

# INTRO TO PHILOSOPHY

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## 1 Preliminaries

Sending me a message online (by email or through Canvas) 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 are 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](http://provost.msstate.edu/faculty-student-resources/university-syllabus).

## 3 Readings

Some of the readings for this course are in a course pack that you have to get from Barnes & Noble. (It's included in the Bulldog Bundle.) Other required readings will be posted on Canvas.

## 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* 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? We'll see as we examine the following questions.

What is the mind and who has one? Do we have free will? Are we living in a computer simulation? When are our actions morally correct, and what makes them so? Should you want to live forever? Over time, do you remain the same person?

These are real questions, not philosophical exercises. And even if we really need more than one semester to contemplate them, they are questions with which we all should grapple.

## 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. It also includes plagiarism and using generative A.I. tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Copilot, or Gemini, etc.).

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. 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.

**Generative A.I.** The following rules are in place and strictly enforced to prevent students from using A.I. tools.

- (a) No resources other than those assigned or provided as optional should be used in this course.
- (b) If, for some reason, you feel that it is important to use some other resource, a reference that will allow me to easily locate the resource must be provided.
- (c) As long as you are using the assigned readings, you don't need to provide references at the end of your written assignments. You do, however, have to cite all of the content to which you refer with a page locator—for example, (col. 2, p. 486).

Read [this explanation about why using generative A.I. is not allowed in this course](#), and 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 Coursework & Grading

Letter grades will be assigned using the standard Mississippi State scale (an A is 90.0 – 100 percent, a B is 80.0 – 89.9 percent, a C is 70.0 – 79.9 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

This is a full 3-credit course being offered during an 8-week term. Consequently, the amount of reading and assignments per week are what would normally be assigned every two weeks (in a full semester course). Most weeks, there will be 4 to 6 hours of reading, one or two quizzes, a written homework assignment for each reading, and a non-writing-focused assignment.

Every due date is firm. Quizzes and homework assignments cannot be completed after their due dates. Papers and the tests can be done late but they will be penalized.

## 8 Schedule

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

Week 1	Arguments in philosophy Johnson, "An introduction to arguments"
Weeks 1 & 2	The mind Johnson, "Beliefs and other mental states" 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 9	test 1 and paper 1 due
Week 5	Ethics Johnson, "What is ethics anyway?"
Weeks 6 & 7	Living forever Cave, "Why you should not choose to live forever"
Weeks 7 & 8	Personal identity Johnson, "What is a person?" Rachels & Rachels, "The problem of personal identity"
December 11	test 2 and paper 2 due