

PHIL 0450: Theories of Knowledge and Reality

Spring 2022

Lecture: T/Th, 12–12:50pm

Classroom: 324 CL

Professor: Kevin Dorst (he/him), kevindorst@pitt.edu

Office: 1029G CL / <https://pitt.zoom.us/j/4971426138> Office Hrs: Wed 4–5pm; by appt.

TAs:

Nikki Ernst (they/he), nikki.ernst@pitt.edu

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Class Description: This course is an introduction to philosophical approaches to a variety of classic and contemporary questions in metaphysics and epistemology. Does God exist? Can we know anything? Do we have free will? What does it take to survive? Are we rational? We'll try to get clear on both the possible answers to these questions and why those answers matter.

Course Goals: Philosophical problems often feel intractable; discussions of them often are inscrutable. The goal of this course is to learn how we might do better. By the end, you'll have experience engaging substantively with hard problems and difficult arguments, and be able to write and speak more clearly about them. Hopefully those skills will generalize.

Readings: All readings will be made available on Canvas in the "Files" section:

<https://canvas.pitt.edu/courses/146173/files>

Grading: Your grade will be determined by 2 papers, one of which you will rewrite (75%), a handful of quizzes (15%), and section attendance/participation (10%).

Papers (75%). You will write two papers, each around 1200–1400 words (5-ish double-spaced pages); you will **rewrite** the first paper after receiving feedback from your TA. Paper prompts will be distributed at least 2 weeks before the due date.

Paper 1 (20%): Due **February 22 at 11:59pm**.

Rewrite of Paper 1 (25%): Due **March 24 at 11:59pm**.

Paper 2 (30%): Due **April 22 at 11:59pm**.

Note: Writing philosophy papers is a learned skill that can be tough to get the hang of. It requires making a single contribution to an ongoing conversation started by the readings and in class. We'll devote class time to discussing what is expected, and I'll send out materials with advice beforehand.

Quizzes (15%). There will be **six** in-lecture **pop quizzes** to check attendance and that you've done the reading. We'll do these at the beginning of class so **bring a computer or smartphone to class**. They will be posted on Canvas:

<https://canvas.pitt.edu/courses/146173/quizzes>. Your lowest quiz-grade will be dropped.

Attendance/participation (10%). Attendance (to both lectures and sections) is mandatory. Sections are discussion-based, so to receive full credit you must also regularly contribute to section discussions.

Course Policies:

Announcements. I'll send **class communications via announcements on Canvas**, so make sure you've set things up to receive notifications.

Late papers. Papers will be marked down $\frac{1}{3}$ of a letter grade per unexcused day late (so a B+ would become a B).

Academic Integrity. This is serious. Academic integrity violations will not be tolerated. Evidence of dishonesty will be seriously pursued, and confirmation that plagiarism has occurred will result in an "F" for the course and notification of the undergraduate dean, with further consequences (such as expulsion) on the table. You are responsible for knowing what counts as plagiarism. The short, sweet version: any words that are not your own must be in quotes with a proper citation; any ideas that are not your own must be clearly cited. See <https://www.provost.pitt.edu/faculty/academic-integrity-freedom/academic-integrity-guidelines>. Please reach out to me if you have any questions. Asking beforehand is never an issue.

Disability Accommodations. If you have a disability that requires special accommodations or other classroom modifications, please reach out to me and your TA about it. You must notify both me and Disability Resources and Services no later than the second week of term. You may be asked to provide documentation of your disability to determine the appropriateness of accommodations. To notify Disability Resources and Services, call 412-648-7890 to schedule an appointment. The office is open virtually; please visit <https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/disability-access/disability-resources-and-services> for more information and to apply for accommodations.

Covid. If you or a loved one gets sick, and as a result you start to fall behind on the course, the best approach is to email me about it as soon as possible so that we can construct a plan for catching up, getting you access to the handouts, etc.

Self-Care and Well-Being

College is hard. All the more so during a pandemic. So, please, get into the habit of building self-care into your schedule—whether it's in the form of exercise, time talking to friends/family, or even just to relax. Do it! You'll find that you are much more productive if you do.

Pitt also has resources to help. If you or anyone you know experiences overwhelming academic stress, persistent difficult feelings and/or challenging life events, please seek support. In addition to reaching out to friends and loved ones, consider connecting with a faculty member you trust for assistance connecting to helpful resources. The University Counseling Center is also here for you. You can call 412-648-7930 at any time to connect with a clinician.

If you or someone you know is feeling suicidal, please call the University Counseling Center at any time at 412-648-7930. You can also contact Resolve Crisis Network at 888-796-8226. If the situation is life threatening, call Pitt Police at 412-624-2121 or dial 911.

Schedule

I. The Existence of God

- 1/11 Introduction (no reading)
- 1/13 The argument from design, Paley 1800
- 1/18 The fine-tuning argument, White 2014
- 1/20 The problem of evil, Mackie 1955
- 1/25 Pascal's wager, Pascal 1660

II. Skepticism

- 1/27 Skepticism, Descartes 1641
- 2/1 Contextualism, Stine 1976
- 2/3 Moral skepticism, McGrath 2008 (skip section 2)
- 2/8 Irrelevant influences, Schoenfield 2020
(Paper 1 prompts distributed)
- 2/10 Inductive skepticism, Hume 1748
- 2/15 The new riddle of induction, Goodman 1955

III. Free Will

- 2/17 The consequence argument, Van Inwagen 1975
- 2/22 The principle of alternative possibilities, Frankfurt 1988a
PAPER 1 DUE at 11:59pm
- 2/24 The flicker-of-freedom objection, Stump 1999
- 3/1 Compatibilism: second-order desires, Frankfurt 1988b
- 3/3 Compatibilism: identity and sanity, Wolfe 1987
- 3/8 No class (spring break)
- 3/10 No class (spring break)

IV. Personal Identity

- 3/15 The psychological criterion, Locke 1690
- 3/17 Against the psychological criterion, Reid 1785
- 3/22 Personal fission, Parfit 1971
- 3/24 The narrative view, Schechtman 2007
PAPER 1 REWRITES DUE at 11:59pm
- 3/29 **Virtual class:** A feminist critique, James 2008 (skip section 7)
<https://pitt.zoom.us/j/99874867107>

V. Rationality

- 3/31 Human foibles, Fine 2005
(Paper 2 prompts distributed)
- 4/5 **No Class** (I'm traveling, unexpectedly)

4/7 Human feats, Pinker 1998
4/12 The right standards..., Hastie & Dawes 2010, Ch. 2
4/14 **No class** (I'm traveling)
4/19 ...or the wrong ones?, Kelly 2004

4/21 Conclusions (no reading)
4/22 **PAPER 2 DUE at 11:59pm** (No class, of course)