

# Social Philosophy

Mondays at 09:50–12:15, and Wednesdays at 09:50–12:15  
Room 409, Teaching Building 5

Peter Finocchiaro

My office: B502

My office hours: Thursdays (14:00–16:00) and by appointment

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## Course Description:

Social Philosophy is often taught as a course about grand social theories that analyze entire societies into their most fundamental elements. In such courses, students learn about the theories of Hobbes, Marx, Kongzi, Foucault, and so on. But Social Philosophy can be so much more than that. In between these grand theories lies a profusion of smaller philosophical issues. What determines that this piece of paper is a 100 RMB banknote? What's the difference between two people walking together and two people merely walking side-by-side? Is it possible to have a morally virtuous open relationship? In this course, I will introduce you to these smaller issues. I will also help you develop your ability to substantively engage with me and your classmates about these issues. Why? Because I think these issues are excellent objects of inquiry; by studying them, you will have a richer foundation upon which you can build your own understanding of society, grand or otherwise.

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

**NB:** This 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; *The Routledge Handbook of Social and Political Philosophy of Language*, edited by Justin Khoo and Rachel Sterken. 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 one of these texts if you send me a picture of an ugly cat; four pictures gets you four PDFs.)

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

Participation	30%
Debriefs	10%
Oral Exam (Easy Mode)	20%
Oral Exam (Hard Mode)	40%

**Course Goals:** My 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 own ideas, 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 you follow this model of active participation.

**Debriefs:** ...

At the end of every class session, you will write a short "debrief" about that class. In your debrief, you will answer two questions: (1) what part of that day's class session did you find the most interesting? (2) what part of that day's class session 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).

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

After the sixth 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 a definition of a simple concept and end by asking you to introduce an argument, explain it, and provide your own evaluation of it.) The topic of your exam will be decided as follows: from the five broad topics we cover in class, you will choose three to prepare for; then, from those three, I will choose one to base my questions on.

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 of concepts, formalizations of arguments, words of encouragement, drawings of Da's puppy, or whatever. You can prepare one notecard for each of the three topics that you choose.

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

After the eleventh 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 six weeks of class.

### **Week 1: Introductions**

**Day 1:** Introduction of me, you, and the course (no reading)

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

### **Week 2: Social Realism**

**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 Building

**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 Realism, Revisited

**Day 13:** TBD

**Day 14:** TBD

**Week 8:** Group Agents, Revisited

**Day 15:** TBD

**Day 16:** TBD

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

**Day 17:** TBD

**Day 18:** TBD

**Week 10:** Social Building, Revisited

**Day 19:** TBD

**Day 20:** TBD

**Week 11:** Interpersonal Relationships, Revisited

**Day 21:** TBD

**Day 22:** TBD

(**NB:** if you take a picture of yourself and East Lake during a sunrise or a sunset and send it to me before your first oral exam, I will give you 1 extra credit point.)