PHIL100 (03): Introduction to Philosophy

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Course Description

As the title suggests, this course is an introduction to philosophy. We'll think about four big philosophical ideas: ethics (what should we do?), ontology (what is there?), epistemology (how do we know things?), and politics (how should we organize ourselves?)—and then read and talk about current philosophical issues.

Course Goals

- To improve your *reading* ability. You'll probably find some of the texts we're reading easy, and some of the others quite difficult. By the end of the semester, you should find the difficult ones a bit easier: you'll know more about the history of philosophy, so you'll have more background knowledge for any future readings; and you'll have practiced reading philosophical works, so you'll be able to spot what's most important in whatever you're reading.
- To improve your *writing* ability. No matter what you end up doing after college, you'll need to be able to write well. We'll talk a lot about structuring your essays, making arguments, polishing your prose, and redrafting your papers.
- To improve your *thinking*. I'll ask you to summarize difficult philosophical arguments, and I'll ask you to make difficult arguments of your own. I'm not doing this to make your life harder; I'm doing it because thinking along with philosophers helps improve everyone's ways of thinking.
- Most importantly, to help you enjoy reading and thinking about philosophy.

Required Texts

All texts are available as PDFs on Blackboard. Print them off and bring them to class! I know this will hurt your printing budget, but consider that the other option is a textbook that costs $150 *and* is boring. This way is much cheaper, lets you spread the spending out over the semester, and cuts down on waste (because nobody ever uses more than half a textbook anyway).

Course Requirements and Grading

The requirements for this course are:

- Consistent preparation for, and participation in, class. This includes completing assigned readings. Write down your questions or thoughts about the text we're reading; I will call on people randomly in class, and even if you're really uncomfortable talking in class, you can read something out easily enough (30% of your grade).
- Three four-page papers. At least one of them must be on 'Ethics' or 'Ontology,' because I need to get a paper from you early in the semester. Each paper is worth 17.5% of your grade.
- However! The grading is not like in most classes. I'm not looking for great papers immediately; I'm looking for improvement over the course of the semester. When I return your first paper, my comments will ask you to work on *one or two* things, in particular, on your second paper (your introduction, or your paragraphing, or your argument…). On the second paper, I will grade you based on how much you improved on *that* aspect of your work.
- Late papers will lose half a grade per day. If you don't complete these requirements by the end of semester, you will fail the class.

Class Policies

Electronics: No laptops or tablets; cell-phones on silent (*not* vibrate) and in your bags. Come to class on time; if you're consistently late, you'll lose half a grade. If you're absent, you'll need a doctor's note to explain why. More than three unexcused absences will result in a half grade penalty; more than seven results in a failing grade. All work is to be emailed to me by the dates listed in the class schedule.

It is university policy to provide, on a flexible and individualized basis, reasonable accommodations to students who have disabilities. Students are encouraged to contact Student Disability Services to discuss their individualized needs for accommodation. If you have a documented learning disability or other condition that may affect academic performance in this course you should make sure this documentation is on file with the Office of Disability Services (SUB I, Room 2500; 993-2474, ods.gmu.edu) to determine the accommodations you will need; and talk with me to discuss your accommodation needs. And if you just feel overwhelmed, let me know, and we'll work out a way through the mess. There's always a way.

Plagiarism

For the purposes of this course, plagiarism is using "words, opinion, or factual information from another person without giving that person credit. Writers [must] give credit through the use of accepted documentation styles, such as parenthetical citation, footnotes, or endnotes; a simple listing of books and articles is not sufficient" (General Education Course Guidebook, slightly modified). Should you ever be tempted to plagiarize, remember two things: first, if you're caught, you'll fail the assignment and in all likelihood the course, and you might very well have to go before the Academic Integrity Council. Second, I read tens of thousands of pages every year, and I infallibly know when you're using someone else's words. And, thanks to the wonders of the internet, I can prove it. So, if you're considering plagiarizing, do yourself a favor, and email me to ask what you might be able to do instead.

