

# Social Philosophy

Mondays at 14:05–16:30, and Wednesdays at 14:05–16:30  
Room 410, Teaching Building 5

Peter Finocchiaro

My office: B502

My office hours: Fridays, 14:00–18:00, and by appointment

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Scan the QR code to add me on WeChat

## Course Description:

Social Philosophy is often taught as a course about how societies should be organized, and students in these courses read some of history’s greatest social theorists – Hobbes, Marx, Kongzi, Foucault, and so on. But Social Philosophy can be so much more than that. In between these grand theories lie a profusion of smaller, but no less interesting, philosophical issues about the social elements of our lives. What determines that this piece of paper is a 5RMB banknote? In what sense can an institution like Wuhan University have a “mission”? Is it possible to have a morally virtuous open relationship? In this course, I will introduce you to these, and other, issues. Along the way, I will help you develop your ability to substantively engage with me and your classmates about these issues. To that end, the primary means of assessment will be two oral exams. (I know that’s scary, but at least there won’t be a term paper!)

**Required Texts:** *An Introduction to Social Philosophy*, by Peter Finocchiaro

**NB:** The textbook is a work in progress.

In addition to reading drafts of the textbook, we will also read several contemporary philosophy articles. I will provide pdf files of all course material.

**Optional Texts:** In addition to the above required material, you may also consider acquiring the following supplementary material: *Socializing Metaphysics*, edited by Frederick F. Schmitt; *Social Epistemology: Essential Readings*, edited by Alvin I. Goldman and Dennis Whitcomb; *After Marriage*, edited by Elizabeth Brake. These books often deviate from what we will discuss in class – that’s why I had to write a textbook, after all! But they can serve as useful background for our class discussions. (I will provide pdf files of these texts if you send me a picture of an ugly cat.)

**Letter Grade Distribution:** In this course I will use the following scale to convert between numerical and letter grades:

96.00 - 100.00	A+	70.00 - 74.99	B-
90.00 - 95.99	A	67.00 - 69.99	C+
85.00 - 89.99	A-	63.00 - 66.99	C
80.00 - 84.99	B+	60.00 - 62.99	C-
75.00 - 79.99	B	00.00 - 59.99	D

**Grade Distribution:** The overall grade is determined by the following:

Participation	20%
In-Class Summaries, Debriefs, Assignments, and So On	20%
Oral Exam (Easy Mode)	20%
Oral Exam (Hard Mode)	40%

### **Course Goals:**

Our goal is help you develop your ability to substantively engage with me and your classmates about a variety of issues relevant to Social Philosophy. In service to that goal, I offer the following five smaller goals:

- (a) to gain familiarity with some topics of interest in Social Philosophy;
- (b) to discover the substantive connections between these topics;
- (c) to develop the ability to (orally) explain the fundamental concepts, positions, and arguments related to (a);
- (d) to develop the ability to (orally) articulate your personal opinions, particularly in connection to (a) and (b);
- (e) to improve your ability to prepare for (oral) conversations involving (c) and (d).

## **Assignments**

### **Participation: ...**

Philosophy is an activity that we do, and active participation in philosophy is the best way to learn to do philosophy. You are expected to interact with me and with other students inside and outside of class. It's important to note, though, that active participation is more than just being vocal; it requires carefully thinking through issues and engaging with peers, often by listening to, supporting, clarifying, or justifying their comments. Doing philosophy is not just about expressing your own ideas, but is just as much about engaging with the ideas of others. Metaphorically speaking, the ideal philosophical discussion is less like a game of ping pong and more like a soccer ("football") match. You will be graded on the extent to which they follow this model of active participation.

## **In-Class Summaries, Debriefs, Assignments, and So On: ...**

Conversations go better when we prepare for them. But you might not know how to prepare for a conversation. (Or, if you do know, you might not want to do it because you find it annoying.) To help you improve your ability to prepare, I will give you a wide variety of in-class assignments. These assignments will typically be short written exercises that ask you to think about the material you are learning and/or the discussion you are having. They will be graded on a “Pass”/“Fail” scale, though I will try to add some additional written feedback.

## **Oral Exam (Easy Mode): ...**

After the 6th week of class, everyone will individually schedule a time to come to my office and take an oral exam. The exam’s format will be as follows: for 12 minutes you will answer, as accurately and concisely as you can, my questions about a single topic. These questions will progress in complexity. (For example: I might begin by asking you for some basic definitions and end by asking you to evaluate an argument.) The topic of your exam will be decided as follows: from the 5 broad topics we cover in class, you will choose 3 to prepare for; then, from those 3, I will choose 1.

This oral exam is the “easy mode” because you will be allowed to use a standard index notecard (127mm x 76mm). This notecard will be prepared by you and will include anything that you want it to include: definitions, formalizations of arguments, words of encouragement, drawings of Tim’s cat, or whatever. You can prepare 1 notecard for each of the 3 topics that you choose.

## **Oral Exam (Hard Mode): ...**

After the 11th week of class, everyone will individually schedule a time to come to my office and take an oral exam. This oral exam will be exactly like the first oral exam. The only difference is that you will not be allowed to use a notecard.

## Reading List and Schedule:

Below is a tentative schedule of the material that we will cover throughout the semester. After Week 6, the reading material is all TBD. That is because I will select the reading material based on what issues you found interesting during the first 6 weeks of class.

### Week 1: Introductions

**Day 1:** Introductions

**Day 2:** *Introduction to Social Philosophy*, Introduction

### Week 2: Social Reality

**Day 3:** *Introduction to Social Philosophy*, Chapter 1

**Day 4:** “Ontology and Social Construction”, by Sally Haslanger

### Week 3: Group Agents

**Day 5:** *Introduction to Social Philosophy*, Chapter 2

**Day 6:** “Who’s to Blame? Collective Responsibility and Its Implications for Group Members” by Margaret Gilbert

### Week 4: Socially Mediated Epistemic Relations

**Day 7:** *Introduction to Social Philosophy*, Chapter 3

**Day 8:** “Wikipistemology” by Don Fallis

### Week 5: Social Construction

**Day 9:** *Introduction to Social Philosophy*, Chapter 4

**Day 10:** “Grounding and Anchoring”, i.e. Chapter 6 of Brian Epstein’s *The Ant Trap: Rebuilding the Foundations of the Social Sciences*

### Week 6: Interpersonal Relationships

**Day 11:** *Introduction to Social Philosophy*, Chapter 5

**Day 12:** “Modal Monogamy” by Carrie Jenkins

### Week 7: Social Reality, Revisited

**Day 13:** TBD

**Day 14:** TBD

### Week 8: Groups, Revisited

**Day 15:** TBD

**Day 16:** TBD

**Week 9:** Socially Mediated Epistemic Relations, Revisited

**Day 17:** TBD

**Day 18:** TBD

**Week 10:** Social Construction, Revisited

**Day 19:** TBD

**Day 20:** TBD

**Week 11:** Interpersonal Relationships, Revisited

**Day 21:** TBD

**Day 22:** TBD

(**NB:** if you send me a picture of East Lake during a sunrise or a sunset, I will give you 1 extra credit point.)