PHIL 106: Introduction to Epistemology

Important Details:

106 meets: MWF 1:15 to 2:30 in OU 207
Your host: Dr. Michael P. Wolf
Office: 201 Humphrey House
Phone: 7-7077
E-mail: wolf@kzoo.edu
Office Hours: M 9:00-11:00 and by appointment

Required Texts


Finally, I recommend a short book called How to Get the Most Out of Philosophy, available at Amazon.com. It is not required reading, but it contains a great deal of helpful advice for someone taking their first or second philosophy class.

What Is This Course About?

My aim in this course is to make you do some philosophy. Just what it means to "do some philosophy" is a matter of some debate, though. If you asked twenty philosophers what it means to do philosophy, you would get somewhere between twenty-five and thirty answers. Just which questions are important, and just how we ought to pursue answers for them are not matters on which philosophers agree. The one element that seems to be common to all these conceptions of philosophy seems to be that we must give and ask for reasons for what we believe. We may judge that some reasons are better than others, and so some views may be more plausible to us. Giving and asking for reasons is a practice that belongs to all rational animals - Earthly or extraterrestrial, human or not - and this is what we will focus our attention on this course. The goal of this course is not to provide you with information (names, dates, and famous quotes) that you can recite at cocktail parties for the shareholders of your Fortune 500 Companies in the future, although in many cases, knowing those details is an important part of taking part in the class. Rather, my goal here is to teach you (or improve upon) a certain kind of skill: the skill of giving and asking for reasons, and evaluating the reasons other may give. If you cannot remember who Rene Descartes or John Searle are a year from now, but you can think more clearly about why you do and why should believe something, then the class will be a success.

To this end, I have not tried to make this a survey course of several important philosophical topics. Instead, we will focus on just one philosophical problem - the skeptical problem in the theory of knowledge - and largely on recent accounts of this problem. This allows us to focus on the arguments different philosophers give for their views, and to compare those accounts in a little more depth. (By looking at contemporary accounts, we also eliminate most problems of translation and archaic language.) One reason that I decided to teach a course on the philosophy of mind was because it is a subject that I know a good deal about, but also one in which I am not convinced that there is one definitive account among the current theories that we all must accept. So any of the theories suggested here are fair game for both criticism and defense, so long as you give good reasons to accept or reject them. Just what will count as a good reason is something we will address.

Assessment
Discussion will be an important part of how we run this class, and each member of the class should contribute something over the course of the semester. This is not to say that everyone must speak every day, nor that everyone has to offer some great insight every time they ask a question. The idea is to get you talking, shed your inhibitions about expressing an opinion, and get you accustomed to thinking about how someone might object or reply to what you have to say. To this end, I will assign a handful of short papers - a page at most, something you could write over lunch before class - that will be due for the following class. I will give these assignments in class, I will collect them, and they will count towards your grade. So attendance is not counted towards your grade, but missing classes is likely to hurt you all the same. I will combine all of these factors into a class discussion grade, and it will count for 10% of your final grade. Part of what I will look at in determining this is who contributes to the class discussion board, accessible through the College's web server. Follow the links for "Dr. Wolf's Board" and then look for the section devoted to this class. There will also be days set aside specifically for discussion where we will spend some time in smaller groups and then reconvene. Your attendance and participation will be expected on these days.

You will also have three 1700-2000 word papers to write over the course of the term on topics I will hand out to you in class. These are not meant to be research papers, they are meant to be arguments for a specific position in a particular debate. While you will not be penalized for going to the library and hunting down some additional sources, I believe this will tend to distract you from your real task, and I encourage you not to do it. There will be more information on how to write these papers and what will be expected over the course of the semester. Each of these papers will be worth 30% of your final grade. More information will be made available on this topic before we begin those parts of the course.

I should mention a few things in closing. First, you are of course bound by the honor code here and any form of plagiarism will be severely punished. (Speak to me or consult a student handbook if you are unsure what counts as plagiarism.) This does not mean that you cannot use another source, or discuss and consult with your classmates about your assignments. I permit you to do the former and strongly encourage you to do the latter, so long as all the sources and classmates in question are properly cited in your paper. Finally, be forewarned that I reserve the right to lower the grades of papers given to me whose grammar and spelling do not meet college-level standards.

A Tentative Syllabus

Readings in the Sosa and Kim anthology are followed by "(SK)" and those included as handouts are followed by "(H)."

Class 1. January 2: Introduction

Part 1: Skepticism

Class 2. January 4: What Is Knowledge?
Read Crumley, pp. 35-65 and Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?".

Read Descartes, *Meditations*, especially 1,3 and 5.

**Class 4. January 9:** Descartes's Approach  
Read Descartes, *Meditations*, especially 1,3 and 5.

**Class 5. January 11:** Undermining Descartes's Approach  
Read Descartes, *Meditations*, especially 1,3 and 5.

**Class 6. January 16:** Skepticism About the External World  
Read Stroud, "The Problem of the External World" (SK).

**Class 7. January 18:** Skepticism About the External World  
Read Stroud, "The Problem of the External World" (SK).

**Class 8. January 21:** Global Skepticism?  
Read Unger, "An Argument for Skepticism" (SK).

**Class 9. January 23:** Global Skepticism?  
Read Unger, "An Argument for Skepticism" (SK).

**Class 10. January 25:** Writing a Philosophy Paper  
Read class handouts.

**Class 11. January 28:** Pragmatist Responses  
Read Putnam, "Brains In Vats" (H).

*First Paper Due January 29 - Click here for topics*

**Class 12. January 30:** Pragmatist Responses  
Read Putnam, "Brains In Vats" (H).

**Class 13. February 1:** Skepticism About the Past and Future  
Read Gardner (H) and Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, §2-4*.

**Class 14. February 4:** Skepticism About the Past and Future  
Read Gardner (H) and Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, §2-4*.

**Class 15. February 6:** The Problem of Other Minds  

**Class 16. February 8:** The Problem of Other Minds  

*Part 2: Replies*

**Class 17. February 11:** Foundationalism  
Read Crumley, pp. 93-121 and Chisholm, "The Myth of the Given" (SK).

**Class 18. February 13:** Foundationalism  
Read Crumley, pp. 93-121 and Chisholm, "The Myth of the Given" (SK).
Class 19. February 15: Against Foundationalism
Read Sellars, "Does Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?" (SK).

Class 20. February 18: Against Foundationalism
Read Sellars, "Does Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?" (SK).

Class 21. February 20: Coherence Theories
Read Crumley, pp. 121-57.

Class 22. February 22: Coherence Theories
Read Crumley, pp. 121-57.

Class 23. February 25: Against Coherence
Read Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge" (SK).

Second Paper Due February 25 - Click here for topics

Class 24. February 27: Against Coherence
Read Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge" (SK).

Class 25. March 1: Is the Skeptical Question Intelligible?
Read Wittgenstein, selections from On Certainty (H).

Class 26. March 4: Is the Skeptical Question Intelligible?
Read Wittgenstein, selections from On Certainty (H).

Class 27. March 6: Is the Skeptical Question Intelligible?
Read Stroud (H).

Class 28. March 8: Review (Maybe the Brandom, if there's time)
Read Stroud, maybe Brandom.

Third Paper Due March 13 - Click here for topics