

Phil*1050 – Fall 2017

Ethics, Knowledge, and Reality

Stefan Linquist (linquist@uoguelph.ca)

Monday & Wednesday 10:30-11:20 / MacNaughton 113

Office: Mackinnon 358. Hours: Mon. 4:00-5:00 or by appointment

Introduction

This course will explore philosophical theories about the nature and limits of human reason. Most of us have at least a basic sense of what it means to reason well. For example, we tend to think that good reasoning is based on reliable evidence. Or, that good reasoning mirrors the beliefs and opinions of the relevant experts. But underlying these ideas are important questions: What makes evidence reliable in the first place? On what grounds should anyone qualify as an expert on some topic?

Of course, many of these questions arise in other disciplines outside philosophy. The fields of economics, biology, history, etc. each operate (by necessity) with some standard of good reasoning. However, philosophy differs from these more specialized disciplines in two main respects. First, philosophy tends to operate at a higher level of generality. Instead of asking what it means to reason well as an economist, as a biologist, etc. philosophy aims for a general theory that applies across the board. Second, in philosophy no assumption or question is off limits because it is too fundamental or basic. By contrast, most specialized disciplines begin with a set of assumptions about their subject matter. Economics assumes that people act in order to maximise self-interest. Biology assumes that complex systems can be broken down and explained in terms of the interactions among their parts. Such questions are rarely examined within these fields. Whereas philosophy takes a step back and asks how such foundational assumptions might be justified.

I have organized this course around the basic premise that there are two distinct domains of human reason: about matters of fact and about matters of value. Roughly, factual statements describe how the world is and value statements describe how the world should be. As you will discover, these two domains of reasoning operate according to different rules.

The course will begin with an examination of Plato and some of the issues that plagued Socrates. In particular, we shall consider what it meant to Socrates to be a good citizen and to behave in a way that is just. This will lead us to consider the nature of ethical norms and the sort of “pull” that they have upon us. We will also consider the nature of aesthetic norms (i.e. norms about beauty) and ask whether they have the same kind of pull as the ethical ones. By the time we reach the first midterm, students can expect to have a working understanding of the fact/value distinction and the way that moral and aesthetic reasoning works.

These issues lead naturally to questions about human nature and, in particular, about human sentiments. The second phase of this course will look critically at Darwinian biology and neuroscience, asking what (if anything) they can teach us about what it means to reason well. By the end of this section, I expect students to have a fairly sophisticated ability to critically assess scientific claims about human nature and their implications for what we should value.

In the third phase of the course we turn our attention to science itself, asking what makes it so successful as a source of certain types of knowledge. In particular, we will consider whether the success of science has anything to do with the so called “scientific method”. At the end of this section, students will be able to explain why most philosophers think that there is in fact no such thing as a scientific method. Students will also develop a more sophisticated understanding of how science operates as a social institution.

The final phase of the course asks whether there are any domains of factual knowledge which are fundamentally inaccessible to science. In particular, we will consider the popular idea that science cannot tell us about the nature of the conscious mind. Students will be able to articulate some of the main historical arguments for this view, and understand why some contemporary philosophers reject a sharp distinction between mind and body.

Learning objectives

- By reading all of the required course material, students will develop their skills in comprehension and critical thinking.
- By attending lectures and tutorials, students will participate in an exploration of philosophical questions that goes beyond the reading material.
- By participating in debates in tutorials, students will be inspired to dig deeply into philosophical positions while developing their skill in the verbal expression of ideas.
- By writing two papers, students will develop their skill in clarity of expression and in critical thinking.
- By studying for two exams, students will be required to synthesize and process the main themes and philosophical positions in this course.

Lectures

Students are expected to attend all of the lectures, where they will encounter content designed to supplement the readings. Please note that philosophy is not simply a matter of reading and regurgitating information. It involves taking different, sometimes opposing positions on issues that are often complex and subtle. As your instructor, I view the lecture as an opportunity to demonstrate these skills as much as it is an opportunity to guide you through the reading.

Tutorials

Weekly tutorials provide a more personalized educational experience than you might otherwise receive in a large, first-year course. Students will be periodically divided into small groups to debate questions relating to the course material. In other weeks, tutorial sessions will cover course content that is supplementary (not covered) to lecture and readings.

Papers

Students are required to write two papers (800-1000 and 1000-1200 words) submitted to Turnitin on Courselink. The book *Writing Philosophy* by Vaughn and McIntosh provides guidelines on philosophical writing, and we will be covering parts of it in tutorial. Footnote all information and ideas taken from someone else or else it may be plagiarism. Listing your sources in a bibliography isn't enough since it doesn't show where you make use of them or which page the reference comes from. For more info, see Chapter 7 of *Writing Philosophy*.

