80-100 | **Introduction to Philosophy** | Syllabus



Lecture Time: Mon/Wed, 11:00–11:50 AM
Lecture Location: Gates Hillman Center 4307
Instructor: Aydin Mohseni
Instructor Email: amohseni@cmu.edu
Office Location: Baker Hall 145-F
Office Hours: Mon/Wed, 1:00–1:50 PM
Teaching Assistants: TA office hours, locations, and contact information will be posted on Canvas.

Course Description

Philosophy defies simple definition. This is in part because those identified as philosophers have explored a wide array of subjects over the centuries—from the structure of the cosmos to the foundations of human values, the limits of knowledge, and the principles of governance. Indeed, philosophy has spun off disciplines as their questions became more precisely defined and better suited to empirical methods, as seen in the cases of physics, psychology, and linguistics. What remains in the purview of philosophy tends to be questions on which it has been too difficult, as yet, to make sufficient progress to develop them into their own distinct disciplines, yet too interesting to abandon. At its core, philosophy remains committed to analyzing and clarifying difficult but important

questions concerning reality, reason, knowledge, values, and our place in the cosmos. In this course, we will engage with some of these enduring questions.

Our exploration will cover four major areas of philosophy:

- **logic**, which studies patterns of reliable reasoning;
- **epistemology**, which examines the nature and limits of knowledge;
- **metaphysics**, in particular the nature of the self and free will;
- **metaethics**, or theories regarding the sources of moral values and actions.

Our coverage will be broad, but within each area we will focus on a few topics that we can examine in depth. Our goals are twofold: to gain an appreciation of these philosophical issues and to cultivate proficiency in philosophical methods of analysis and clarification.

Course Objectives

By the end of the course, you will be able to:

- Describe some of the central questions in logic, epistemology, metaphysics, and metaethics.
- Summarize arguments and evidence for the various proposed answers to these questions.
- Evaluate these arguments and evidence using the tools of deductive and probabilistic reasoning.

How Objectives Are Assessed

Learning Objective	**Assessment**
Describe central questions in logic, epistemology, metaphysics, and metaethics	Reading quizzes; reflection questions
Summarize arguments and evidence for proposed answers	Reading quizzes; midterm and final exams
Evaluate arguments using deductive and probabilistic reasoning	Reflection questions; midterm and final exams

Course Texts

You do not need to purchase any texts for this course. All readings will be made available on the course Canvas site.

Course Structure

Each week, we will do readings and discuss a different topic in philosophy:

- there will be a weekly reading posted on Canvas;
- there will be a weekly reading quiz;
- there will be a weekly reflection question;
- and there will be an open-book, untimed, non-cumulative midterm and final exam.

Assignments

Participation. You are expected to actively participate in class discussions by bringing your own questions, listening thoughtfully, and responding to the questions of your peers.

Reading quizzes. Each week you will be given a reading quiz that you will be able to complete if you attended the lecture and completed the reading. It will be open-book and untimed. It will be graded for correctness.

Reflection questions. Each week you will be given one or more "reflection questions" during lectures meant to have you grapple with some philosophical or practical problem. There is no correct answer to these; rather, they are meant to get you to think deeply about the nature of a problem.

Midterm and final exams. The midterm and final exam will be open-book, untimed, and non-cumulative. The midterm will cover the contents of Weeks 1–7 and the final will cover the contents of Weeks 8–14. Expect that each exam will take around an hour to complete. However, the exams will be untimed and you will typically have around five days to complete a given exam.

Extra Credit

There will be an opportunity to earn extra credit by diving deeper into one of the "further readings" for a week of your choice and writing an essay (500–1,000 words) summarizing the logical structures of its main arguments.

Grading

Assignment	Weight
Active Participation	20%
Reading Quizzes	20%
Reflection Questions	20%
Midterm Exam	20%
Final Exam	20%

% Score	Grade	% Score	Grade
98–100	A+	78–79.9	C+
93–97.9	A	73–77.9	C
90–92.9	A−	70–72.9	C−
88–89.9	B+	68–69.9	D+
83–87.9	B	63–67.9	D
80–82.9	B−	60–62.9	D−
		< 60	F

Late Work Policy

Late work loses 10% per day. For example, work submitted two days late can earn at most 80%. Exceptions are granted only if:

1. Official university documentation is provided, or
2. You contact me at least one week in advance and arrange an alternative.

Your lowest grade in each of the reading quizzes and reflection questions will be dropped. So, you can effectively be arbitrarily late on one reading quiz and one reflection question without any penalty to your grade.

Participation and Attendance

You earn your participation grade by showing up to both lectures with me and recitations with your TA. You may miss two lectures without any loss to your participation grade, and you are not required to give a reason for these. You may likewise miss two recitations

without any loss to your participation grade. For any more than two missed lectures or recitations, however, you must have a doctor's note or equivalent official documentation; otherwise, your participation grade will be reduced.

AI and LLM Use

You may use AI tools (e.g., Claude, ChatGPT, Gemini) to help brainstorm ideas, locate sources, or clarify questions. However, you may not use AI to generate or draft written work for this class. All writing you submit must be your own, and you should be able to explain and defend everything you submit. Think of AI as a research assistant, not a ghostwriter. Submissions that rely on AI-generated text will be treated as academic integrity violations.

Academic Integrity

I trust you to be adults. This course will follow the University policy on academic integrity.