Course Outline

We start the course with a unit on ethics and human nature in classical Chinese philosophy. The most famous Chinese philosopher—perhaps the most famous philosopher of all—is **Confucius**. He argued that right action is in accordance with the rites; he lived during a time of war and upheaval, and was looking for ways to create a stable society. He thought he'd found it: respect your elders, particularly your parents; be polite; speak the truth, usually. That might sound boring or obvious, but he does a lot of really interesting things with those principles! **Mozi** argued, against Confucius, that we should care for everyone equally, rather than caring more for our family; and that many of the things Confucians favored—elaborate funerals, lots of music—were wasteful, and that that money should be put to more useful purposes. **Yangism** was an answer to both of these arguments; for these philosophers, you do *and should* care not for your family, or for all equally, but only, or mostly, about yourself. **Mencius** was a later Confucian philosopher, who tried to answer Mozi's arguments; he favored partiality to your family, elaborate funerals, music and so on. He also argued, famously, that people are basically good, but that they can be corrupted. **Xunzi** argued against Mencius: he thought human beings were basically evil, but could be reformed by standard Confucian means: respect, funerals, music and so on.

Next, we talk about ontology in ancient Greek philosophy. These philosophers were trying to explain what exists. **Heraclitus** thought everything was made of ever-changing fire, and would eventually burn out, only to burst back into flame: look around, and you'll kind of see what he means. Everything dies or is destroyed, then things grow or are made. But **Parmenides** disagreed. He argued

that there was no change at all. If that sounds ridiculous, wait until you read his arguments, which are actually really hard to disprove. Greek then philosophers tried to find ways to have it both ways: good arguments, which explained why there is change. **Plato** suggested that the ever-changing world we see wasn't as real as the really real 'forms' (or 'ideas'). The forms are real, and what we see is just a copy or approximation of the forms, which are... well, it isn't clear where they are. **Aristotle** argued, instead, that everything is made up of matter and form: the form stays the same, but the matter changes. So, I am still me, even though all the stuff that makes me up—skin, bone, not much muscle, not much fat—has been replaced many times since I was born. Finally, **Epicurus** was an atomist: he thought that what really existed was little bits of different shaped stuff. This is a bit like what scientists think now, but certainly there are weird differences. As you read all of these very odd ideas, be generous: try to see what they're trying to explain, rather than just thinking "That's ridiculous: the world is not made of fire." Which is not to say that that idea isn't ridiculous.

Our third unit looks at philosophers who argued about different ways of knowing, and, in particular, different ways of knowing God (even if you're not interested in God, these readings are still full of interesting questions about how we come to know things; so, if you prefer, read them with an eye to those issues). **Saadia** was a Jewish philosopher who lived in the ninth and tenth centuries in the middle east. He argued that Jews should believe in God, but that scripture alone wasn't as good as scripture plus philosophy. **Ghazali** lived in the eleventh century, mostly in what is now Iran. He argued that only scripture could teach us about God. He was, though, an excellent philosopher himself, and made many arguments against earlier Muslim thinkers who had praised philosophy. **Averroes** lived just after Ghazali, but in what is now Spain. He argued, against Ghazali, that philosophy was not just useful for knowing God, but that the Quran requires all Muslims to study philosophy, if they are able to do so. **Aquinas**, a thirteenth century philosopher from Italy, was influenced by Aristotle, and wanted to prove to Christians—as Averroes had done to Muslims—that philosophy was a good thing for Christians to read and practice.

Next, we move to modern philosophy, particularly looking at societies and states. **Hobbes** famously argued that life without a state was nasty, brutish and short; he argued that states come into being when people voluntarily give many of their natural rights, and set above them a sovereign who will protect them from the brutishness. **Locke** had a much happier understanding of human nature, but likewise argued that states could be trace back to original contracts between people, but in his version the people have a contract with the sovereign as well, not just between themselves—so while Hobbes sees the sovereign as above the law (or perhaps just as the law), Locke argued that people

could overthrow the sovereign if it wasn't doing its job. This might have had some influence on the American founding. **Hume** was rather skeptical of these 'social contract' theories, and wrote quite well about why. But that didn't stop people using the idea. **Rousseau**, who famously met and irritated Hume, developed a broader understanding of the contract, and came up with the idea of the 'general will.' For him, the contract is just between people, and the sovereign just does represent the 'general will' of the people. It's not clear how that's meant to work. **Hegel**, like Hume, criticizes social contract theories, largely because they don't paint a true picture of human social life. **Marx** followed Hegel in this (and added in what he learned from **Smith**), to argue that human societies area more than just political entities, and that they aren't necessarily just or fair: indeed, he argues, they're mostly not.