Exams

There will be an in-class midterm in Week 8. Approximately one week before the exam, students will be provided with a list of questions from which questions on the exam will be drawn. A final exam (2 hours) is scheduled for December 07.

Teaching Assistants

TA	Section	Time	Location	Office Hour
Mary King	01	Wed. 1:30	MacNaughton 201	Mon. 9:00-10:00
mking06@uoguelph.ca	05	Wed. 3:30	MacNaughton 304	MACK 366
Michael Furac	06	Fri. 10:30	MacNaughton 202	Mon. 12:00-1:00
mfurac@uoguelph.ca	03	Fri. 2:30	MacKinnon 307	MACK 366
Brady Fullerton	07	Thurs. 9:30	Alex. Hall 309	Thurs. 3:30-4:30
bfullert@uoguelph.ca	04	Thurs. 4:30	MacKinnon 305	MACK 363

Grading

Presentations in tutorial debates	10%
Participation in seminar discussion	10%
First paper (800-1000 words)	15% – October 22
Midterm exam	20% – October 30
Second paper (1000-1200 words)	20% – November 26
Final exam	25% – December 07

Readings

- Lewis Vaughn and Jillian Scott McIntosh (2009), *Writing Philosophy: A guide for Canadian Students (2nd edition)*. Oxford University Press.
- Philosophy 1050: Custom Coursepack – available through the bookstore.
- Handouts - available on Courselink.

Course Schedule

Week 1 - What is philosophy?

Sept. 11: Course introduction, the facts/value distinction.

Sept. 13: What would alien beings philosophize about?

Tutorial Lesson: Reading like a philosopher.

Reading

- Bakker, "On Alien Philosophy."
- Vaughn & McIntosh, (2009) *Writing Philosophy* Ch. 1 "How to read philosophy" (p.1-20).

Week 2 - Platonic origins of Western philosophy, Part 1 - the Socratic method.

Sept. 18: Who was Socrates and why do we still read about him?

Sept. 20: Key features of the Socratic Method.

Tutorial Debate: Did Socrates do the right thing by submitting to the state?

Reading

- Plato, "The Apology."

Week 3 - Platonic origins of Western philosophy, Part 2 - the nature of justice.

Sept. 25: Plato's challenge to define justice.

Sept. 27: Some philosophical responses to Plato's challenge.

Tutorial Lesson: Argument reconstruction and analysis.

Reading:

- Plato, *The Republic*, Book 1.
- Vaughn & McIntosh (2009), *Writing Philosophy* Ch. 2 "How to read & evaluate an argument" (p. 21-38).

Week 4 - Are moral truths socially constructed?

Oct. 2: Nietzsche's challenge to "herd" morality.

Oct. 4 Some challenges for moral relativism?

Tutorial: Debate: Are we justified in morally judging other cultures?

Reading

- Friedrich Nietzsche (1886), *Beyond Good and Evil*, Chapter IX.
- Martha Nussbaum "Judging other cultures" (handout).

Week 5 - Clear argumentative writing.

Oct 9: No class

Oct. 11: How to reconstruct and analyze arguments.

Tutorial Lesson: Pointers for essay writing, discussion of topics.

Reading

- Vaughn & McIntosh (2009), *Writing Philosophy*, Chapter 3 “Rules of style and content” & Ch 4 “Exegetical and expository writing” (p. 45-63).

Week 6 – Can reason resolve disagreements in ethics?

Oct. 16: Three strategies for resolving ethical disputes.

Oct. 18: The limits of reason in ethical deliberation.

Tutorial Lesson: The appropriate role for human sentiment in ethical deliberation?

Reading

- Varner et al. (2017) “Methodology in ethics” (handout).
- Lewis Carroll (1895) “What the tortoise said to Achilles.”
- Simon Blackburn (1995) “Practical tortoise raising.”

First papers due on Sunday, Oct. 22

Week 7 - Can reason resolve disagreements in aesthetics?

Oct. 23: Why beauty isn’t merely in the eye of the beholder.

Oct. 25: The role of aesthetic judgment in democratic society.

Tutorial Debate: “Should some political decisions be based on judgments about beauty?”

Reading

- David Hume (1757), “Of the Standard of Taste.”
- Kimberly Smith (2000), “Mere Taste? Democracy and the Politics of Beauty.”

Week 8 – Midterm exam and Darwinism Intro.

Oct. 30: exam in class

Midterm Exam

Nov. 01: Introduction to Darwinism.

Tutorial Lesson: Darwin’s theory of human sentiments.

