

A large, light gray speech bubble with a dark gray outline. The bubble has a long tail pointing towards the bottom left corner. Inside the bubble, there is a single paragraph of text in a dark gray, serif font. The text is centered and reads: "What's the point of looking at arguments about how to answer these questions, if we can't know for sure which is right?"

“What’s the
point of looking at
arguments about how to
answer these questions, if
we can’t know for sure
which is right?”

Suppose further that you really care about the origins of life on earth. Does that fact that no biologist can tell you what the origins in fact were mean that you should not look at the arguments given for the competing theories?

That does not seem reasonable.

Or take a less intellectual example. In the recent past many of you spent some time thinking about where would be the best place for you to go to college. Was there a proof you could find, or some infallible authority you could consult?

But that didn't make it unreasonable for you to think long and hard about the arguments in favor of various options. Just the opposite — because you cared about this question and because there was no authority to consult, it was more important for you to think hard about the arguments.

Readings are short. Learning how to read philosophy is a very important skill, but not our focus.

The guiding theme of the course: your goal is not to learn what others have thought about these topics, but to (1) figure out what **you** think about these topics and (2) learn how to defend your views by argument.

Everything is structured around this theme.

My job in lecture: explain to you the most important arguments for and against various views on our big questions.

Given this goal, I am sorry to say: no laptops.

Every lecture (after today) will include a mid-class break to let you clear your mind and ask any questions about the first half of the lecture. We use

Slack for this, in two ways.

Your job in lecture: thinking about what I am saying, making objections, and asking questions. Lectures are not for memorizing or scribbling down what I am saying; the notes are all posted online.

Instead of spending lots of time doing readings before lecture, you should spend lots of time thinking about the material after lecture. The main mechanism for doing this is the My Philosophy page on the course website.

This page has two main purposes. First, it is a tool for helping you to figure out what you believe. Second, it is a tool for helping you to see logical connections between topics which might at first seem disconnected.

Your work on this page is your main assignment for the course, and will make up 85% of your grade. You should spend a lot of time on it. There is no busy work in the class: your only job is to figure out what you think and defend your views to the best of your abilities.

If you go into that part of the website, you will see on the left bar an 'FAQ' button which will give you a lot of information about how to approach this assignment and how to do well on it. But let's talk through a few common questions.

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