

# Phil 0220 Knowledge and Reality

## Syllabus Spring 2024

Prerequisites: None | Credits: 1 | Phil Distribution: ESP

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### Instructor

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### Course Details

Lecture Time: M-W 11:15-12:30  
Room: Johnson Memorial Building 204  
Office Hours: M 4:00-5:00pm; Th 2:00-4:00pm  
and by appointment

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### Course Description

This course is an introduction to metaphysics and epistemology, which are the study of reality and knowledge, respectively. Metaphysics and epistemology are two of the most central subfields in philosophy which examine fundamental questions about the nature of the world and our ability to know that nature. The purview of metaphysics and epistemology is often abstract, theoretical questions, but we will see that these issues have deep and lasting importance for ourselves and our place in the world. Specific questions we may pursue include:

- (a) What arguments are there for and against the existence of the divine?
- (b) Is there an external world and if so how can we know it?
- (c) What makes us the same person over time?
- (d) Is time travel possible and if so, can we change the past?
- (e) Are mathematical entities like numbers a sort of abstract object?
- (f) How can we know that other minds like our own exist?
- (g) Are there objective truths or is truth relative to a person or culture?
- (h) Do we have free will or are our choices pre-determined by the laws of nature and causality?
- (i) What role do social groups play in determining our beliefs about the world?
- (j) How do our assumptions and biases affect the process or outcome of the scientific method?

The aim of this course is to give an overview of some of the deepest and most enduring metaphysical and epistemological questions in philosophy. Some of these questions may be difficult to answer while others may not be answerable, yet we will come to see that there's value in asking such questions nonetheless. Empirical, scientific concerns will bear on some of our topics, but what differentiates these questions is that they aren't necessarily answerable by empirical, scientific means. No prior philosophical background or exposure is assumed.

### Course Goals

The aim of this course is to introduce you to some prominent questions, arguments, and views in metaphysics and epistemology. This course will also introduce you to philosophical methodology, focusing on reasoning and arguments that could support various views on the issues discussed. The goal is for you to be able to clearly articulate concepts, arguments and positions for different views on complicated questions relating to reality and our knowledge of it, as well as analyze and evaluate different and competing lines of reasoning, and give reasoned and critical support for your own views. Crucially, we'll come to see that, as is generally the case with philosophy, the topics discussed are far more complex than they initially seem.

## Required Materials

There is no required textbook for this class. All course readings are available on Canvas in PDF. Any supplemental course materials (e.g. podcasts, YouTube clips, movies/episodes etc.) will be provided on the course Canvas page.

## Grading

Short Papers (x2)	40%
Short Reflections (x2)	20%
Final Oral Exam	25%
Participation	15%

The standard Middlebury College grade scale (letter/4.0/percentage equivalents) will be used:

A = 4.00 = 93%-100%	A- = 3.67 = 90%-92.99%	B+ = 3.33 = 87%-89.99%
B = 3.00 = 83%-86.99%	B- = 2.67 = 80%-82.99%	C+ = 2.33 = 77%-79.99%
C = 2.00 = 73%-76.99%	C- = 1.67 = 70%-72.99%	D = 1.00 = 60%-69.99%
F = 0 = 0%-59.99%	INC	Credit/No Credit

## Assignments

Detailed instructions, grading rubrics, and due dates for each assignment are available on Canvas.

### *Short Papers*

There are two short papers, each worth 20% of the final grade. These will be structured either as short argumentative essays where you will be tasked with defending a position on a particular topic we covered or they will be structured as argument reconstructions where you will need to explain an author's argument and raise an objection and potential reply to that argument. The focus is on argument re/construction and supporting a position on an issue, regardless of whether it's the one you believe. These will only involve the relevant assigned readings and class discussions; no outside research will be necessary.

### *Short Reflections*

There are two short reflection assignments, one due in each half of the semester, worth 10% each of the final grade. The first will focus on our topic of time travel. You will reflect on our reading for that topic, Lewis' paper "The Possibility of Time Travel", the *Futurama* episode we will watch in class, and the short story "The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate" by Ted Chiang. The second reflection will focus on our topic of echo chambers, conspiracy theories and cults. You will reflect on the readings and class discussions for those topics as well as *The Simpsons* episode we will watch in class. These are informal reflections that aim at drawing connections between diverse media around a central topic.

### *Final Oral Exam*

In lieu of a standard written exam, students will have an oral exam, which will be scheduled during the exam period at the end of term. These are worth 25% of the final grade and will be around 15 minutes long. Students will be given a list of questions that they may be asked on our class readings and discussions and they will then answer a few of those questions of my choice in one-on-one conversation with me. Oral exams will be evaluated on the cogency of responses and knowledge of the topic based on the readings and class discussions.

### *Participation*

There is a participation component, worth 15% of your final grade. Your showing up and being attentive and engaged in lecture will be reflected in your participation grade. Attending class is required to get full marks since this is required to actively participate. Regularly participating by asking questions, making comments and otherwise engaging with me and your peers will count towards your participation marks. You may lose marks if you are disruptive in lecture (on your phone, talking out of turn, regularly arriving late, etc.). Students may gain participation marks by coming to office hours.

