How are logic, epistemology and ethics dealt with in philosophy? Show that, in spite of their having different material objects, the formal object of these areas of philosophy is the same.

2. Philosophic questions in the domain of ethics and morality have everything to do with the conceptual paradigm in which they are asked. Support this statement by considering the types of preliminary ethical questions mentioned above (see Introduction).

3. Show that Creel, pp. 161-162 has a semantic approach.

4. What is the general line of thought of Creel, pp. 162-186, in which the various answers to the basic question "What gives morality its authority?" are enumerated? Draw a scheme of these alternative answers, including the similarities and dissimilarities between them.

5. Why does Creel conclude that ultimately, ethical nihilism and some forms of ethical relativism, viz. 'Individual Relativism' and 'Social Relativism' (*as presented by Creel*, pp. 166-170), are unsatisfactory?

We should now be able to define our position towards Creel, who seems to favour a form of Ethical Absolutism. Any answer to our key question, "What gives morality its authority?" will imply a 'universal' criterion. The fundamental problem is whether Ethical Absolutism is the only option for all those who reject Ethical Nihilism.

6. What is a universal criterion?

7. Define what Creel means by 'Ethical Absolutism'.

8. Creel (pp. 174-190) distinguishes five absolutist positions: two theocentric theories — viz. 'the divine command theory' and 'the perfect being theory' — and three anthropocentric theories — viz. 'Rationalistic Ethics', 'Utilitarian Ethics', and 'Universal Eudaemonism'. Define the gist of these philosophical positions. Explain the "absolute yet non-theistic foundations to ethics" of 'Rationalistic Ethics' and 'Utilitarian Ethics' (take Kant and Bentham & Mill as their mouthpieces).

9. Explain 'Universal Eudaemonism'.

Meeting 9:

Reading assignment:

Creel (2001), pp. 181-190.

Horner & Westacott (2000), pp. 137-143.

Introduction:

As you have seen, there is a fundamental difference between Kant's foundation of ethics and the one presented by thinkers like Jeremy Bentham (1742-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-73). Bentham and Mill were fiercely opposed to Kant's highly abstract approach to ethics. In their view, Kant's approach ended up in a lifeless theory, which ignores the simple fact that above all human beings are pleasure seekers. Creel (p. 183) phrases it as follows:

> "Kant's theory is not going to motivate us in a sustained way to be moral. It may captivate us temporarily with its romantic vision of moral dignity, but in the long run romantic visions which are not grounded in fact get vaporised by the harsh glare of reality. If we are going to have an ethical theory which is not only a good idea but is also capable of motivating and sustaining our commitment to it, it is going to have to be based on the simple fact that above all else we are pleasure seekers."

Let us test these two rival theories, and see to what extent, despite their (supposedly) absolutist starting point, they are subject to a (more or less) fixed paradigm conveyed by the conceptualisations and categorisations they are embedded in.

Study questions:

1. Explain that Kant's foundation of ethics is strictly formal, whereas the ethical foundation of ethics like the ones of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill is derived from experience.

2. Explain what is meant by the 'categorical imperative'. What is the difference between a categorical and a hypothetical imperative?

3. What objections can and have been made against the ethics of Kant?

4. Explain the role of conceptualisation in the foundation of Utilitarianism. (Consider the basic assumptions of Utilitarianism.)

5. Make a list of, and evaluate the strength(s) and weakness(es) of utilitarianism as a practical guide in ethical matters.

WEEK 6

Meeting 10:

Virtue ethics.

Reading assignment:

Anscombe (1958).

Horner & Westacott (2000), pp. 151-157.

Hursthouse (2010).

Further reading:

Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, Books I and II.

Introduction:

For a long time, utilitarianism (or consequentialist ethics) on the one hand and deontological theories on the other, were seen as the only alternatives in ethics. In 1958, Elizabeth Anscombe published an article 'Modern Moral Philosophy', in which she attacked the at that time predominant conceptions of ethics as being incoherent, and instead hinted at a different kind of approach, known as virtue ethics. The roots of this approach can be traced back to Aristotle; in his *Nichomachean* Ethics, Aristotle criticises Plato's conception of the Good as impossible and useless, and instead connects the notion of human goodness with virtue of character.

Study questions:

1. What do utilitiarian and deontological ethics have in common?

2. What are Anscombe's objections to these types of ethics? What, generally speaking, does she recommend?

3. Explain the basic conception of virtue ethics (consult Hurthouse 2010, and Horner & Westacott, pp. 151-153).

4. Explain how virtue ethics is different from utilitarianism and deontological ethics.

5. Critically evaluate virtue ethics.

Meeting 11:

The end of ethics?

Reading assignment:

Blackburn, *Being Good*, pp. 9-55; 129-135.

Introduction:

In his excellent introduction to the philosophical discipline of ethics, Blackburn (*Being Good,* pp. 9-55) presents seven "threats" to ethics, of which relativism is listed as a separate one.

Questions:

1. Try to present in your own words what Blackburn sees as the seven threats to ethics.

2. Analyse the different "threats" and show in what ways they can be connected with one another.

3. Considering what has been said about truth and knowledge in the previous meetings, how do you think you might be able to escape the difficulties imposed upon ethics by the theory of evolution and determinism? Explain you answer.

Nota bene: for a concise and clear account of determinism and its weaknesses, see Richard Taylor, *Metaphysics*, 1983^3 (1963), Englewood Cliffs, N.J., chapter 5.

4. According to Blackburn (*Being Good*, pp. 129-135), "confidence [can be] restored". Do you agree? Explain your answer.