

# Introduction to Philosophy

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Office Hours: After class and by appointment

## Course Description

This course will offer a problem-based introduction to philosophy. We will consider the following philosophical questions: What can we know about the world external to our senses? What can we know about the thoughts and feelings of others? What is the relationship between our minds and our brains? What makes certain sounds and inscriptions meaningful, while most other sounds and inscriptions are not? Can we have free will in a causally determined world governed by natural laws? What makes an action right or wrong? What does justice require of us? What is the evil of death? What is the meaning of life? The course aims to motivate these questions and introduce students to the methods of contemporary analytic philosophy.

## Readings

Please buy *What Does It All Mean?* by Thomas Nagel. Other readings will be available through LATTE.

## Requirements

- First Paper (3-4 pages) 20%
- Second Paper (3-4 pages) 20%
- Midterm Exam 15%
- Final Exam 20%
- Participation 25%

Course attendance is required. To pass the course, students must complete all written assignments.

## Laptop Policy

Please do not use laptops or other screens in class! They distract other students, you and me.

## Four-Credit Course

Success in this 4 credit hour course is based on the expectation that students should expect to complete three hours of work for every class contact hour (readings, papers, discussion sections, preparation for exams, etc.).

## Disability

If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis and need to have special accommodations for this class, please see me immediately.

## **Learning Goals**

The course aims to help students develop the skills to identify arguments and their parts (premises, conclusions and assumptions), to structure, defend and criticize arguments, to use conceptual tools to assess arguments, and to use and evaluate arguments by thought experiment.

The course also aims to provide students with a general overview of the main fields of contemporary analytic philosophy: epistemology, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, metaethics, ethics, political philosophy, metaphysics and philosophical methodology. Students will learn the views and arguments of at least one important approach to each of these fields.

Finally, the course aims to provide students with a basic understanding of two important approaches to the theory of justice (utilitarianism and Rawls's theory) and it aims to provide students with an opportunity to reflect on the requirements of social justice that we are subject to.

For more information, see the Philosophy Department's learning goals at:  
<http://www.brandeis.edu/departments/philosophy/undergrad/learninggoals.html>

## **Academic Dishonesty**

Academic Dishonesty will be reported to the Department of Student Development and Conduct. Students are responsible to inform themselves about what constitutes dishonesty. If in doubt, please ask me! Here are some basic principles:

- Representing others' words as one's own constitutes academic dishonesty. One represents others' words as one's own if one uses a formulation that someone else came up with without putting it in quotation marks and attributing it to the author.
- Copying and pasting formulations found on the internet, without attributing them and citing the relevant webpage, is a particularly egregious form of academic dishonesty.
- Communicating with others during an exam about anything that pertains to the subject matter of the course also constitutes academic dishonesty.

Note, however, that it is *not* dishonest to have others read your papers and give you feedback on them. The writing and formulations, however, must be your own.

More information about what constitutes academic dishonesty can be found here:  
<http://www.brandeis.edu/studentaffairs/srcs/index.html>

## Schedule of Readings and Assignments

6/4 – Introduction and Skepticism

Nagel, *What Does It All Mean?* Ch.1-2

Descartes, *Meditation I*

6/5 – Putnam on Skepticism

Putnam, “Brains in a Vat”

6/7 – Skepticism cont’d.

6/11 – Other Minds

Nagel, *What Does It All Mean?* Ch.3

Descartes, *Meditation II*

6/12 – cont’d.

Ryle. “Descartes’s Myth,” *The Concept of Mind*, ch. 1

6/14 – The Mind-Body Problem

Nagel, *What Does It All Mean?* Ch.4

Nagel. “What is it like to be a bat?”

6/15 *First Paper Due*

6/18 – The Meaning of Words

Nagel, *What Does It All Mean?* Ch.5

Grice, “Meaning”

6/19 – Language in Conversation

Grice, “Logic and Conversation”

6/21 – Free Will

Nagel, *What Does It All Mean?* Ch.6

Frankfurt. “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person”

6/25 – Right and Wrong

Nagel, *What Does It All Mean?* Ch.7

Peter Singer. “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”

6/26 – cont’d

Onora O’Neill. “Kantian Approaches to Some Famine Problems.”

Susan Wolf. “Moral Saints.”

6/28 *Midterm*

6/28 – Feminist Social Critique

Sally Haslanger, “‘But Mom, Crop-Tops are Cute!’ Social Knowledge, Social Structure and Ideology Critique”

7/2 – Justice

Nagel, *What Does It All Mean?* Ch.8

Rawls. *A Theory of Justice*, selections

7/3 Death and the Meaning of Life

Nagel, *What Does It All Mean?* Ch.9-10

Yourgrau, “The Dead”

Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus”

7/5 or 7/6 *Second Paper Due*

7/5 or 7/6 *Final Exam*