Introduction to Philosophy
QUARTER YEAR

Instructor information

Instructor: Laurenz Ramsauer
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Office hours: TBA

Course description

In this course, we will together read and discuss a selection of challenging and controversial topics that will introduce students to some of the central concerns of the discipline of philosophy. In addition, this course will introduce you to the basic methods of philosophy: constructing convincing arguments, carefully listening to and reconstructing others' arguments, giving engaging oral presentations and writing convincing essays. Incidentally, you will also find these basic philosophical skills helpful in any academic discipline and virtually all occupations. Among other things, we will discuss what, if anything, would be bad about living in the matrix, whether online 'piracy' should be allowed, if the climate crisis demands acts of political resistance, and what societies should do to avoid fake news.

Texts

All texts will be made available online.

Course requirements

- Thoughtful participation in discussion: 20%
- A 10 minute in-class presentation: 30%
- Final 10–15-pages essay: 50% (due Month/Day)

Assessment

Thoughtful participation in discussion means that you regularly attend class and come prepared to each meeting ready to discuss the material. This not merely involves articulating your own point of view but also the ability to take in what others are saying and to genuinely engage with it. An excellent in-class presentation conveys the content of the reading concisely without overly simplifying, is presented clearly, raises interesting questions and/or criticism, and connects the reading with previous course material. You can find a short guide on how to write a good philosophy paper here, and you can find the rubrics for the assessment of your oral presentation and essay here and here respectively. You can also find a brief guide on using AI tools in philosophy papers here.

Accommodation for Students with Disabilities

If you need accommodation, please inform me as soon as possible. All discussions will remain confidential.

Schedule

Week 1: What's the point of theory?

Day/Month. Introduction; 'Is' and 'ought'
No required reading

Day/Month. A merely intellectual pastime?
Jennifer Morton, 'An Antidote to Injustice'
Zena Hitz, 'Why Intellectual Work Matters'
Kant, Notes (selection)

Week 2: The value of disagreeing

Day/Month. Is disagreement good?
Thomas Kelly, 'The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement'

Day/Month. Is 'no platforming' good?
Robert Mark Simpson and Amia Srinivasan, 'No Platforming'

Week 3: How rational are humans really?

Day/Month. What is Bullshit?
Harry Frankfurt, 'On Bullshit'

Day/Month. Intuitions and biases
Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (selections)

Week 4: Whom should we believe?

Day/Month. Is believing a matter of justice?
Miranda Fricker, 'Testimonial Injustice'

Day/Month. Is it okay to trust your friends?
Regina Rini, 'Fake News and Partisan Epistemology'

Week 5: What is consciousness?

Day/Month. Is the mind just the brain?
Thomas Nagel, 'The Mind-Body Problem'

Thomas Nagel, 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?'

Day/Month. Is AI already conscious?
Graham Oppy and David Dowe, 'The Turing Test' (selection)
Eric Schwitzgebel and Mara Garza, 'A Defense of the Rights of Artificial Intelligences'

Week 6: What's so important about reality?

Day/Month. How do you know there's a reality out there?
Thomas Nagel, 'How Do We Know Anything?'
Descartes, First and Second Meditation

Day/month. The matrix
Excerpt from *The Matrix*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5b0ZxUWNf0
James Pryor, 'What's So Bad About Living in the Matrix?'
Robert Nozick, 'The Experience Machine'

Week 7: How should we behave online?

Day/Month. Online privacy
Jeffrey Toobin, 'The Solace of Oblivion'
Ashley Nicole Vavra, 'The Right to Be Forgotten'

Day/Month. Should you steal that?
Edwin Hettinger, 'Justifying Intellectual Property'
Agnes Callard, 'Is Plagiarism Wrong?'

Week 8: What, if anything, is wrong with capitalism?

Day/Month. Should everything be for sale?
Michael Sandel, 'Commodification, Commercialization, and Privatization'

Day/month. What is meaningful work?
David Graeber, 'On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs'
Rahel Jaeggi, 'Pathologies of Work'

Week 9: What should we do about Global Heating?

Day/Month. Should you join Extinction Rebellion?
Candice Delmas, 'Political Resistance: A Matter of Fairness'
Extinction Rebellion, Why Rebel?

Day/month. Should the US create a New Tuvalu?
Cara Nine, 'Ecological Refugees, States Borders, and the Lockean Proviso'

Week 10: College admission; summary

    Day/Month. Should there be an admission lottery?
    Anastasia Berg, 'The Case for Admission Lotteries'
    Leon Botstein, 'Meritocracy Isn't Broken. Assessment Is.'

    Day/Month. Summary
    No required reading

Academic Integrity

Academic work is an author's original contribution and properly cites all sources used (such as articles, books, interviews, films, podcasts etc.). This matters for both epistemic and moral reasons. For epistemic reasons, it is crucial that academic work can be double-checked by academic peers, so readers must be able to easily identify all sources an author relied on. For moral reasons, it is crucial that other authors receive the credit they deserve.[*] Feel free to consult with me before completing your assignments if you should have any concerns about the correct way to reference the work of others. The consequence of plagiarism will be a failing grade. In the unfortunate event that a student is suspected of plagiarism, I also have to follow the university's official guidelines for responding to academic misconduct.

Climate and Inclusion

Philosophy involves the ability to formulate your own and carefully attending to others' arguments, both in writing and in conversation. Even when philosophers disagree, this is not an adversarial activity: philosophy can only be done well as a collective activity with the shared end of furthering our mutual understanding. This requires that all of us be prepared to listen carefully and seriously to what others have to say, no matter how strongly we may disagree. Creating such an inclusive environment matters not merely for moral reasons, but for epistemic reasons too. If some groups are left feeling unwelcome and their perspectives left unheard, we seriously impair our collective ability to make progress in knowledge. It is therefore my goal as an instructor to create an environment where everyone feels respected and welcome. I encourage you to reach out to me if you have suggestions for promoting a welcoming and open academic environment, and I will give them serious consideration. If there are any circumstances that make you feel uncomfortable in our classroom, please let me know. All discussion will remain confidential.

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[*] For instance, these academic integrity and climate statements are modelled after Tyler Zimmer's syllabus on Philosophy of Economics (2022).