

Philosophical English

Tuesdays, 14:05–16:30

Teaching Building 6, Room 102

Peter Finocchiaro

My office: Zhenhua Building, B502

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

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Scan the QR code to add me on WeChat

Course Description:

Our central goal in this course is to cultivate your ability to hold a productive philosophical conversation in English. To that end, I divide this course into three parts. In the first part, you will learn the “tools” of philosophy, focusing especially on the structure of philosophical arguments and the appropriate “moves” in a philosophical conversation. In the second part, you will learn some key ideas in the so-called “core” areas of analytic philosophy (including epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and political philosophy). In the third part, you will learn some key ideas in more specialized topics (including decision theory, the philosophy of science, the history of philosophy, and conceptual engineering). Your participation in this course will center around oral conversations and short written exercises. (There will not be a final term paper.) In addition, because this course is an “introduction” to professional Anglophone philosophy, we will also occasionally discuss questions about how to do philosophy professionally.

Text: *For the Sake of Argument: How to Do Philosophy* by Robert M. Martin

In addition to reading portions of the above “textbook”, we will also read eight articles. These articles are seminal works in contemporary Anglophone philosophy; anyone who wants to do philosophy should be familiar with them. These articles will act as introductions to the philosophical ideas that we will cover.

I will provide PDF files of all course material, including that of the text mentioned above.

A note about the reading: I understand that reading English-language philosophy can be difficult. I also understand that students differ with respect to their experience with reading English-language philosophy. That’s okay! But I do expect you to dedicate a certain level of time and effort to reading the material I assign. To structure this expectation, each week I will provide four “levels” of reading assignments that differ with respect to how long and complex the reading material is.

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: Your overall grade is calculated as follows:

Debriefs	Ungraded
Participation	22%
Exercises	33% (3% each)
Podcasts	45% (15% each)

Course Goals:

As I said above, our goal in this course is to cultivate your ability to hold a productive philosophical conversation in English. I think it is helpful to divide this goal into two smaller goals. In other words, in order to hold a productive philosophical conversation in English, you need to: (i) understand the key philosophical ideas, and (ii) be fluent in holding a productive conversation. Below, I dissect these complex abilities into smaller, more “visible” components. This dissection will (I hope!) aid us in the direction of your learning as well as the measurement of your growth.

(i) An understanding of a key philosophical idea requires:

- the ability to succinctly explain the idea;
- the ability to explain how (Anglophone) philosophers utilize the idea;
- the ability to explain how non-philosophers may utilize the idea.

(ii) A fluency in verbally discussing philosophical questions (in English) requires:

- an awareness of the discussion’s topic, including an awareness of what is *off* topic;
- the ability to actively listen to and understand what is said by your interlocutor;
- a willingness to seek clarification when appropriate;
- the ability to make lucid contributions to the discussion.

Assignments

Debriefs: At the end of every class session, you will write a short ungraded “debrief” about that class. In your debrief, you will answer two questions: (1) what part of the class did you find the most interesting? (2) what part of the class did you find unclear or would like clarification on? You will share these debriefs with me. I will then use the debriefs to identify topics that we

can review together (either because many people in the class find the topic interesting or because many people in the class would like clarification).

Exercises: Every week, I will give you exercises to complete for homework. These exercises will focus on the philosophical tools and ideas that we are discussing during that week. For some of these exercises, you will complete them on your own. For others, you will complete them with other students. I will grade these exercises on a “ ✓- / ✓ / ✓+ ” scale. I will also give you feedback on which parts of the exercises you did well and which parts of the exercises could be improved.

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 you follow this model of active participation.

Podcasts: You will collaborate with other students in small groups to make and record a 10-minute philosophical conversation. Your group may choose their own topic to discuss or they may choose to have a topic assigned by me. Ideally, the conversation will address issues covered in class, issues relevant to current events or culture, or issues connected to your own philosophical interests. These conversations will be recorded and emailed to me. Overall, you will complete three podcasts, each with the **different** group of students.

Reading List and Schedule:

Below is a tentative schedule of the material that we will cover throughout the semester.

Acronyms:

- “FSA” = *For the Sake of Argument: How to Do Philosophy* by Robert M. Martin

Unit 1: “The Tools of Philosophy”

Week 1: Necessary and sufficient conditions; objections vs. counter-arguments

Main: FSA Introduction; FSA Chapter 1; FSA Chapter 2

Supplemental: FSA Chapter 3

Week 2: Formalizing arguments; deductive arguments; validity and soundness

Main: FSA Chapter 5;

Supplemental: FSA Chapter 4, FSA Chapter 6

Week 3: Inductive arguments; arguments by analogy; inference to the best explanation

Main: FSA Chapter 11

Supplemental: FSA Chapters 7–10

Assignment: Podcast #1

Deadline: 8 March 2022, by 23:59 CST

Unit 2: “Core Areas of Analytic Philosophy”

Week 4: Epistemology

Main: James’s “Will to Believe”

Supplemental: Hieronymi’s “Responsibility for Believing”; Jackson’s “Belief, Credence, and Faith”

Week 5: Metaphysics

Main: Lewis and Lewis’s “Holes”

Supplemental: van Inwagen’s “Quine’s 1946 Lecture on Nominalism”; Korman and Carmichael’s “What Do the Folk Think about Composition and Does It Matter?”

Week 6: Ethics

Main: Singer’s “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”

Supplemental: Hooker’s “Introduction to Rule-Consequentialism”; Zagzebski’s “Exemplarist Virtue Theory”

Week 7: Political Philosophy

Main: Rawls’s “Justice as Fairness”

Supplemental: Buchak’s “Taking Risks Behind the Veil of Ignorance”; Besch’s “On Political Legitimacy, Reasonableness, and Perfectionism”

Assignment: Podcast #2

Deadline: 5 April 2022, by 23:59 CST

Unit 3: “Specialized Topics”

Week 8: Decision Theory and Collective Intentionality

Main: List’s “Group Knowledge and Group Rationality”

Supplemental: Bratman’s “Sociality and Planning Agency”; Gilbert’s “Who’s to Blame?”

Week 9: Philosophy of Science

Main: Bortolotti’s “Doctors Without Disorders”

Supplemental: Gutting’s “Scientific Realism versus Constructive Empiricism: A Dialogue”; Kourany’s “Should Some Knowledge be Forbidden?”

Week 10: History of Philosophy

Main: Normore's "The Methodology of the History of Philosophy"

Supplemental: Van Norden's "A Manifesto for Multicultural Philosophy"; McDaniel's "A Philosophical Model of the Relation between Things in Themselves and Appearances"

Week 11: Conceptual Engineering

Main: Cappelen's *Fixing Language*, Chapter 2

Supplemental: Dembroff's "What Is Sexual Orientation?" Cappelen's *Fixing Language*, Chapter 4;

Assignment: Podcast #3

Deadline: 3 May 2022, by 23:59 CST

(**NB:** if you take a picture of someone fishing at East Lake and send it to me before the end of Unit 1, I will give you 1 extra credit point.)