What is philosophy?

What is philosophy?
And why do I have
to take it?

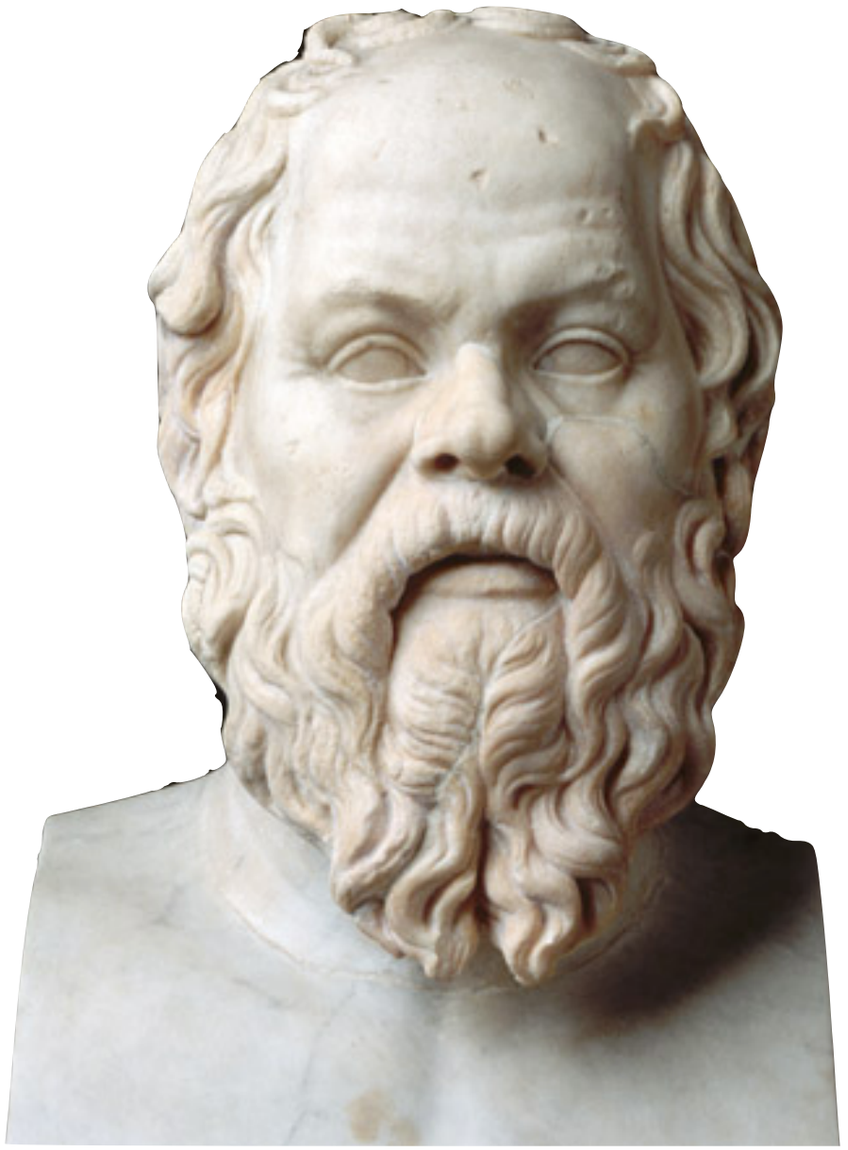
'Philosophy' comes from the ancient Greek 'φιλοσοφία' —
philosophia.

philosophia = philo + sophia
philo = love
sophia = wisdom

What does it mean to love wisdom?

What does it mean to love wisdom?

Socrates, who was one of the first philosophers, contrasted lovers of wisdom with two other sorts of people.



The first were people who formed belief on the basis of custom or tradition rather than argument.

The second were rhetoricians and sophists who used arguments, not to form true beliefs, but to achieve some other end.

Philosophy, by contrast, is the attempt to form true beliefs about the world on the basis of reason.

