

INTRO TO PHILOSOPHY (DRAFT)

Gregory Johnson, Ph.D.

gregory.johnson@msstate.edu

1 Preliminaries

Sending me a message online (email, Canvas, or direct message on GroupMe) is the best way to reach me, and I will usually respond within 24 hours. If you would like a more immediate response, you can try calling or sending a text message to 267-416-0292. But don't leave a voicemail. I won't get it.

[Meetings by appointment.](#) (Webex, George Hall, College Park Bldg.)

2 Mississippi State University Syllabus

The Mississippi State University Syllabus contains all policies and procedures that are applicable to every course on campus and online. The policies in the University Syllabus describe the official policies of the University and will take precedence over those found elsewhere. It is the student's responsibility to read and be familiar with every policy. The University Syllabus may be accessed at any time on the Provost website under Faculty and Student Resources: provost.msstate.edu/faculty-student-resources/university-syllabus.

3 Readings

You will access the textbook and other readings for this course on the Perusall platform. Most of the readings that are separate from the textbook are free. The textbook and a couple of the articles have a cost, which is included in the Bulldog Bundle. If you "opted in" to the Bulldog Bundle at the beginning of the semester, then you are still in the program and don't have to do anything. If you opted out, then you will have to purchase access to the course site in Perusall.

4 Course Description

4.1 General introduction

Before taking a philosophy course, most people are unfamiliar with the subject. So, by way of introduction, here is an excerpt from a lecture on Plato's dialogue the *Apology* (which we will read) by the philosopher Steven Smith,

Philosophy cannot rest content with mere belief. Philosophy grows out of the passionate desire – the restless and intransigent desire – to replace opinion with knowledge, to replace belief with true principles. For philosophy, it is not enough to hold a belief on faith; one must be able to give reasons or arguments for one's beliefs. . . . The citizen may accept certain beliefs on faith because he or she is attached to a particular political order or regime, or because this or that is what we have been brought up to believe; the philosopher, on the other hand, seeks to judge in terms of true standards, in the light of what is true always and everywhere. As a quest for knowledge, there is a necessary and inevitable tension between philosophy and belief. (2012, p. 28)

Philosophy is different than science, but only to a degree. Science investigates the world by collecting data and doing experiments. Philosophy, meanwhile, usually undertakes neither of these activities. But still, the philosopher seeks knowledge, and the tool for seeking knowledge in this domain is reason. Given some facts (perhaps uncovered by science), what follows? What is likely to be – or must be – true?

The theme of this course is challenging our beliefs. There are things that we want to believe, for instance, that we are real, that we have free will, that a god exists. How well do these beliefs hold up when we examine them and consider the evidence? We'll see as we examine the following questions.

What is the mind and who has one? What does it take to be a person, and when should we let a human being die? Do we have free will? Are we living in a computer simulation? Does God exist? These are real questions, not philosophical exercises. Although interestingly, how these questions turn out doesn't affect our day-to-day lives (except for making a decision about when someone should be allowed to die). When people finally accepted that the earth orbits the sun and so earth is not the center of the universe, nothing really changed. Similarly, if it turns out that we don't have free will or that we're living in a computer simulation, you will still go on with your life. Nothing will suddenly be different.

In the last three weeks of the semester, we will read two of Plato's dialogues, the *Apology* and the *Crito*. The first is an account of the trial of Socrates. The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates was put on trial for, essentially, the very thing that this course is about, questioning

commonly held beliefs and seeking knowledge. He was found guilty, and in the *Crito* Socrates is waiting to be put to death. Here Plato examines the relationship between the individual citizen, especially one like Socrates, and the state.

4.2 Online

This is an online course, and it is not designed to be too similar to a classroom course. Instead of lectures being the central feature of the course, you will be working independently on the readings. I am available and will be in contact with you, and you should email me as often as you find useful. But think of this course as a very structured independent study (that is, structured by the instructor for you) rather than as a standard classroom course. See also the additional information about the course in the first module in Canvas.

5 Learning Objectives

Naturally, one objective is to become acquainted with the assigned material. Other, no less important, goals are improving reading comprehension, critical thinking, and writing skills.

6 Student Honor Code & Academic Misconduct

Mississippi State has an approved Honor Code that applies to all students. The code is as follows:

As a Mississippi State University student, I will conduct myself with honor and integrity at all times. I will not lie, cheat, or steal, nor will I accept the actions of those who do.

Upon accepting admission to Mississippi State University, a student immediately assumes a commitment to uphold the Honor Code, to accept responsibility for learning, and to follow the philosophy and rules of the Honor Code. Students will be required to state their commitment on examinations, research papers, and other academic work. Ignorance of the rules does not exclude any member of the MSU community from the requirements or the processes of the Honor Code. For additional information, please visit: <http://honorcode.msstate.edu/policy> and <http://students.msstate.edu/studentconduct/>.

To be clear, students who cheat in any way will be penalized. Cheating includes giving as well as receiving help when such help is not explicitly allowed.

Plagiarism and using AI (i.e., a generative AI tool) are both types of cheating. The best way to avoid anything that might be academic misconduct is to put yourself in a position

where you don't need to cheat or plagiarize. Don't get behind, and if there are things that you don't understand, give yourself time to figure them out or schedule a meeting with me.

Please ask me if you have any further questions about what constitutes academic misconduct. I am happy to answer any questions about what is and is not allowed. But ask me before you do something questionable.

7 Schedule

The specific dates and the assignments are in this [Google calendar](#).

Week 1	Arguments in philosophy
	Johnson, "An introduction to arguments"
	Does God exist?
	Rowe, "God and evil"
Week 2	The mind
	Johnson, "What is the mind and who has one?"
Week 3	Free will
	Johnson, "Could I have taken the other road? Libertarianism versus Determinism"
	Johnson, "Hard determinism, soft determinism, and moral responsibility"
Week 4	Are we living in a computer simulation?
	Bostrom, "Why the probability that you are living in a matrix is quite high"
November 10	test 1 and paper 1 due
Week 5	Ethics, being a person, and end of life decisions
	Johnson, "What is ethics anyway?"
	Arras, "The severely demented, minimally functional patient"
Weeks 6 - 8	Socrates on trial
	Plato, "Apology" and "Crito"
	Smith, "Socrates and the examined life"
December 11	test 2 and paper 2 due

8 Coursework & Grading

Letter grades will be assigned using the standard Mississippi State scale (an A is 90 – 100 percent, a B is 80 – 89 percent, a C is 70 – 79 percent, etc.). The grades will be set based on this coursework and these percentages:

quizzes: 15 percent

homework assignments: 40 percent

two papers: 20 percent

two tests: 25 percent