

What is Philosophy? And what do philosophers do?

Introduction to philosophy, Spring 2021

T & TH 9:30 -10:45 AM on Zoom

Professor: Bryce Huebner

Office hours: T 13:00 - 15:00; and by appointment

You might have some assumptions of what philosophy is, and you might even have some thoughts about the kinds of things that philosophers do. But in different times and different places, philosophers have been artists and ascetics, court advisors and contemplatives, poets and political leaders, reactionaries and revolutionaries, scientists and sages. There is no way to explore all of these ways of doing philosophy in a single course. But we will examine some of these different ways of being a philosopher; and over the course of the semester, we will ask: what does it mean to do philosophy?

Course Structure: This will be a **discussion driven course**, which will be meeting on Zoom during the scheduled course time. Class sessions will always focus on the reading that is assigned for that day—though there will always be room for discussion of how the readings for the course as a whole hang together.

Some of the issues that we discuss might seem strange to some of us; but others might find these same issues utterly mundane. That's at least part of what will make this class fun. However, since the questions we will be discussing can generate contentious claims, spirited discussions, vehement disagreements, and trenchant criticisms, we will need to work hard to treat one another as co-participants in an attempt to understand what philosophy is. I promise to do my best to raise philosophical issues and to start philosophical discussions in ways that are as sensitive as possible to the variety of viewpoints and opinions that we are sure to find among the members of this seminar. But we need to work together to create an atmosphere where we can discuss interesting ideas in a way that allows us to learn from one another.

Accessibility and diversity: There is a great deal of diversity in teaching and learning styles in a modern university; and this diversity is likely to be significantly increased in our current situation. But learning styles might not always mesh in ways that are conducive to the success and wellbeing of everyone in a course. That said, there are often ways of improving things; and I am always happy to discuss the structure of this course, and to work with different learning styles to the best of my ability. So please feel free to talk to me if things are not working out for you. I sincerely think that every student is entitled to a meaningful and stimulating educational experience! Disabled students and students who are on record with the university as requiring particular accommodations should let me know that this is the case, in confidence, during the first few weeks of the semester. Everyone should take advantage of the services that are provided by the university; and you should let me know if you learn that something would make this course more accessible and rewarding for you.

Course Requirements: Your main assignment is to write a brief paper (Max: 2000 words), which defends the claim that some creative endeavor (e.g., a piece of music, a collection of poetry, a piece of visual art, an essay) should be understood as a work of philosophy. This project is open ended, and it might seem like you don't have the tools for addressing it yet. That's ok! You will develop these skills as you think through this assignment. And as you'll see over the course of the semester, there are many ways of doing philosophy, and many ways of presenting philosophical ideas. If you're unsure where to start, look through the *Supplementary Resources*. And if you're unsure whether you're on the right track, please set up an appointment, or come to office hours to discuss some possibilities (as a side benefit, this will help us get to know one another better).

Assignment	Points	Due date
Identify a creative endeavor and submit a 4-Sentence Paper that takes the following form: 1. This creative project says/does... 2. I say that this is philosophy because... 3. One might object that... 4. But I would reply...	10	2/23
Submit a ~500 word Summary of your source	15	3/9
Submit a ~500 word Explanation of why your source is philosophy	15	3/23
Provide Anonymous Peer Feedback on one paper-in-progress, which takes the following form: First, suggest one thing that the author could do to make their summary of their source clearer; second, suggest one thing that the author could do to make their explanation of why their source is philosophy stronger; and third, briefly provide the best objection that you can think of to treating this source as philosophy.	10	4/10
Submit a ~ 500 word account of a Potential Objection	15	4/20
Submit revisions of your first three sections, and add a reply to the objection that you have entertained, to yield a Final Paper (Max: 2000 words)	15	5/4
Participate. You should come to the zoom sessions if possible, and contribute to the discussion where you can. Philosophy is often best done collaboratively, and some philosophical questions only come to light when you discuss them.	10	Ongoing
At the end of the semester, you must submit a Brief Narrative detailing what you have learned in the class, as well as what questions you feel have been left unresolved, and what it would take to address them adequately.	10	5/9