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Can you think of any other academic departments at Notre Dame that might describe themselves in this way?

Yes, quite a few. Physics, economics, psychology, biology, sociology, political science (maybe) .... the list goes on and on.

This is no accident. All of these other fields — the natural sciences (like physics, chemistry, and biology), the social and human sciences (like economics, sociology, psychology, and political science), and others — were once part of philosophy. Isaac Newton was a philosopher; so was Charles Darwin; so was Adam Smith.

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These great philosophers went on to form systematic new ways of answering the questions in which they were interested. These 'new ways of answering questions' are just what we now call 'sciences.'

This is all, we current philosophers think, excellent. But it doesn't mean that we can just do science and forget about philosophy. There remain questions — fundamental, basic questions — which we have not been able to devise any science capable of answering. Those questions are the ones philosophers try to answer.

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Metaphysics is derived from the Greek prefix μετά (meta), which means after, and the Greek φύσις (physis), which means nature. This might encourage the view that metaphysics is the study of the supernatural. Fortunately, it isn't. Metaphysics is a name for the study of the ultimate nature of reality.

Epistemology is derived from the Greek word ἐπιστήμη (episteme), which was the word for knowledge or understanding. Epistemology is the study of what we can know about the world.

So our topic is a broad one: the nature of reality and what we can know about it.

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In this class, we'll be focusing on five fundamental questions.

Is there a God?

Do you have free will?

What are you?

What should you believe?

How should we live?

The Catholic Church has always had an optimistic view of questions like these. It has always held that these basic questions are both of great importance, and answerable by the use of human reason.

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Here's how St. Augustine put the point:

'No man has a right to lead such a life of contemplation as to forget in his own ease the service due to his neighbor; nor has any man a right to be so immersed in active life as to neglect the contemplation of God.'

The Catholic Church has always had an optimistic view of questions like these. It has always held that these basic questions are both of great importance, and answerable by the use of human reason.

That is why (in case you were wondering) Notre Dame requires every student to take courses in Philosophy.

Philosophy classes are sometimes taught as history classes. The idea is that you learn the history of what people have thought about questions like these.

That is not what this class is. This class is an attempt to find out the truth about these subject matters.

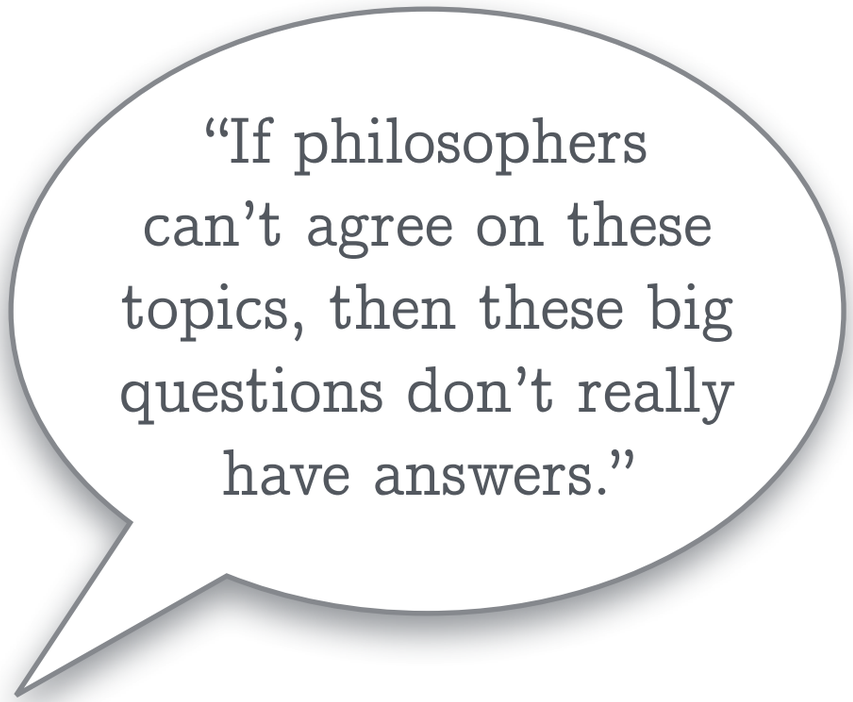
My job is to explain to you the best arguments for different answers to these questions. Your job is to evaluate these arguments, and use them to formulate arguments of your own. Ultimately your aim is to decide where you think the truth lies, and to be able to defend your belief.

