

Philosophy 100 YW41 (Terp Young Scholars) Introduction to Philosophy

University of Maryland, College Park
Summer 2024
July 8 – July 26

Instructor: Dr. Michael McCourt
Email¹: <michael.mccourt@gwu.edu> or <mmccour2@umd.edu>
Office hours: By appointment on Zoom, M-Th afternoons

Meeting schedule: Monday to Friday 11am-12pm
Zoom link for meetings: TBD
Course website: TBD

COURSE CONTENT AND OBJECTIVES

In general, philosophers ask questions about knowledge (*What do I really know for certain?*), existence (*What's the world really like?*), and value (*What makes a human life a good one?*). This course provides a broad overview of philosophical discussions of these and related questions.

- Where do my beliefs come from? Are they all the result of experiences, or did I have some beliefs prior to any experiences?
- What are animal minds like? Can I ever know? What is your mind like, and can I ever be sure that it's similar to mine? Can I even know for sure that you exist at all? Could a computer or AI that we build have a mind?
- How should we think of death? Should we fear it? Could we in some sense survive it? Would existing eternally in an afterlife be a good thing for us?
- Why do we live in societies with rulers? What is the rational basis for this arrangement? Is there an ideal form of society and its governance, and if so what does that look like?
- How should we act? What do we owe each other? Why should we be moral?

COURSE MATERIALS AND FORMAT

All readings are available for download on Canvas. We meet synchronously via Zoom every morning, Monday through Friday, from 11am-12pm. Classes begin and end with a short lecture, the interim consisting of discussion and other student-driven activities. You'll complete a reading and a quiz before each meeting.

¹ I'm a UMD alumnus (PhD '21) and now visiting assistant professor at The George Washington University. I teach winter and summer courses at UMD. My UMD email often gets deactivated in between teaching appointments, so it's best to email my @gwu.edu address prior to the start of our summer term on July 8.

GRADING POLICIES

Here is a breakdown of each type of assignment and their weight in your overall score.

- 10% Participation
- 15% Short Paper
- 25% Long Paper
- 25% Reading Quizzes
- 25% Test (Two tests, higher score counts)

Final numerical scores are converted to a final letter grade as follows.

- 97-100 = A 87-89 = B+ 77-79 = C+ 67-69 = D+
- 93-96 = A- 83-86 = B 73-76 = C 63-66 = D
- 90-92 = A 80-82 = B- 70-72 = C- 60-62 = D- 0-59 = F

Final scores are rounded in the usual fashion, so that (for example) a final numerical score of 89.44% converts to a letter grade of B+, whereas an 89.45% converts to an A-.

Here's an indication of the standards of evaluations for participation and the papers.

A (Excellent) 90-100

Writing: clear and ambitious thesis, excellent analysis and use of research; exceptionally thorough proofreading and editing.

Participation: regular, exceptional, insightful contributions reflecting very strong preparation and engagement with readings.

B (Good) 80-89

Writing: clear and relevant thesis, good analysis, effective use of research; generally effective proofreading and editing.

Participation: regular and constructive contributions; good preparation and engagement with readings.

C (Acceptable) 70-79

Writing: clear but weak thesis, adequate analysis, adequate use of research; adequate but inconsistent proofreading and editing.

Participation: irregular contributions reflecting adequate preparation and engagements with readings.

D (Borderline) 60-69

Writing: confused and weak thesis, minimally adequate analysis, minimally adequate use of research; weak and inconsistent proofreading and editing.

Participation: infrequent contributions that reflect minimally adequate preparation or engagement.

F (Failing) 0-50

Writing: indiscernible thesis, weak or nonexistent analysis, inadequate use of research; evident lack of proofreading and editing.

Participation: contributions (frequent or not) that reflect inadequate preparation or engagement.

ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTIONS

More details are available for all assignments on Canvas. Here are some basics.

Participation is an important part of a philosophy course. Participation during class meetings can take many forms: asking questions about readings and lectures, expressing opinions and arguing for them, responding to arguments with objections, or drawing comparisons between authors. It is required that you actively contribute to discussion at least once during almost every class meeting in order to earn a grade in the A range for participation. Quality matters more than quantity. Sharing the time and building solidarity with peers is helpful, while trying to “win” or have the last word or speak the most often is not. You’ll hear from me over the first and second weekend of the term with an interim report concerning participation. However, your participation score is based on my holistic assessment at the end of the term.