Supplementary resources: Peter Adamson, [The History of Philosophy Without any Gaps](#) (podcast); Peter Adamson & Jonardon Ganeri, [The History of Philosophy in India](#) (podcast); Peter Adamson & Chike Jeffers, [The History of African and Africana philosophy](#) (podcast); [Pieces on Non-'Western' Philosophy for a General Audience](#) by Abiral Chitrakar Phnuyl; [Aeon](#) (There's a specific philosophy section, but feel free to look around!)

Paper deadlines: If you need an extension on a paper, please ask me at least 24 hours before the due date. I will always give a 48-hour extension, no questions asked. If you need longer than this, we will need to set up a meeting to go over your ideas, and to establish a schedule for finishing the paper. Unless an extension has been granted, assignments will be penalized 1/3 of a grade for each day they are late.

Appealing a grade: You can appeal any grade that you feel does not accurately represent the work you have done. Appeals for re-evaluation must be made in writing, no more than two weeks after your paper is returned, and no sooner than 48 hours after you receive your grade. Requests must provide a compelling argument for raising the grade, but an agreement to re-evaluate a paper is no guarantee of a better grade, and it can result in lower grades if there are more serious problems that were missed on the first reading.

The honor code: The Georgetown University Honor pledge requires you to be honest in your academic endeavors and to hold yourself to the high ideals and rigorous standards of academic life. I expect you to be familiar with the letter and the spirit of this pledge; and, I will enforce the Honor Code by reporting any and all suspected cases of academic dishonesty.

Tentative course reading schedule

A quick pass through some of the history of philosophy?	
1/28	Zoom meeting to discuss Unknown , A dispute between a man & his ba (8 pages)
2/2	Zoom meeting to discuss Epicurus , Letter to Menoeceus (1846 words)
2/4	Zoom meeting to discuss Sonam Kachru , Ashoka's moral empire (3500 words)
2/9	Zoom meeting to discuss Selections from The sayings of the desert fathers (read at least the sayings of Abba Anthony the Great; but feel free to give some of the others a quick look; 7+ pages)
2/11	Zoom meeting to discuss Selections from the Therīgāthā (Paṭācarāterīgāthā; Mahāpajāpatigotamīterīgāthā; Kisāgotamīterīgāthā; Ambapālīterīgāthā; Subhājīvakambavanikāterīgāthā)
2/16	Zoom meeting to discuss Zār'a Ya'aqob , <i>Haṭaṭa</i> (23 pages)
2/18	Zoom meeting to discuss Benedict de Spinoza , <i>Letter 32</i> (1785 words)
2/23	Zoom meeting to discuss Dōgen , Instructions for the cook (~9 pages)
Do you really want to live forever?	
2/25	No zoom meeting. But watch the overview lecture on Canvas Read: Sam Littlefiar Do you only live once? (2934 words) Canvas discussion: Post a few sentences laying out what you take to be the strongest argument in support of rebirth, or the strongest argument against it. Add at least one comment on someone else's post. If you disagree with someone, make sure to make your disagreement about the facts, and not an attack on their way of framing things.
3/2	No zoom meeting. Watch the overview lectures for each of the readings (posted on Canvas) Individual writing: For each of the two articles, submit three sentences before Wednesday at 23:59 PM: 1) What is one thing that you learned from the text? 2) What is one criticism that you would raise about the text? And 3) What question would you like to ask the author of the text.
3/4	Zoom meeting to discuss Natalie Emmons Immortality instinct (3200 words); Regina Rini The last mortals (10 pages)
Philosophy on the edge of art	
3/9	No zoom meeting. Watch the overview lectures for each of the readings (posted on Canvas)