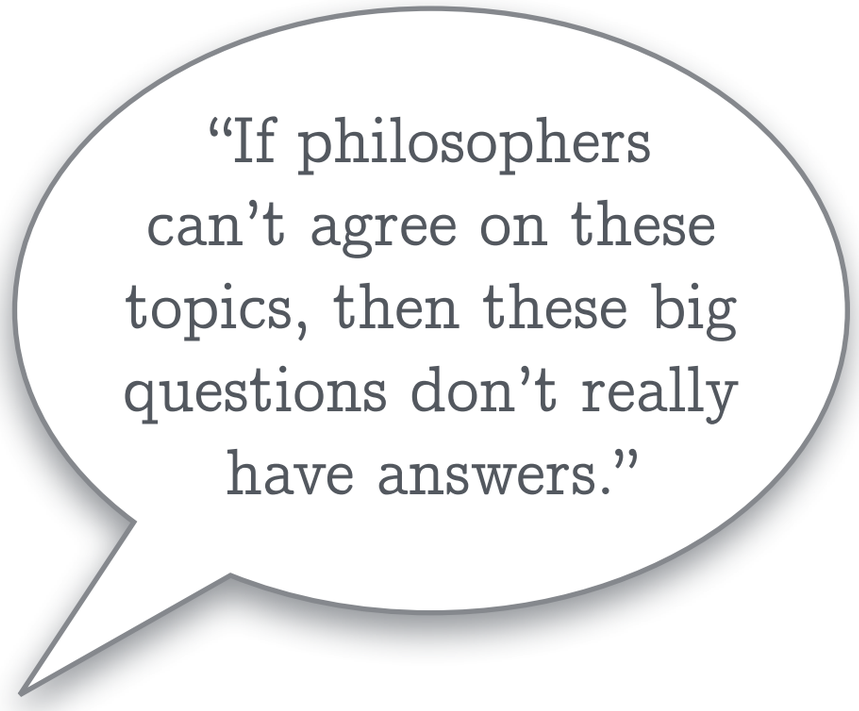
This makes philosophy different than lots of other classes you will take. Your physics professor does not ask you to come up with your own take on gravity; she'll ask you to learn and apply the theory of gravity on which physicists have agreed.

Why is philosophy like this? A short answer: philosophers don't agree.

This sometimes drives students crazy. I'll give the best arguments on both sides of an issue, and students will want to be told which argument is the winner. I won't do this — and this can lead to one of two frustrated responses.

Here is the first frustrated response:



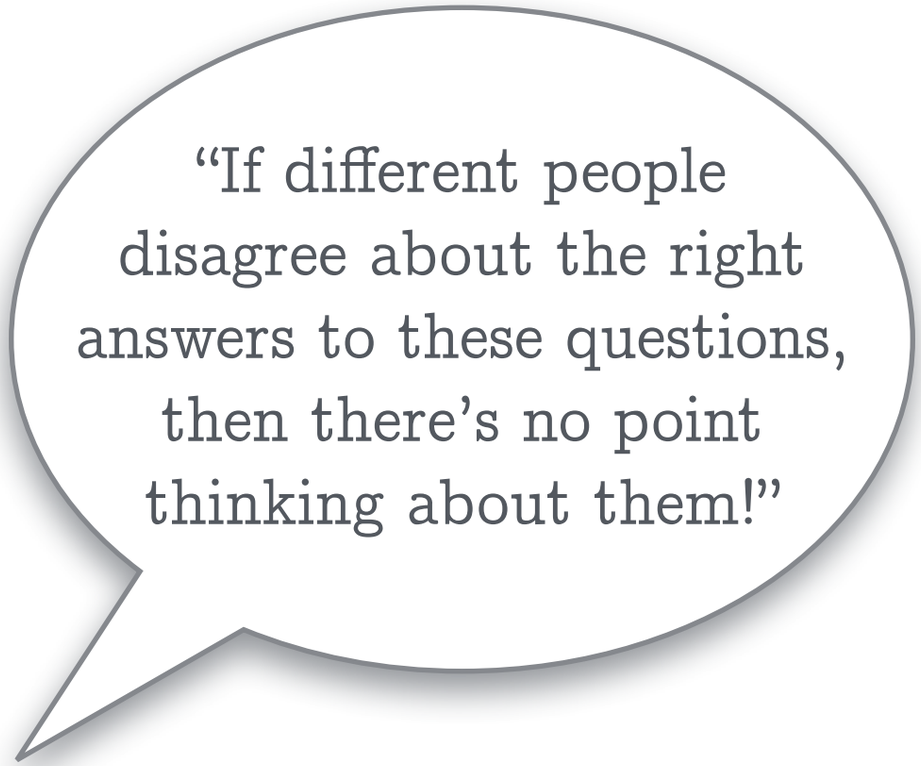


This response does not make a lot of sense.

There are also topics about which scientists disagree. For example, biologists disagree widely about the origins of life on earth. Does that mean that there is no answer to the question of how life on earth really originated? Of course not.

Similarly, whether or not we can figure out the answers to them for sure, questions like 'Does God exist?' clearly do have answers. What's the alternative — that God sort of exists and sort of doesn't?

Here is the second frustrated response:



Suppose 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?

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.

That is a bit like the attitude I want you to take toward philosophy. Questions about whether God exists, whether you have free will, and how you should form beliefs are questions which you should care about. So, just as you cared about the arguments for and against various options for college, you should care about the arguments for and against (for example) the existence of God.

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And to do that, you will have to learn a bit about what arguments are, and what makes arguments good or bad. I will come back to that in a bit. But first, some nuts and bolts about how the course will work.

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.

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

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

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.

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.

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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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What makes for a good answer?

What if I change my mind?

Should I use outside sources?

Can I use AI?

How will my work be graded?

How do the oral evaluations work?

Can I leave all of my work until the last minute and do it all then?

We are lucky to have three very talented young philosophers serving as teaching assistants for the course.

Early next week we will split the class into small groups of 12 or so students. Each group will be assigned a TA. Your TA will have office hours, as will I; you are very welcome to come see either of us to talk about the course.

At the end of each section of the course you will meet with your small group (rather than coming to lecture) for a discussion day. These involve watching a movie or TV episode relevant to the themes discussed in that section of the course; more details to come when we get closer to our first discussion day.

Any questions?

If the main thing you are going to be asked to do in this class is to argue for your views, and respond to arguments against your views, you need to know something about arguments. The study of arguments is called logic.

A first step in grasping the basic principles of logic is the mastery of four (semi-)technical terms.

Arguments consist of one or more premises and a conclusion. The conclusion is what you are arguing for; the premises are the (alleged) basis for that conclusion.

The two key terms used in the evaluation of an argument are valid and sound.

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an argument is **valid** when it is impossible for its premises to be true and its conclusion false

an argument is **sound** when it is valid and all of its premises are true

Validity and soundness are the two most fundamental concepts for you to grasp in this course. Let's illustrate them by considering some example arguments.

an argument is **valid** when it is impossible for its premises to be true and its conclusion false

an argument is **sound** when it is valid and all of its premises are true

1. Either Notre Dame is in Indiana or Notre Dame is in Ohio.
2. Notre Dame is not in Ohio.
———————————————
C. Notre Dame is in Indiana. (1,2)

The argument is valid. The first premise says that one of two things, A or B, is true. The second one says that B is not true. A is the only possibility left, so we know that it must be true -- and that is just what the conclusion says. So we can see, via this line of reasoning, that the truth of the premises would guarantee the truth of the conclusion.