Quizzes are due on Canvas Monday–Thursday prior to our class meeting.

- Each quiz is made available at 9am and is then due by 10:45am.
- One attempt per quiz is allowed, with no option for a retake. Open notes and books.
- There are twelve quizzes in total throughout the term.
- Your two lowest quiz scores are dropped from calculation of your overall score for the class.
- Quizzes will often test your understanding of material based on reading alone, prior to any lecture on the material in question. So, be sure to complete the day’s reading carefully before taking a quiz.

Two tests are taken online after the second and third Friday meetings.

- The tests are made available on Friday, 7/19, and Friday, 7/26, at 12pm. On those Fridays, you must begin the test within the two-hour window from 12–2pm.
- The tests are timed: when you open a test, you will then have exactly 60 minutes to complete it.
- The lower test score is dropped from calculation of your overall score for the class.
- Each test consists of five multiple choice questions and one prompt for a short essay.

Two short papers are due, on the first and then third Friday of the term.

- The **first paper** is very short (approximately 300 words) and worth 15% of your overall score; it is due Friday 7/12; instructions for the first paper are made available 7/8, the first day of class.
- The **second paper** is approximately 1000 words and worth 25% of your overall score; it’s due Friday 7/26; instructions for the second paper are made available Friday, 7/12.
- You have the option to rewrite your first paper exactly once in light of my comments on your first submission. If the revisions substantially improve on the first submission, an improved score for the assignment will be assigned. Rewriting the first paper cannot harm your score for the assignment. However, insufficient improvement may result in no change in your score. There is no option to rewrite the second paper.

SCHEDULE OF READINGS

Week 1 Wisdom and Justice, Skepticism and Certainty, Mind and Body

- 7/8 M Syllabus
- 7/9 Tu Plato's *Apology*
- 7/10 W Descartes (1641) *Meditations* I
- 7/11 Th *Meditations* II
- 7/12 F (a) *Meditations* VI
(b) Descartes & Princess Elisabeth (1643)
First Paper due by 2pm (made available at 12pm; timed at 1 hour)

Week 2 Freedom and Constraint, Egoism and Altruism

- 7/15 M Olson (2007) 'What are We?'
- 7/16 Tu James (1884) 'The Dilemma of Determinism'
- 7/17 W (a) Plato's *Crito*
(b) MLK (1963) 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail'
- 7/18 Th Feinberg (1978) 'Psychological Egoism'
- 7/19 F Hobbes (1651) *Leviathan* Part I, Chapters 13 & 14
First Test due by 2pm (made available at 12pm; timed at 1 hour)

Week 3 Right and Wrong, Equality and Inequality, Happiness and Meaning

- 7/22 M Mill (1863) *Utilitarianism* Chapters 1 & 2
- 7/23 Tu Korsgaard (2007) 'What's Wrong with Lying?'
- 7/24 W (a) Le Guin (1973) 'The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas'
(b) Nozick (1974) "The Experience Machine"
- 7/25 Th Singer (1986) 'All Animals are Equal'
- 7/26 F Wolf (1997) 'Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life'
Second Test due by 11am (made available at 9am; timed at 1 hour)
Second Paper due by 5pm

ADDITIONAL COURSE POLICIES

A full list of official course-related policies and relevant links to resources may be found at:

<<https://www.ugst.umd.edu/courserelatedpolicies.html>>

SYLLABUS REVISIONS

This syllabus is subject to minor revisions throughout the term. The structure of assignments will not change, but the schedule of readings may change.

EXCUSED ABSENCES

The full university attendance/absence policy can be found here:

<<http://www.ugst.umd.edu/courserelatedpolicies.html>>

If you anticipate an absence for a legitimate reason (religious observance, for example), please reach out as soon as possible to request excusal. Except in cases of emergency, most requests for excused absence should be sent to the instructor by the end of the first day of our summer term. Likewise, if you anticipate difficulty meeting an assignment deadline for a legitimate reason, please reach out as soon as possible to request an extension. If you unexpectedly miss a meeting or an assignment deadline for a reason that warrants excusal (medical or family emergency, for example), please reach out as soon possible with appropriate documentation.