Reading

- Charles Darwin (1871), *The Descent of Man*, Chapter 3.

Week 9 – Does our biology influence our capacity to reason?

Nov. 6: Are ethical judgments a reflection of our innate psychology?

Nov 8: What does neuroscience teach us about practical reason?

Tutorial Debate: Have human moral intuitions been shaped by natural selection?

Reading

- Michael Ruse (1984), “Evolution and morality.”
- Patricia Churchland (2007), “Inference to the best decision.”

Week 10- How are scientific claims justified?

Nov. 13: The myth of a scientific method.

Nov. 15. What makes science so successful?

Tutorial lesson: Overview of the scientific method and its problems.

Reading:

- Woodward & Goodstein (1996), “Misconduct and the structure of science.”

Week 11 – Is the human mind understandable to science?

Nov 20: Mind/body dualism.

Nov 22: Can science understand the mind?

Tutorial debate: Is it possible to understand the conscious mind of an ‘alien’ creature?

Reading:

- Rene Descartes (1641) *Meditations on First Philosophy* (handout).
- Thomas Nagel (1971), “What’s it like to be a bat?”

Second papers due on Sunday, Nov. 26

Week 12- Questioning the mind/body distinction

Nov. 27: Is the concept of mind a category mistake?

Nov. 29: Debunking the mystery of consciousness.

Tutorial lesson: Category mistakes and the ghost in the machine.

Reading

- Gilbert Ryle (1949), “The ghost in the machine” (handout).
- Daniel Dennett (2003), “Explaining the ‘magic’ of consciousness.”

Final exam: Thursday, December 07, 7:00-9:00 pm.

College of Arts Standard Statements

E-mail Communication

As per university regulations, all students are required to check their <mail.uoguelph.ca> e-mail account regularly: e-mail is the official route of communication between the University and its students.

When You Cannot Meet a Course Requirement

When you find yourself unable to meet an in-course requirement because of illness or compassionate reasons, please advise the course instructor (or designated person, such as a teaching assistant) in writing, with your name, id#, and e-mail contact. [See the undergraduate calendar for information on regulations and procedures for Academic Consideration.](#)

Drop Date

Courses that are one semester long must be dropped by the end of the fortieth class day (Friday, 3 November 2017); two-semester courses must be dropped by the last day of the add period in the second semester. The regulations and procedures for [Dropping Courses](#) are available in the Undergraduate Calendar.

Copies of out-of-class assignments

Keep paper and/or other reliable back-up copies of all out-of-class assignments: you may be asked to resubmit work at any time.

Accessibility

The University promotes the full participation of students who experience disabilities in their academic programs. To that end, the provision of academic accommodation is a shared responsibility between the University and the student.

When accommodations are needed, the student is required to first register with Student Accessibility Services (SAS). Documentation to substantiate the existence of a disability is required, however, interim accommodations may be possible while that process is underway.

Accommodations are available for both permanent and temporary disabilities. It should be noted that common illnesses such as a cold or the flu do not constitute a disability.

Use of the SAS Exam Centre requires students to book their exams at least 7 days in advance, and not later than the 40th Class Day.

[For more information see the SAS web site.](#)

Student Rights and Responsibilities

Each student at the University of Guelph has rights which carry commensurate responsibilities that involve, broadly, being a civil and respectful member of the University community. [The Rights and Responsibilities are detailed in the Undergraduate Calendar](#)

Academic Misconduct

The University of Guelph is committed to upholding the highest standards of academic integrity and it is the responsibility of all members of the University community – faculty, staff, and students – to be aware of what constitutes academic misconduct and to do as much as possible to prevent academic offences from occurring. University of Guelph students have the responsibility of abiding by the University's policy on academic misconduct regardless of their location of study; faculty, staff and students have the responsibility of supporting an environment that discourages misconduct. Students need to remain aware that instructors have access to and the right to use electronic and other means of detection.

Please note: Whether or not a student intended to commit academic misconduct is not relevant for a finding of guilt. Hurried or careless submission of assignments does not excuse students from responsibility for verifying the academic integrity of their work before submitting it. Students who are in any doubt as to whether an action on their part could be construed as an academic offence should consult with a faculty member or faculty advisor.

[The Academic Misconduct Policy is detailed in the Undergraduate Calendar.](#)

Recording of Materials

Presentations which are made in relation to course work—including lectures—cannot be recorded or copied without the permission of the presenter, whether the instructor, a classmate or guest lecturer. Material recorded with permission is restricted to use for that course unless further permission is granted.

Resources

The [Academic Calendars](#) are the source of information about the University of Guelph's procedures, policies and regulations which apply to undergraduate, graduate and diploma programs.