

INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY

Gregory Johnson, Ph.D.

gregory.johnson@msstate.edu

1 Preliminaries

Email 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 outside of class by appointment (Webex, 071 College Park (Meridian), or 1050 George Hall (Starkville))

2 Readings

The readings for this course will be posted on Canvas. You have to print them out, and so you need to have access to a printer throughout the semester.

3 Course Description

3.1 synchronous online

This is a "synchronous online" course, meaning that we will have weekly meetings at the designated time (Wednesdays, 4:00 - 6:30 pm) using Webex. This is probably a new way of taking a course for some (or maybe all) of you, and so we will take some time to make sure that everyone is on track. As it says below, though, part of your course grade will be based on attendance and participation, and so you will be expected to be present (sitting at a table or desk, with your webcam on) and actively participating. That will require doing the assigned reading before each class meeting, and being prepared to discuss it. (Although, in some cases, we will spend some class time making sure that we are all clear on the content of the reading.)

3.2 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.

We will start out with a topic that doesn't challenge our beliefs: arguments. These are the basic tool for doing philosophy. Next, we'll consider Galileo. That the earth revolves around the sun shouldn't challenge what you believe, but it sets the stage for the topics to follow. Why, in his day, was Galileo's claim that the earth revolves around the sun threatening? What role did the evidence have in the debate about whether the sun revolves around the earth or the earth revolves around the sun? What else was a factor?

After Galileo, we will 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? And 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 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 Schedule

See the Google calendar in Canvas for the exact schedule. The calendar is also available [HERE](#).

Weeks 1 & 2	Arguments in philosophy Johnson, "An introduction to arguments"
Week 3	The earth is moving!?? Gingerich, "The Galileo affair"
Week 4	Does God exist? Rowe, "God and evil"
Weeks 5 & 6	The mind Johnson, "What is the mind and who has one?"
Week 7	test 1
Weeks 8 & 9	Free will Johnson, "Could I have taken the other road? Libertarianism versus determinism" Ayer, "Freedom and necessity" Bostrom, "Why the probability that you are living in a matrix is quite high"
Week 10	Ethics? Johnson, "What is ethics anyway?"
Week 11	Being a person and end of life decisions Arras, "The severely demented, minimally functional patient"
Weeks 12 - 14	Socrates on trial Plato, "Apology" and "Crito"
Exam Week	test 2, paper 2

5 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. Student 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 is also a form 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 ask me about them.

If you have any further questions about what constitutes cheating, either ask me or see the University's policy on academic dishonesty. (I am happy to answer to any questions about what is and is not allowed. But ask me before you do something questionable.)

6 Cell Phones

Cell phone use, including texting, is not allowed during the class meetings.

If there is the legitimate possibility that you might be contacted for an emergency-related reason during the class meeting, then your phone should be nearby, although not so close that it is distracting you. If you are not likely to be contacted for an emergency-related reason, then your phone should be on silent and put away. (And, yes, there is always some possibility of an emergency, but if you can turn your phone off for a couple of hours when you are at a movie or leave your phone behind when you go swimming [or be without access to your phone in a variety of other situations], then you should do the same when you are in a meeting of a college course.) There are at least three reasons for this.

One, I understand the temptation to look at your phone, but learning to manage when you look at and use your phone is an important habit to develop now. Two, when you use your phone during class (or in other kinds of meetings), you may not intend to be rude or distracting, but the person addressing you will usually interpret it negatively. This applies, not only to professors, but to the people with whom and for whom you will work once you graduate. Three, doing anything on your phone takes your attention away from the lecture or discussion, and even a short break in attention can make it difficult to re-engage with and understand what is going on in the class meeting.

7 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.

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:

attendance & participation: 10 percent

quizzes & assignments: 30 percent

papers: 30 percent

two tests: 30 percent

There will be weekly quizzes and homework assignments. Some of the quizzes will be taken in groups during the class meetings, and some will be taken alone, outside of the class meetings. Two longer writing assignments (about 2 to 4 pages) will be due on **Sunday, ...** and **Sunday,**

Quizzes and homework assignments cannot be made up or submitted late. Papers will be accepted late, but late paper will be penalized. Each students' two lowest quiz or assignment grades will be dropped – although some assignments may be weighted more heavily than others and may not be eligible for dropping. There will not be any extra credit at the end of the course. Therefore, you should do as well as you can throughout the semester.

Honorlock You will use the proctoring software Honorlock when taking the tests. There is information about using it on Canvas, and you will have the opportunity to use it while taking a practice quiz before you have to use it for a test.

9 Disability Resource Center

Mississippi State University is committed to providing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students.

Starkville The Disability Resource Center (01 Montgomery Hall) collaborates with students who have disabilities to arrange reasonable accommodations. If you have, or think you may have, a disability, please contact drc@saffairs.msstate.edu or 662-325-3335 to arrange a confidential discussion regarding equitable access and reasonable accommodations.

Meridian Student Services at MSU-Meridian collaborates with students who have disabilities to arrange reasonable accommodations. If you have, or think you may have, a disability, please contact Skye Hamilton, Student Services Coordinator at 601-484-0234 or shamilton@meridian.msstate.edu to arrange a confidential discussion regarding equitable access and reasonable accommodations.

Disabilities may include, but are not limited to, conditions related to mental health, chronic health, attention, learning, autism, brain injury, vision, hearing, mobility, speech, or intellectual disabilities. In the case of short-term disabilities (e.g., broken arm), students and instructors can often work to minimize barriers. If additional assistance is needed, please contact the Disability Resource Center in Starkville or the Student Services Coordinator in Meridian.

10 Title IX

MSU is committed to complying with Title IX, a federal law that prohibits discrimination, including violence and harassment, based on sex. This means that MSU's educational programs and activities must be free from sex discrimination, sexual harassment, and other forms of sexual misconduct. If you or someone you know has experienced sex discrimination, sexual violence, or harassment by any member of the University community, you are encouraged to report the conduct to MSU's Director of Title IX/EEO Programs at 662-325-8124 or by e-mail to titleix@msstate.edu. Additional resources are available here:

<http://students.msstate.edu/sexualmisconduct/>

<http://www.msstate.edu/web/security>

11 University Safety Statement

Mississippi State University values the safety of all campus community members. Students are encouraged to register for Maroon Alert texts and to download the Everbridge App. Visit the Personal Information section in Banner on your MyState portal to register.

To report suspicious activity or to request a courtesy escort via Safe Walk, call University Police at 601-934-0863, or in case of emergency, call 911. For more information regarding safety and to view available training resources, including helpful videos, visit:

<http://ready.msstate.edu>.