

PHIL 1: Problems of Philosophy

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Class: MW 11:00–12:15, PR 202
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Course description

This course is an introduction to philosophy. In the coming weeks we will discuss some of the classic problems of philosophy and read some of the best work philosophers have done on these problems. The goal of this course is to help you develop well-justified positions on important human questions using the tools of analytic philosophy.

Materials

There is not textbook for this course; all of the readings will be made available on Sakai. Because we will be discussing the readings in detail in class, you must always bring a copy of the day's reading to class with you, in whatever format is most convenient. You should also check the course page on Sakai regularly (at least every other day) so that you're aware of any updates.

Accessibility

Pomona College is committed to making all courses accessible for everyone. If you need academic accommodations, please contact the Dean of Students office and visit the [accommodation services page](#) for more information about how the accommodation process works. I encourage you to come talk to me about your accommodations. As a Pomona faculty member, I am dedicated to supporting all students in my courses and making this course accessible for everyone.

Evaluation

The readings for this course will introduce you to some of the central questions and arguments in philosophy; the assignments will introduce you to some of the central skills and methods. We'll work on two categories of skills: philosophical conversation and philosophical writing.

One third of your grade will be determined by exercises that will be due most days of class. These exercises will usually be designed to help you work on your skill at philosophical discussion. For example, some days there will be reading quizzes and some days you'll be asked to turn in a question about the reading. But we'll also use them to work on writing: sometimes you'll turn in a draft of an upcoming paper. These assignments will be turned in at the beginning of class on the day they are due. They will be graded pass/fail, and 3 missed or failed exercises will be dropped. So, for example, if there are 20 exercises, and you miss 2 and fail 3, then your exercise grade will be 15/17. If there are 20 and you pass all of them, your exercise grade will be 17/17.

The next third of your grade will be determined by papers written during the term. These will be part of a "levels system" invented by Dustin Locke, a professor at CMC. This system is modeled on levels systems in video games, and is designed to make every assignment challenging enough to be interesting without being too difficult. At each level you'll also be focusing on one aspect of philosophical writing, which will help you prepare for writing your final paper (the last third of your grade). You will have 5 opportunities to level up by turning in a written assignment. Each assignment will deal with one of the readings that we discussed after the last opportunity, and the details will depend on the level you're on:

Level 1 An expository paper of 150–300 words. You will choose one argument and explain it.

Level 2 An expository paper of 400–600 words. You will choose two related arguments from the readings, explain them, and explain their relationship. You might choose an argument that objects to another argument, or an argument that supports another argument, or something else along these lines. This paper should have an introduction that tells the reader what the paper will be about, followed by the explanation of the two arguments and their relationship.

Level 3 An expository and critical paper of 700–1000 words. You will choose two related arguments from the readings, explain them, explain their relationship, and argue that one of the arguments is unsound. This paper should have an introduction that tells the reader what the paper will be about, followed by the explanation of the two arguments and their relationship. You should then present an original criticism to one of the arguments (i.e., not an objection from the readings) and defend your objection against potential objections.

These assignments will be submitted to Sakai. Each of your level-up attempts will receive one of four evaluations: ‘not much progress’, ‘good attempt’, ‘almost’, or ‘complete’. Your levels grade will then be determined by the level and evaluation of the last written assignment you submit:

Level 3	Complete	A	Almost	A-	Good attempt	B+	Not much progress	B
Level 2	Complete	B-	Almost	C+	Good attempt	C	Not much progress	C-
Level 1	Complete	D	Almost	D-	Good attempt	F	Not much progress	F

The last third of your grade will be determined by a final paper, also submitted to Sakai on December 12 by noon. The structure of this paper will be the same as a Level 3 paper, but will be graded on the standard letter grade scale. In this paper you may discuss any two related arguments from this course that you have not written about. So you may write about the arguments we discuss in the last three weeks of class, but you may also write about any of the arguments we discussed in the fifth week of class, as long as you didn’t write about those arguments in your second Levels paper.

Late work policy

Exercises are due at the beginning of class on the day they are due, and late submissions will not be accepted. For your levels papers, you have a “bank” of extension time consisting of four 12-hour units. You can extend the due date of any of these by 12 hours up to four times. There are no penalties or bonuses for how you use this time, and you don’t need to tell me ahead of time that you will be using it. You can only use this extension time on assignments submitted to Sakai, which will record your submission time so we can both keep track of what extension time you use. If you get sick or have an accident or other emergency, you should get in touch with me.

Academic integrity

We will all be committed to the standards of academic honesty in this course, especially those laid out in [Pomona College’s policies on Academic Standards](#).

Schedule

For the first two weeks of the course, before the first level-up opportunity, we will be thinking about death. Is death bad? Would there be any downsides to extending our lifespan? What if we could achieve immortality—would that be good, or would it be horribly boring? For the first few meetings we will be discussing some answers to these questions that philosophers have argued for, and your first levels paper will deal with one of these arguments.

You will choose the topics that we discuss for the rest of the course. In the first week of class you will vote on which questions from the following list you are most interested in discussing. In the following weeks we will discuss the 12 most popular of these, one topic per week.

Ethics and value theory

1. What is the meaning of life?
2. Do we have free will?
3. What makes things good and bad?
4. Is morality relative?
5. Can something be bad without being painful?
6. When is war justified?
7. Do we have obligations to the foreign needy?
8. Would a perfectly moral life be a good one?
9. What is the most just kind of government?

Philosophy of religion

10. Does morality require religion?
11. Are there good arguments for a god's existence?
12. Is the existence of a benevolent god compatible with all the evil in the world?

Aesthetics

13. Can a piece of art be objectively good or bad?
14. If a piece of art is morally bad, does that make it artistically bad?

Epistemology & philosophy of science

15. What's the difference between knowledge and mere belief?
16. Can we know that the external world exists?
17. Can we know anything?
18. Is there any knowledge that isn't grounded in experience?
19. Should we believe in unobservable things like electrons?

20. Are we ever justified in predicting the future based on the past?

21. How can we distinguish between science and pseudoscience?

22. What is scientific explanation?

23. What role, if any, should value judgements play in science?

Philosophy of language

24. Is the meaning of words completely up to us?

25. How do names work?

Philosophy of mind

26. Is an artificial mind possible?

27. How are our minds and bodies related?

28. Is the mind purely physical?

29. Can we describe conscious experience objectively?

Metaphysics

30. Is time travel possible?

31. What makes me the same person today that I was yesterday?

32. Do time and space exist?

33. Can anything infinite exist?

34. Is the world deterministic?

35. Is the future fated?

36. Why is there something rather than nothing?

37. Is math invented or discovered?

38. Does anything other than atoms really exist?