### *3-2-1 Reading Notes*

Because this course is discussion-focused, it is crucial for that to be successful, and for you to get the most out of the class, that you do the readings and come to class prepared to talk about them. To that end, students are expected to produce a set of reading notes for *each reading* and come prepared to discuss these notes in class. These will consist in a 3-2-1 approach: students will come up with three main points/ideas/conclusions from the reading, two connections between the reading and some other aspect of the world, and one question about the reading that you had. These should be written or typed and brought to each class. I will periodically use them in class or collect them to ensure that the reading is being done and in such cases they will count towards your participation grade.

### **Class Expectations**

- **Office Hours:** I will have office hours this semester on Mondays from 4:00-5:00pm and on Thursdays from 2:00-4:00pm. These are in person, but can also be done over Zoom, if necessary. I'm also available at other times by appointment, both in person and via Zoom (email me to set up a meeting).
- **Course Readings:** Students should do all the assigned readings *before* the class in which they're discussed since this is necessary for productive and responsible class discussion. All readings are available on the course webpage. There is no textbook, but students can print articles so they can bring them to class if they choose.
- **Attendance:** Attendance in class is expected. I will keep track of student attendance and contributions in class. Attendance is a prerequisite to participating; poor attendance will adversely affect your participation grade.
- **Communication:** You can contact me via e-mail. I will endeavour to respond within 24 hours, but usually don't respond after 5pm on weekdays nor on weekends. My principal method of communicating with you will be via your Middlebury e-mail, so be sure to check this daily. You can also come see me during office hours or if you're unable to make those we can schedule a time that works for both of us, either in person or on Zoom.
- **Electronics Policy:** Cellphones and smartwatches are not to be used during class since these are serious distractions for both yourselves and others. Many of you will do the readings on your laptops or tablets and may prefer this method in class to printing out the readings. Since participation is such a core aspect of this course, we will decide collectively on the first day what the policy around laptop and tablet use in class will be. If I see you using prohibited

devices in class I may ask you to leave which can affect your participation. If you require an accommodation regarding electronics please come see me to request an exemption.

- **Late Work Policy:** I'm flexible with due dates and granting extensions. If you think you need an extension to do your best work, consult with me and we'll find a solution. Late assignments without an extension will be downgraded by 3% per day after the due date (e.g. 90% to 87%), up to a penalty of 15% (after which they won't be accepted).
- **Grade Disagreement:** I am happy to discuss your graded assignments with you. I ask that you first read through my comments on your assignment, write down any questions you have, and then schedule an appointment with me. Note that I require a 24-hour "cooling off" period before discussing grades. If you think a grade you have received is unfair, please write a paragraph explaining why and send it to me via email. Note that this can result in your initial grade being *either raised or lowered*.
- **Extra Credit:** As a matter of general policy, no extra credit will be offered in this course unless *extremely* unusual circumstances arise which necessitate it.
- **Classroom Etiquette:** Students are expected to respect each other, allow others the chance to speak, and be open-minded to views different from their own. The topics covered may be controversial and evoke strong reactions. Please be aware of, and sensitive to, the feelings and experiences of others. We're here to learn and that's best done through community building, a prerequisite of which is respect and toleration.
- **Syllabus:** Circumstances may arise which necessitate adjustments to our reading schedule. I will give you as much of a heads-up as possible, both in class and via email. I will also strive to keep the assignment due dates unchanged unless absolutely necessary.

### Provisional Course Schedule

Dates	Topics	Readings	Notes	Assignments
<u>Week 1</u>  Monday 02/12  Wednesday 02/14	Course Introduction  &  What is Metaphysics and Epistemology?	No readings  Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" & Smart, "How to Reidentify the Ship of Theseus"		
<u>Week 2</u>  Monday 02/19  Wednesday 02/21	Skepticism	Descartes, <i>Meditations I &amp; II</i> & Moore, "Proof of an External World"	Watch Black Mirror in class; no reading for Wednesday	

		Black Mirror S3E4, “San Junipero”		
<u>Week 3</u>  Monday 02/26  Wednesday 02/28	Personal Identity	Sider and Conee, “Personal Identity”  Parfit, <i>Reasons and Persons</i> (selections)	Watch “To Be” video (in class)	First Short Paper Due
<u>Week 4</u>  Monday 03/04  Wednesday 03/06	Personal Identity	Schechtman, <i>The Constitution of Selves</i> (selections)  Byrne, “Knowing Our Minds”		
<u>Week 5</u>  Monday 03/11  Wednesday 03/13	Personal Identity &  Time Travel	Paul, <i>Transformative Experience</i> (selections)  Lewis, “The Paradoxes of Time Travel”	Watch: <i>Futurama</i> , “Roswell That Ends Well” (in class Wednesday)	Short Reflection Due
<u>Week 6</u>  Spring Break	<i>No Class</i>	<i>No Class</i>		
<u>Week 7</u>  Monday 03/25  Wednesday 03/27	Existence of God	Anselm, “The Classic Ontological Argument”; Aquinas, “The Classic Cosmological Argument”; Paley, “The Analogical Teleological Argument”  Pascal, “The Wager” & Taylor, “Faith”	Note: Many authors this week, but all readings are short	
<u>Week 8</u>  Monday 04/01	Existence of God &	Hume, “Evil Makes a Strong Case Against God’s Existence”		