UNEXCUSED ABSENCES

Not all absences are excused. Excusal requires an email explaining the reason for the absence, which must be one that UMD policy recognizes as legitimate grounds for excusal. For example, sleeping through class or going to the beach or deciding to take a shift at your summer job will result in an *unexcused* absence. If a deadline is missed due to an unexcused absence, a score of 0% is assigned and make-up work is not an option. After two unexcused absences, additional unexcused absences will have a directly negative impact on your final grade. Each unexcused absence after your second will result in a reduction of your final letter grade by one increment. For example, if you earn a final letter grade of A-, a third unexcused absence would result in reduction of your final letter grade to B+, and then a fourth unexcused absence would reduce that further to B, and so on.

CLASSROOM CONDUCT

The following expectations are in place for all students.

- Arrive on time. Meetings start at 11am sharp. You should join the waiting room a few minutes early.
- Stay until the class ends at 12pm. We will end on time, never early and never late. Do not leave early to get a head start on traffic on the way to work or an afternoon at the beach. Do not start to “pack up” and get ready to leave prior to 12pm. Give the class your undivided attention for the 60 minutes when we meet each weekday.
- Please share your video throughout the meeting. This substantially improves the quality of our discussions.
- Unless you are speaking, leave your audio muted.

- Pay attention to the current speaker. Don't try to multi-task. Research shows that it doesn't work. During whole-group discussion, don't engage in side-chats with peers.
- If written/verbal attempts to enforce these policies are unsuccessful, I reserve the right to remove students from meetings and/or to reduce Participation scores.

NO RECORDING

Under no circumstances will I record a class meeting. Doing so encourages reduced attendance and also tends to reduce student discussion. The lecture slides are posted regularly on Canvas for the purposes of review. If you miss a class, it's your responsibility to get caught up on the material by reviewing the slides for the missed meeting(s), borrowing notes from a classmate, and/or making use of office hours.

OFFICE HOURS AND EMAIL

The best way to ask a question about philosophy is to bring it up during a regular class meeting so that we can all discuss it together. If the question occurred to you, it probably occurred to at least one of your peers. So, discussing it as a whole group will be useful. As a general rule, I don't have long email exchanges with students about philosophy. That's what our meetings are for!

Email is useful for things like logistical/administrative questions about the class, or ideas you have for a paper. Prior to the start of our summer term, please reach out to <michael.mccourt@gwu.edu> with any questions. During the summer term, I can also be reached at <mmccour2@umd.edu>.

Office hours are available for conversations that are suited to neither whole-group discussion nor email—for example, getting caught up after absences, tricky material that you are individually struggling with, or ideas for a paper you are writing. I'm available for one-on-one Zoom office hours by appointment in the early afternoons, Monday through Thursday. I'm not available to meet Friday through Sunday. I usually need at least 24 hours' advance notice to find a time that works.

STUDENT PRIVACY

It is the student's responsibility to address course-related issues with the instructor. The instructor is under no obligation to engage with parents or guardians about their student's performance in this class. Inquiries sent to the instructor by parents or guardians concerning their student's performance may be referred to TYS (<tys@umd.edu>).

DRAFTS

Because of the fast pace of the course, I cannot review drafts of student papers prior to submission. It is simply not possible to do so in a way that is both effective and fair. I will however encourage peer review and provide a space on Canvas for you to interact with peers who are interested in opportunities for peer review.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

The UMD Honor Code prohibits students from cheating on exams, plagiarizing papers, submitting the same paper for credit in two courses without authorization, buying papers, submitting fraudulent documents, and forging signatures. Allegations of academic dishonesty will be reported directly to the Student Honor Council.

<<http://www.shc.umd.edu>>

DIVERSITY

The University of Maryland values the diversity of its student body. Along with the University, I am committed to providing a classroom atmosphere that encourages the equitable participation of all students regardless of age, disability, ethnicity, gender, national origin, race, religion, or sexual orientation.

DISABILITY SUPPORT

Students with disabilities should, in accord with university policy, contact me at the beginning of the semester (before the add/drop date) to discuss any special accommodations for the course. To obtain an Accommodation Letter, contact Disability Support Service (DSS) at 301-314-7682 or visit:

<<https://counseling.umd.edu/ads/>>

LEARNING ASSISTANCE SERVICES

If you are experiencing any difficulties in keeping up with the academic demands of this course, please contact me. You can also contact the Learning Assistance Service, located at 2202 Shoemaker Building (301-314-7693). Their educational counselors can help with reading, note-taking and exam preparation skills, as well as time-management. All their services are free to UMD students.