Finally, we'll read some recent philosophy (and, *finally*, philosophy by women: there were female philosophers before the twentieth century, but often their works were ignored. Women are, of course, just as good at philosophy as men, when they're given the chance to do it; hopefully this unit proves that!) **Beauvoir** is most famous for her book, *The Second Sex*, which had a big influence on later twentieth century feminist movements; but we'll be reading a chapter from her work on ethics. She describes existentialist ethics not in terms of moral rules, but ways of life; you might find yourself among her list. **Weil** went to college with Beauvoir, but led a very different life. Her 'Needs of the Soul' is an attempt to explain what people need to live decent lives. **Anscombe** is best known for her book *Intention*, and that topic is important for the essay we're reading. In it, Anscombe tries to suggest a problem with the most widespread ontology today (among philosophers): scientific materialism, the idea that the only thing that exists is material stuff. So, for instance, 'mind' just is what the brain does. But, she suggests, this is a mistake. **Rose**, like Weil, had an unconventional career: she always seemed to be thinking about unfashionable things (philosophy has trends like everything else). We're reading a bit of her memoir, which will hopefully give you some insight into what it's like to be a philosopher. The course ends with a viewing of a documentary about **Hannah Arendt**, whose *Origins of Totalitarianism* is very fashionable at the moment (she would find that immensely irritating). Arendt wrote about a lot of different things; aside from her work on totalitarianism, she is best known for her theories about how societies function, and her very controversial *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

And that's it! If you find anything interesting during the semester, or want to learn more about one of the topics we've covered, just let me know. I absolutely love giving out book recommendations (and receiving them!)

Class Schedule

August

T29: Class introduction

Th31: **Reading philosophy**. Reading Confucius in class.

September

T5: **Ethics and Human Nature in Classical Chinese Philosophy**: Confucius continued

Th7: Mozi, 39.1-8; 4; 7; 11; 16; 36.

T12: 'Yangism,' as seen in *Chuang Tzu*: 'Webbed Toes' and 'Robber Chih'; as seen in *Mozi*: 46.18.

Th14: Mencius IA1; IB1; IIA 6; IIIA5; IIIB1, 8, 9; IVA1, 27; IVB11, 13, 19, 28, 32, 33; VIA1-6, 10, 11; VIB4; VIIA1-3, 26; VIIB26, 31, 33.

T19: Xunzi, pp 248-252; 271-272; 284-291.

Th21: **Ontology in Classical Greek Philosophy**: Heraclitus and Parmenides

T26: Plato, *Republic* selections. ***Ethics paper due.***

Th28: Aristotle, *Categories* 5; *Physics* I 1, 2, 7, 8, 9; *Metaphysics* 1086.

October

T3: Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*

Th5: **Knowing God – Faith and Reason**: Saadia Gaon, *Book of Doctrines and Beliefs* pp 1-11, 16-17 (start at "6 If one asks…"), 19 ("We cannot avoid…")-20.

T10: No class; Monday timetable.

Th12: Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error* pp 17-25; 27-42; 59-68. ***Ontology paper due***.

T17: Averroes, *Decisive Treatise* ¶1-22, 39-75.

Th19: Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* chapters 1-8.

T24: **The Social Contract, the State, and Modern Society**: Hobbes, *Leviathan* 183-191, 223-238

Th26: Locke, *Second Treatise* ¶4-8, 95-99, 113-131. Hume, 'Of the Original Contract' pp 274-280 (stop at 'Athens'), 286-289 ('All moral duties…' to 'may be pleased') **(26th) *Knowing God paper due***.

T31: Rousseau, *Social Contract* I.i, ii, v, vi, vii, viii. II.i, ii, iii, iv. III xvi, xvii, xviii.

November

Th2: Hegel, *Philosophy of Right* ¶72-75, 182-188, 256-265

T7: Smith, *Wealth of Nations* 1-2; 7-9; 15-20. Marx, *Marx Engels Reader* 18-21; 143-145; 222-223.

Th9: Marx, *MER* 148-163

T14: **Modern Life**: Beauvoir *Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp 35-58 [Stop at 'adventurer!']

Th16: *Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp 58-73. ***Social Contract paper due***.

T21: Simone Weil, 'Needs of the Soul'

Th23: Thanksgiving

T28: G. E. M. Anscombe, 'Analytical Philosophy and the Spirituality of Man'

Th30: Gillian Rose, *Love's Work* selections

December

T5: Arendt Documentary

Th7: Arendt Documentary

M11: Reading Day ***Modern Life paper due***.