Wednesday 04/03	Free Will	& Dawkins, “Science Discredits Religion”  Sider and Conee, “Free Will and Determinism”		
<u>Week 9</u>  Monday 04/08  Wednesday 04/10	Free Will	Ayer, “Freedom and Necessity”  Griffith, “Free Will and Science”		
<u>Week 10</u>  Monday 04/15  Wednesday 04/17	Relativism	Goodman, “Just the Facts, Ma’am!” & Boghossian, “Relativizing the Facts”  Appiah, “Relativism and Cross-Cultural Understanding”		Second Paper Due
<u>Week 11</u>  Monday 04/22  Wednesday 04/24	Race and Gender	Ney, “The Metaphysics of Race and Gender”  Basu, “Radical Moral Encroachment: The Moral Stakes of Racist Beliefs”		
<u>Week 12</u>  Monday 04/29  Wednesday 05/01	Social Epistemology and Testimony	Nguyen, “Escape the Echo Chamber”  Cassam, “The Intellectual Character of Conspiracy Theorists”	Watch <i>The Simpsons</i> S9E13, “The Joy of Sect” (in class)	Second Reflection Due

<u>Week 13</u> Monday 05/06  Wednesday 05/08	Science and Epistemic Authority	Saul, “Feminism, Science, and Bias”  Fricker, “Epistemic Injustice”		
<u>Week 14</u>  Exam Period				Final Oral Exams

### Academic Honesty

As a student at Middlebury, you are responsible for understanding and following the norms of academic honesty and integrity in the preparation and submission of your work. Details of our Academic Honesty, Honor Code, and Related Disciplinary Policies are available in [Middlebury's handbook](#). Additionally, the [Philosophy Department Statement on Academic Integrity](#) can be a helpful resource. If you have any questions about what constitutes academic dishonesty or need tips on how to avoid plagiarism or what constitutes authorized vs. unauthorized aid, do not hesitate to contact me to have a discussion.

### Generative AI Use

Outputs generated by AI programs (e.g. ChatGPT, Bard) may be inaccurate, incomplete, or otherwise problematic but they also have the potential to be important aids in education. We will discuss the issues surrounding generative AI use on the first day but as a general rule, I expect you not to use these technologies on your assignments unless their use is explicitly specified in the instructions (i.e. if there is an assignment for which you must use them). I will hold you accountable for the accuracy of your work. Be aware that use of AI may also limit your own independent thinking and creativity and may stunt the development of strong writing skills. Any inappropriate use of AI tools will be treated as a violation of Middlebury's Honor Code.

### Accessibility

I am committed to making this class accessible and welcoming for all students. Student needs vary for what will allow them to do their best in academic courses. If you are having difficulties with any aspect of this course – whether that be the material itself or the structure/delivery mechanisms of the course – please do not hesitate to contact me so that we can explore how to improve the situation for you.

Students who have Letters of Accommodation in this class are encouraged to contact me as early in the semester as possible to ensure that such accommodations are implemented in a timely fashion. For those without Letters of Accommodation, assistance is available to eligible students through the Disability Resource Center (DRC). Please contact ADA Coordinators Jodi Litchfield, Peter Ploegman, and Deirdre Kelly of the DRC at [ada@middlebury.edu](mailto:ada@middlebury.edu) for more information. All discussions will remain confidential.

### Campus Resources

*The Writing Center* encourages meaningful, exploratory writing. The trained professional and peer tutors are available to work with students on many different types of writing, as well as on the emotional

(motivation, confidence, engagement) and cognitive (process, genre, metacognitive) elements of writing. Students are encouraged to schedule appointments wherever they are in their writing process: <https://www.middlebury.edu/teaching-learning-research/student-resources/writing-center>.

*The Center for Teaching, Learning, and Research (CTLR)* provides academic support for students in many specific content areas and in writing across the curriculum through both professional tutors and peer tutors. The Center is also the place where students can find assistance in time-management and study skills. These services are free to all students. For information on how to access support, go to <https://www.middlebury.edu/teaching-learning-research/student-resources>.

*The Middlebury Library* can help you with your research projects in a wide variety of ways. Visit <https://www.middlebury.edu/library/>.

*Information Technology Services* are your go-to center for everything related to the technology used on campus and in service of your education, including both hardware and software support and services. Visit <https://www.middlebury.edu/information-technology-services>.

*The Center for Health and Wellness* is committed to supporting your physical, mental, and emotional needs throughout your time at Middlebury and their services are completely free. If you need mental health support or counselling they have a variety of care options and operate without any waitlists. Visit <https://www.middlebury.edu/center-health-wellness>.