1. Either Notre Dame is in Indiana or Notre Dame is in Ohio.
2. Notre Dame is not in Ohio.
————————————————
C. Notre Dame is in Indiana. (1,2)

Here is a second way to see that the argument is valid. Try to come up with a way to make the premises true but the conclusion false.

Since the argument is about Notre Dame's location, we want to try out different ways of locating Notre Dame in order to make the premises true and the conclusion false.

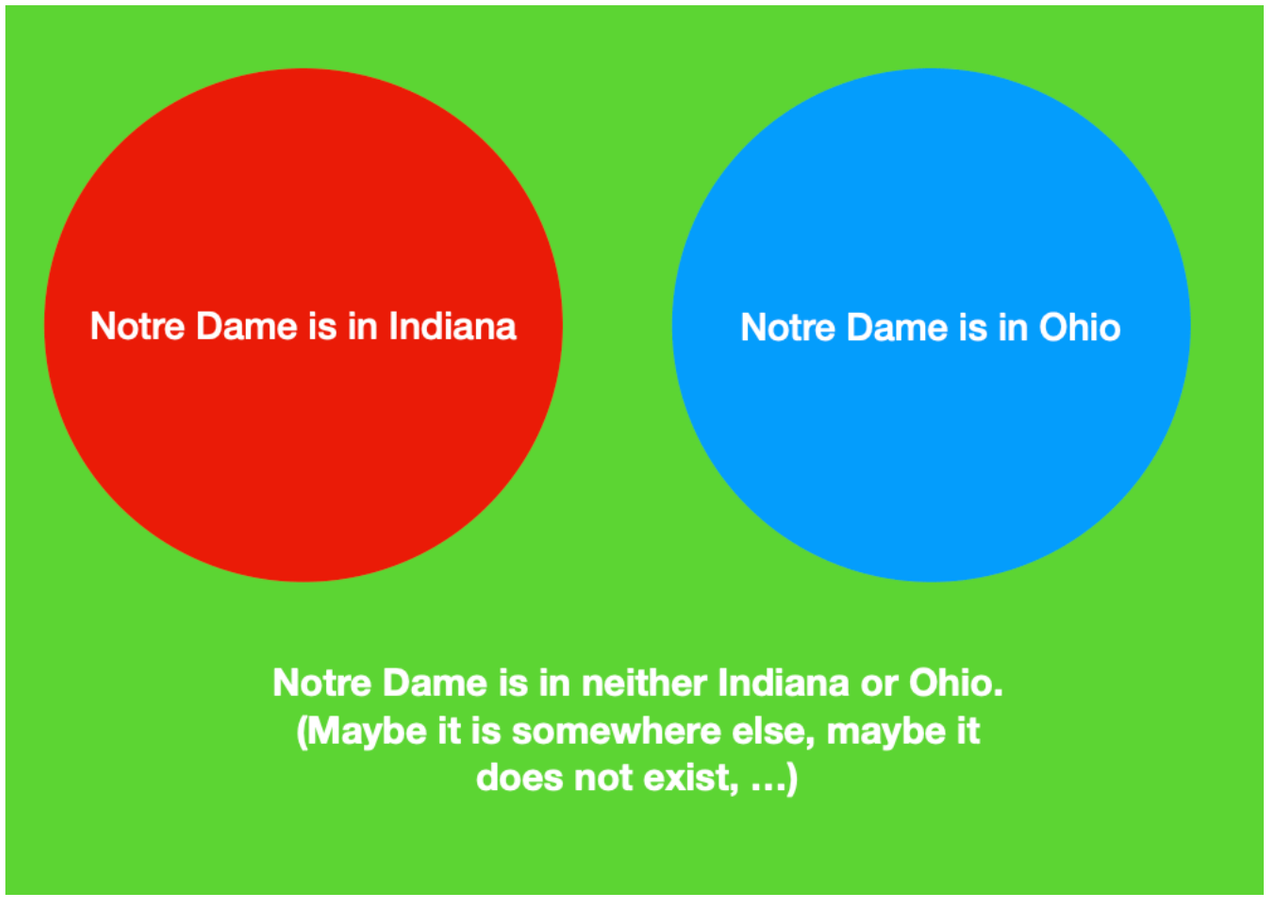
Suppose first that we imagine that ND is somewhere other than Indiana or Ohio. Then we make the first premise false, so that is no good. Suppose instead that we imagine that ND is in Ohio. Then we make the second premise false, so that is no good. The only other possibility is that ND is in Indiana -- and that makes the conclusion true!