	<p>Canvas discussion: Ishan Chakrabarti explores a favorite philosophical theme through the lense of art and music. Choose a philosophical theme that you're interested in; in a couple of sentences explain what that theme is; post a link to or image one piece of art, and one song that show us something interesting about that theme. Leave at least one comment on at least one other person's post.</p>
3/11	<p>Zoom meeting to discuss Ishan Chakrabarti, What to do with flayed skin? (CW: graphic images & discussions; 2769 words); Hundertwasser, Mouldiness Manifesto against Rationalism in Architecture (2145 words)</p>
3/16	<p>No zoom meeting. Watch the overview lectures for each of the readings (posted on Canvas)</p> <p>Read Ursula K. LeGuin's Introduction to Left Hand of Darkness (1636 words) and use it as a foundation to write a brief (3-5 sentence), informal, answer to the following question: What aspect of reality, that is, the present world, is Butler trying to describe? Submit your answer before Wednesday at 23:59 PM.</p>
3/18	<p>Zoom meeting to discuss Octavia Butler, The evening, the morning, and the night (18 pages) Adrian Piper, Ideology, Confrontation and Political Self-Awareness (1716 words)</p>
Minds are strange things	
3/23.	<p>No zoom meeting. Watch the overview lectures for each of the readings (posted on Canvas)</p> <p>Canvas discussion: Music and film often depict the idealized past. Choose a piece of music or a film that does this; in a few sentences, 1) explain a source that you are interested in, and the kind of idealized past that it is describing; and 2) explain how it either opens up interesting possibilities for thinking about our world, or how it obscures important facts about the world. Leave at least one comment on at least one other person's post.</p>
3/25	<p>Zoom meeting to discuss Jamie Lombardi Marcus Aurelius helped me survive grief and rebuild my life (1300 words); Felipe de Brigard Nostalgia reimagined (3700 words)</p>
4/6	<p>No zoom meeting. Listen to Ann-Sophie Barwich on Mindscapes</p>
4/8	<p>Zoom meeting to discuss Ann-Sophie Barwich, It's hard to fool a nose (3000 words) Marta Tafalla, A world without smell (10 pages)</p>
4/13.	<p>No zoom meeting. Watch the overview lectures for each of the readings (posted on Canvas)</p> <p>Individual writing: For each of the two articles, submit three sentences before midnight on Wednesday: 1) What is one thing that you learned from the text? 2) What is one criticism that you would raise about the text? And 3) What question would you like to ask the author of the text.</p>
4/15	<p>Zoom meeting to discuss Kristen Andrews & Susana Monsó, Rats are us (3600) Val Plumwood, Meeting the predator (13 pages)</p>
Complexity and the Anthropocene	
4/20	<p>No zoom meeting. Read Lucas Stephens, Erle Ellis, & Dorian Fuller The deep Anthropocene (3700 words); and submit three sentences before Wednesday at 23:59 PM: 1) What is one thing that you learned from the text? 2) What is one criticism that you would raise</p>

	about the text? And 3) What question would you like to ask the author of the text.
4/22	Zoom meeting to discuss Olúfemi O. Táiwò , Crisis, COVID-19, and Democracy Beth Lord , We are nature (5336 words)
4/27	No zoom meeting. Listen to Jessica Flack on the Jim Rutt show Submit one question about the interview, and about the ideas that she is exploring
4/29	Zoom meeting to discuss Jesica Flack & Melanie Mitchell , Uncertain times (4400 words) Laura Pereira et al , Chefs as change-makers from the kitchen (8 pages)
5/4.	No zoom meeting. Watch the final overview lecture (posted on Canvas) Canvas discussion: What is the most important thing that we can learn by paying attention to indigenous perspectives on climate change? Add one new post, and leave at least one comment on at least one other person's post.
5/6	Zoom meeting to discuss Kyle Whyte , Indigenous science (fiction) for the Anthropocene (14 pages)