

# 24.00: Problems in Philosophy

Fall 2022

**Professor:** Kevin Dorst (he/him)

kmdorst@mit.edu

Office: 32-D931 / <https://mit.zoom.us/my/kevindorst>

Office Hrs: Tues 4–5pm; by appt.

Lecture:	T/Th, 11–12	Classroom:	1-190
Recitations:	F, 10–11	Classroom:	56-180
	F, 10–11		66-154
	F, 11–12		56-180
	F, 11–12		66-154
	F, 12–1		56-180
	F, 12–1		66-154

## TAs:

Bennett Eckert, beckert8@mit.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.mit.edu/courses/16375/files>

## Requirements:

*Readings:* carefully read the assigned readings before each class.

*Attendance:* attend all lectures and recitations. Many lectures will include a brief quiz to assess whether you are absorbing the material. **You cannot pass the course if you do not attend regularly.**

*Participation:* CI-H subjects require a substantial oral evaluation component, which will be assessed by participation in recitations. You will be expected to participate actively, and cannot receive full marks without doing so.

*Papers:* CI-H courses require at least 5,000 words of writing, and (in addition) one paper that is rewritten after receiving feedback from (and meeting with) your TA. **You cannot pass the course if you do not turn in all the papers and the rewrite.**

**Grading:** Your grade will be determined by 3 papers and one rewrite (75%), a number of quizzes (15%), and recitation attendance and participation (10%).

**Papers (75%).** You will write three papers, and you will **rewrite** the first paper after receiving feedback from (and meeting with) your TA. Paper prompts will be distributed at least 2 weeks before the due date.

Paper 1 (1000 words, 15%): Due **Thursday, October 6 in class.**

Rewrite of Paper 1 (1000 words, 15%): Due **Thursday, October 27 in class.**

Paper 2 (2000 words, 20%): Due **Thursday, November 17 in class**

Paper 3 (2000 words, 25%): Due **Tuesday, December 13 in class.**

**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 a number of **pop quizzes** in lectures, to check attendance and that you've done the reading. We'll do these at the beginning of class. Your lowest quiz-grade will be dropped.

**Attendance/participation (10%).** Attendance (to both lectures and sections) is mandatory. Recitations are discussion-based, so to receive full credit you must also regularly contribute to discussions. (If you attend every session and contribute meaningfully to every other session, you will receive full credit. If you must miss a session or two, contribute more to the discussions in the ones you attend.)

### **Policies and Resources:**

**No screens.** No laptops, tablets, or phones may be used during lectures or recitations. (See below for accommodations.)

**Announcements.** I'll send **class communications via announcements on Canvas** (<https://canvas.mit.edu/courses/16375/announcements>), 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).

**Writing Help.** Clear and concise writing is an important component of this class. The MIT Writing and Communication Center (WCC) offers free one-on-one professional advice from communication specialists with advanced degrees and publishing experience. The WCC can help you learn about all types of academic and professional writing and further develop your oral communication skills. You can learn more about WCC consultations at <http://cmsw.mit.edu/writing-and-communication-center> and register with the online scheduler to make appointments through <https://mit.mywconline.com>. WCC hours are Monday-Friday, 9am–6pm during the semester, and fill up fast.

**Academic Integrity.** Any writing submitted for a grade must be your own; quotations or ideas paraphrased from other sources should be clearly cited in a way that allows us to find the source. You are responsible for knowing what counts as plagiarism. See <https://integrity.mit.edu/sites/default/files/images/AcademicIntegrityHandbook2020-color.pdf>. Reach out to your TA if you have questions. Asking beforehand is never an issue.

**Disability Accommodations.** MIT is committed to the principle of equal access. Students who need disability accommodations are encouraged to speak with Disability and Access Services (DAS), prior to or early in the semester so that accommodation requests can be evaluated and addressed in a timely fashion. If you have a disability and are not planning to use accommodations, it is still recommended that you meet with DAS staff to familiarize yourself with their services and resources. Please visit the DAS website for contact information: <https://studentlife.mit.edu/das>.

If you've already been approved for accommodations, please inform both Kevin and your TA to make an implementation plan.

**Excused absences and late work.** We understand that things come up! When they do, email me and your TA to talk about how to make up any missed content or work. If it becomes a regular issue, we'll ask you to go through Student Support Services (S<sup>3</sup>). Email ([s3-support@mit.edu](mailto:s3-support@mit.edu)) or call (617-253-4861) them to get an excuse note from a dean (the earlier the better). For more contact options for S<sup>3</sup>, see here: <https://studentlife.mit.edu/s3/s3-about-us/s3-contact-us>.

### **Self-Care and Well-Being**

College is hard. All the more so right now. 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 (and happy) if you do.

MIT 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 seek support. In addition to reaching out to friends and loved ones, MIT Mental Health and Counseling offers a variety of services for (both long-term and immediate) support. These services are free for students. See <https://medical.mit.edu/services/mental-health-counseling>, or call 617-253-2916—a line that's open 24 hours a day. If you are concerned about someone else, resources and advice can be found at <https://medical.mit.edu/services/mental-health-counseling/helping-others>.

## **Schedule**

### **I. God**

- 9/8 Introduction (no reading)
- 9/13 The argument from design, Paley 1800
- 9/15 Class cancelled (zoom woes)
- 9/20 The fine-tuning argument, White 2014
- 9/22 The problem of evil, Mackie 1955
- 9/27 Pascal's wager, Pascal 1660

### **II. Skepticism**

- 9/29 Skepticism, Descartes 1641
- 10/4 Contextualism, Stine 1976

10/6 Moral skepticism, McGrath 2008 (skip section 2)

**Paper 1 due in class**

10/11 No class (student holiday)

10/13 Inductive skepticism, Hume 1748

10/18 The new riddle of induction, Goodman 1955

**III. Free Will**

10/20 The consequence argument, Van Inwagen 1975

10/25 The principle of alternative possibilities, Frankfurt 1988a

10/27 Compatibilism: second-order desires, Frankfurt 1988b

**Rewrite due in class**

11/1 Compatibilism: identity and sanity, Wolfe 1987

**IV. Personal Identity**

11/3 The psychological criterion, Locke 1690

11/8 Against the psychological criterion, Reid 1785

11/10 No class (I'm traveling)

11/15 Personal fission, Parfit 1971

11/17 The narrative view, Schechtman 2007

**Paper 2 due in class**

11/22 A feminist critique, James 2008 (skip section 7)

11/24 No class (Thanksgiving break)

**V. Rationality**

11/29 Human foibles, Fine 2005

12/1 Human feats, Pinker 1998

12/6 The right standards..., Hastie & Dawes 2010, Ch. 2

12/8 ...or the wrong ones?, Kelly 2004

12/13 Conclusions (no reading)

**Paper 3 due in class**