So we can see that it is impossible to place Notre Dame anywhere that would make the premises true and the conclusion false.

1. Either Notre Dame is in Indiana or Notre Dame is in Ohio.
2. Notre Dame is not in Ohio.

———————————————————

C. Notre Dame is in Indiana. (1,2)



Here is a third way to see why the argument is valid. The Venn diagram at left represents three ways the world could be. The first premise rules out the green possibilities. The second premise rules out the blue possibilities. So the premises rule out all but the red possibility, which is what the conclusion says.

First premise

Second premise

Notre Dame is in Indiana	Notre Dame is in Ohio	Notre Dame is in Ohio or Notre Dame is in Indiana	Notre Dame is not in Ohio
true	true	true	false
true	false	true	true
false	true	true	false
false	false	false	true

Here is a fourth way to see that the argument is valid. If you think about it, this argument is all based on two sentences: 'Notre Dame is in Indiana' and 'Notre Dame is in Ohio.' Either of those sentences could be true or false; so that gives us four possibilities (true/true, true/false, false/true, false/false). We can represent those possibilities on a kind of chart called a 'truth table.'

Each row represents a possibility. How many rows make both of the premises true? Just the second one. And the conclusion is true in that row. So, we know that if the premises are true, the conclusion must be as well.

1. Either Notre Dame is in Indiana or Notre Dame is in Ohio.
2. Notre Dame is not in Ohio.

C. Notre Dame is in Indiana. (1,2)

Sometimes when thinking about arguments it is helpful to think about the **form** of the argument.

You'll notice that certain words in the argument are repeated.

To get the form of the argument, replace every repeated expression of this sort with a 'dummy letter' — sort of like a variable. That gives us the following form of the argument:

1. P or Q.
2. Not Q.

C. P. (1,2)

Would every argument of this form be valid?

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1. Either Notre Dame is in Indiana or Notre Dame is in Ohio.
2. Notre Dame is not in Ohio.

———————————————————

C. Notre Dame is in Indiana. (1,2)

So the argument is valid. Is it sound?

Before talking about more examples, let's take a step back. Why should we care about validity?

We care about this because we care about the truth. When we are looking at an argument, we want to know whether the conclusion is true. If we know that the argument is valid, we know that **if** its premises are true, then the conclusion is too.

Conversely, we also know that if an argument is valid, then if the conclusion is **false**, at least one of its premises must be false too.

This connects up with your two of your main goals in this class: argue for your views, and defend your views against counter-arguments.

You do the first by constructing valid arguments with true premises.

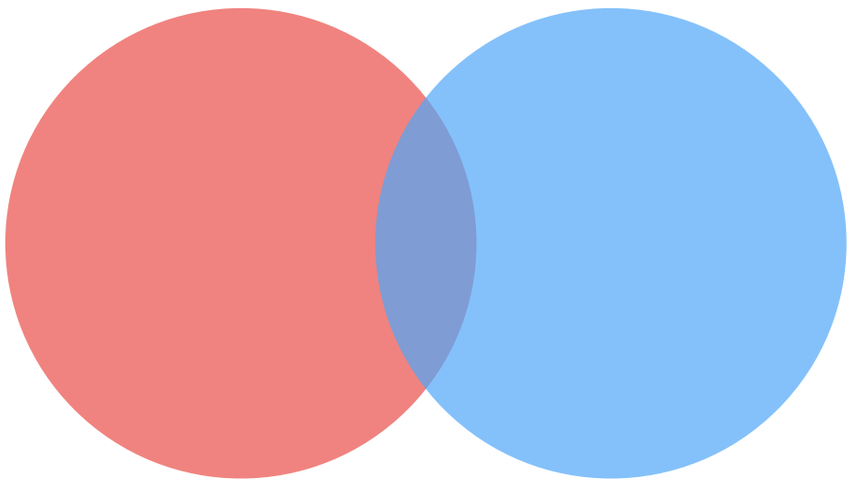
You do the second by finding false premises in arguments against your views.