If you are unsure about the University's policies and definitions regarding academic integrity and plagiarism see:
www.cmu.edu/policies/student-and-student-life/academic-integrity

Religious Observance

If classes or assignments for this course conflict with a religious holiday, please let me know in advance. We can then make alternative arrangements.

Disability Accommodations

If you have any questions or concerns about disability accommodations, don't hesitate to speak with me—I am very happy to help out.

In general, if you have a disability for which you may be requesting an accommodation, you will want to contact the Office of Disability Resources (www.cmu.edu/disability-resources). The Office of Disability Resources will verify your disability and ensure you get appropriate accommodations for this course.

Accessibility

Lecture slides and course materials will be posted to Canvas. If you would benefit from receiving materials in an alternative format, please contact me and I will be glad to arrange it.

Student Wellness

All of us benefit from support during difficult times. There are helpful resources available on campus, and an important part of the college experience is learning how to ask for help. Asking for support sooner rather than later is often better—but asking at all is certainly better than not asking.

Consider reaching out to a friend, faculty, or family member you trust for help getting connected to the support you need. CMU offers counseling to students for a variety of problems at Counseling and Psychological Services (www.cmu.edu/counseling).

If you are worried about affording food or are feeling insecure about food, consider contacting the CMU Pantry (www.cmu.edu/student-affairs/resources/cmu-pantry). You can schedule an appointment by email or by calling 412-268-8704 (SLICE office).

How to Succeed in This Course

My advice for succeeding in this course is as follows.

- Show up to the lectures and recitations and be prepared to participate.
- Do the weekly readings and complete the weekly reading quizzes.
- Complete the weekly reflection questions.
- Create ample time for the midterm and final exams.

If you do all these things, you should do very well in the course!

Office Hours and Support

The TAs and I will hold office hours at set times during the week. You are enthusiastically encouraged to come to these hours!

Their purpose is for you to ask any questions you may have about lectures, assignments, or the course; to discuss any difficulties, concerns, or questions regarding the course or your performance; and just to enjoy chatting about philosophy!

You can also contact me or the TAs via email. When writing to the TAs, always do so very respectfully. You should allow for two business days for a response.

Course Schedule and Readings (Tentative)

The schedule is open to change in response to our evolving interests. All readings and materials will be available on Canvas. "Further reading" items are optional but recommended for those who want to go deeper into a given topic.

Module I: Logic

Learning goal: Recognize what makes a proof, trace the development of logic from Aristotle to Frege, and use basic tools of modern deductive logic.

Week 1: *Introduction & proofs*

- Glymour, *Thinking Things Through*, Ch. 1, "Proofs."

Week 2: *Aristotle's theory of demonstration*

- Glymour, *Thinking Things Through*, Ch. 2, "Aristotle's Theory of Demonstration."

Week 3: *Frege's new logical world*

- Glymour, *Thinking Things Through*, Ch. 5, "Frege's New Logical World."

Week 4: *Primer on modern logic*

- *forall x* (open logic textbook), selections.

Further reading:

- Carroll, L. (1895), "What the Tortoise Said to Achilles."
- Boolos, G. (1994), "Gödel's Second Incompleteness Theorem Explained in Words of One Syllable."
- *Scientific American* (2006), "The Limits of Reason."
- *Scientific American* (2009), "The Origins of Computing."

Module II: Epistemology

Learning goal: State the central questions about truth, knowledge, and justification, and assess skeptical arguments and Bayesian responses to them.

Week 5: *Theories of truth and scientific realism*

- Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Truth."

Week 6: *Knowledge and justification*

- Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Knowledge."

Week 7: *Skepticism*

- Glymour, *Thinking Things Through*, Ch. 7, "Skepticism."

Midterm: *Covers Weeks 1–7.*

Week 8: *Bayesian solutions*

- Glymour, *Thinking Things Through*, Ch. 8, "Bayesian Solutions."

Further reading:

- Borges, J. L. (1946), "On Exactitude in Science."
- Gettier, E. (1963), "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?"
- Descartes, R. (1641), *Meditations on First Philosophy.*
- Laudan, L. (1981), "A Confutation of Convergent Realism."
- Easwaran, K. (2011), "Bayesianism I: Introduction and Arguments in Favor."

Module III: Metaphysics

Learning goal: Analyze competing accounts of the self and free will, and assess the scope and limits of metaphysical inquiry.

Week 9: *Theories of the self & free will*

- Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Free Will."

Week 10: *The nature of concepts*

Week 11: *The limits of metaphysics*

Further reading:

- Borges, J. L. (1960), "Borges and I."
- Dennett, D. (1978), "Where Am I?"
- Chiang, T. (2005), "What's Expected of Us."
- Frankfurt, H. (1971), "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person."
- Carnap, R. (1932), "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language."

Module IV: Metaethics

Learning goal: Compare the major ethical theories and evaluate accounts of the sources of moral value.

Week 12: *Ethical theories*

- Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Metaethics."

Week 13: *Political theories*

- Glymour, *Thinking Things Through*, Ch. 16, "Moral and Political Theories."

Week 14: *Ethics in the real world*

- Glymour, *Thinking Things Through*, Ch. 17, "Ethics in the Real World."

Final: *Covers Weeks 8–14.*

Further reading:

- Hobbes, T. (1651), *Leviathan*, Ch. 13.
- Hume, D. (1740), *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III: Of Morals.
- Kant, I. (1785), *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals.*
- Mill, J. S. (1863), "What Utilitarianism Is."
- Rawls, J. (1971), *A Theory of Justice*, §§3–4.
- Le Guin, U. K. (1973), "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas."
- Street, S. (2006), "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value."