

# Philosophical English

Monday, 9:50–12:15

Zhenhua Building B102

Peter Finocchiaro

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My office hours: Monday, 2:00–3:00 and Tuesday, 2:00–3:00

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## Course Description:

Our central goal in this course is to cultivate the ability to hold a productive philosophical conversation. There are many ways to hold a productive philosophical conversation, but for practical reasons we will focus on conversations within Anglophone philosophy. We will closely examine influential works of the Western canon, including those of Plato, Anselm, and Hume. While we will come to these texts on our own terms, we will also observe how they represent the concerns of Anglophone philosophy. Consequently, our class sessions will feature a mix of discussion and lecturing. Our assignments (two papers and two conversational “podcasts”) will assess our ability to relate the material to our own perspectives.

**Texts:** *The Trial and Death of Socrates* by Plato (Grube/Cooper translation); *The Republic* by Plato (Reeve translation); *Basic Writings* by Anselm of Canterbury (Williams translation); *Predestination, God’s Foreknowledge, and Future Contingents* by William of Ockham (Adams/Kretzmann translation); *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume II* by René Descartes (Cottingham/Stoothoff/Murdoch translation); *Two Treatises of Government* by John Locke (Laslett edition); *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* by David Hume (Beauchamp edition)

In addition to the above historical texts, we will read portions of the following contemporary texts: *An Essay on Free Will* by Peter van Inwagen; *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* by Robert Nozick; *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast* by Nelson Goodman

We will also read several contemporary philosophy articles. I will provide pdf files of all course material, including those of the texts mentioned above.

**A note about the reading:** For each class session, I will come prepared to discuss a specific aspect of the reading assigned for that day. That being said, in each class session we are free to explore whatever issues come to mind. Everyone should, therefore, read all of the assigned material.

**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	10%
Podcasts	20%
Critical Paper	30%
Comparative Paper	40%

### Course Goals:

As said above, our central goal in this course is to cultivate the ability to hold a productive philosophical conversation with Anglophone philosophers. I think it is helpful to break down this large goal into smaller, more concrete goals. To that end, in this course we will:

- gain familiarity with the Western philosophical tradition;
- gain familiarity with the topics of interest to Anglophone philosophers;
- gain familiarity with Western methods of reasoning and argumentation;
- improve our ability to discuss complex philosophical ideas,
  - verbally
  - and in writing.

## Assignments

**Participation:** Philosophy is an activity that we do, and active participation in philosophy is the best way to learn to do philosophy. Each student is 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. Each student will be graded on the extent to which they follow this model of active participation.

**Podcasts:** Students will collaborate in small groups to produce 10 minutes of philosophical conversation that connects the material to current events or culture. These conversations will be recorded, sent to me, and graded on the extent to which they demonstrate (i) familiarity of the material discussed, (ii) ability to prioritize material, and (iii) skill in reasoning, argumentation, and active participation. Students will be guided through the first of these podcasts. Overall, students will complete two podcasts, each with a different group.

**Papers:** Each student will write two papers for this course. These papers may be done in any order and submitted at any time during the semester – but both must be submitted by the final deadline. One paper will be a shorter critical response to a reading. The other paper will be a longer “comparative” paper. This second paper will develop an idea or argument from the reading and relate it to something familiar (Chinese philosophy, pop culture, etc.). Students are free to choose their own topic or have one assigned, but in either case each student must meet with me in advance to discuss their papers.

## Reading List and Schedule:

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

**Week 1 – Introduction:** No reading

**Week 2 – The Value of Philosophy:** *The Apology*; “Why Study Philosophy?”

**Week 3 – Justice:** *The Republic*, Books I–V; “Socrates’ Refutation of Thrasymachus”

**Week 4 – The Self:** *The Republic*, Books VI–X; “Selflessness and the Loss of Self”

**Week 5 – The Existence of God:** *Proslogion*; “Three Versions of the Ontological Argument”

**Week 6 – Free Will:** *Predestination, God’s Foreknowledge, and Future Contingents; An Essay on Free Will*, Chapter III

**Week 7 – Skepticism:** *Meditations on First Philosophy*, First–Third; “Proof of an External World”

**Week 8 – Mind and Body:** *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Fourth–Sixth; “Causal Closure Principles and Emergentism”

**Week 9 – Natural Rights:** *Second Treatise of Government*, especially Chapters I–XII; *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Chapters I–III

**Week 10 – Empiricism:** *Enquiry on Human Understanding*, Sections 1–4; “Epiphenomenal Qualia”

**Week 11 – Inductive Reasoning:** *Enquiry on Human Understanding*, Sections 5–12; *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*, Chapter III