an argument is **valid** when it is impossible for its premises to be true and its conclusion false

an argument is **sound** when it is valid and all of its premises are true

1. If Notre Dame wins all of its football games, it will win the national title.
2. Notre Dame will win all of its football games.

C. Notre Dame will win the national title. (1,2)



[neither happens]

A Venn diagram can help again here.

What does the first premise rule out? How about the second premise?

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2. Notre Dame will win all of its football games.

C. Notre Dame will win the national title. (1,2)

The argument is valid. What is its form?

The first premise just rules out the situations where P is true and Q is false. So the argument is closely related to this one:

1. If P, then Q.
2. P.

C. Q. (1,2)

1. Not-P or Q.
2. P.

C. Q. (1,2)

an argument is **valid** when it is impossible for its premises to be true and its conclusion false

an argument is **sound** when it is valid and all of its premises are true

1. If Notre Dame wins all of its football games, it will win the national title.
2. Notre Dame will win all of its football games.

———————————————

C. Notre Dame will win the national title. (1,2)

Is the argument sound?

an argument is **valid** when it is impossible for its premises to be true and its conclusion false

an argument is **sound** when it is valid and all of its premises are true

1. All men are mortal.
2. Marcus Freeman is a man.

C. Marcus Freeman is mortal.

Is this argument valid?

Is it sound?

an argument is **valid** when it is impossible for its premises to be true and its conclusion false

an argument is **sound** when it is valid and all of its premises are true

1. All men are mortal.
2. Marcus Freeman is mortal.

C. Marcus Freeman is a man.

Is this argument valid?

One way to show that this argument is invalid is to focus on its form.

1. All men are mortal.
2. Marcus Freeman is mortal.

C. Marcus Freeman is a man.

One way to show that this argument is invalid is to focus on its **form**.

1. All F's are G.
2. x is G

C. x is F.

Can you think of any argument of this form which has true premises and a false conclusion?

This shows that this form of argument is invalid — which in turn is good evidence that the argument at the top, which is of this form, is invalid.

Mastering the concepts of validity and soundness gives you way to talk about, and criticize, arguments.

Your main goal in this class is to figure out what you think about the big questions we will be discussing. But a side benefit is that, if work hard at that, you will get **much** better at thinking about arguments.

In our first section of the class, we'll be considering some arguments whose conclusion is 'God exists' and some other arguments whose conclusion is 'God does not exist.' Suppose that you think that God exists. Then it is your job to explain why you think that the arguments whose conclusion is 'God does not exist' are not sound. After all, if they were sound, their conclusion would be true — and you (in this example) think that their conclusion is false.

How do you show that an argument is not sound? Remember: **soundness = validity + true premises.** So to show that an argument is unsound, you can do one of two things: show that it is invalid, or show that it has a false premise.

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That is a lot of what your 'My Philosophy' work will be like. You'll be asked to take a stand on whether particular arguments are sound, or not, and will be asked why you think this. Depending on how you answer those questions, you'll be asked follow up questions which challenge your views.

You will always have the chance to go back and change your answers to questions as your beliefs evolve over the course of the semester. In fact, it would be surprising if your beliefs did **not** change in this way!

Next time we will put these tools to work discussing an important attempt to answer the first question which will occupy us in this course:

Is there a God?