

A History of Philosophy: Nature, Certainty, and the Self Fall, 2017

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Office Hours: Wednesday 1-3; Thursday 1-3; and by appointment

Description

How do we know what we know? Epistemology, the philosophy of knowing, is essential to the other fields of philosophy, and arguably, most other fields of thought. The definition of the knowable, or the nature of the true, serves as a foundation for the treatment of other crucial topics: the character of virtue, the foundations of authority, or the basis of beauty. However, in the process of defining the knowable, philosophers have had to confront the nature of the knower – the human mind or the human self. This course will trace the complex relationship between views of knowledge, views of the human mind, and the relationship of both to the understanding of the physical universe. While we will concentrate on the study of primary texts, we will also apply those texts to contemporary topics of interest in class and in a series of four or five evening seminars.

Books and Readings

Plato: *Symposium*
Aristotle: *Physics*, *On the Soul* -- (selections)
Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* (Book 2)
Ibn Sina, *On the Nature of God*
Aquinas, *Summae* (selections)
Christine de Pisan, *Book of the City of Ladies* (selections)
Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*
Descartes, *Meditations*
Pascal, *Pensees* (selections)
Spinoza, *Ethics* (selections)
Boyle, *Usefulness of Natural Philosophy* (selections)
Newton, *Principia* (selections)
Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (selections)
Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (selections)
D'Alembert, *Preliminary Discourse on the Encyclopedia*
Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (selections)
Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Women*
Kant, *Protologmena* (selections)
Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (chapter 1)
De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (selections)
... additional readings on contemporary issues will be added

Instructional Design

The course revolves around three essential questions:

What is true, knowable, or certain?

How does mind relate to matter, body, or cosmos?

What is the relationship between knowledge and the knower?

These three questions will be asked of each of the philosophers in the course. This is a history of philosophy course, so chronology will play a crucial part – the course will address issues of cultural context and historical influence. This distinguishes the experience from a philosophy course organized by problems alone, with little sense of temporal development.

The three unifying questions serve to characterize the entire course as a long-term investigation of a series of related issues; in this sense, the course is “problem centered.” (Perhaps “question centered” would be more apt). Further, students in the course will study the origins of different strategies for the construction of knowledge, strategies that have influenced most academic disciplines. In this sense, the course is truly integrative – it demonstrates the essential connections between different disciplines at the level of methodology. Students will be encouraged to consider how the different approaches to knowledge they encounter in the course are embedded in the rest of academe, or in the culture at large.

Assessment Practices

Each major division of the course will include a 3-4 page formative paper in which students are asked to respond to a particular reading on their own, before class discussion has taken place. Feedback on these papers plays a big part in the development of student analytical skills. Each quarter will conclude with a longer summative paper. Finally, students will occasionally write short responses to course readings in class. These responses, along with class discussion, will form an essential part of the students’ experience.

Grade Breakdown:

Short papers (5): 50%

Major papers (2): 40%

In-Class work and Discussion: 10%

Schedule of Topics and Assignments

Plato and the Path of Love: *Symposium*

Read: Plato, *Symposium*

Questions for Consideration:

Why might Plato use mathematics as an exemplar of the capabilities of the mind to know truth?

For Plato, how does mind encounter the realm of ideas?

In Phaedrus' speech in *Symposium*, what aspect of love is emphasized?

For Pausanias, what is the distinction between high and low love?

How does Socrates incorporate the ideas of his predecessors?

For Socrates, is love a goal in itself or a means to a goal?

What are the implications of Plato's views of justice for democracy?

First Short Paper:

What is the role of Alcibiades at the close of *Symposium*? Is he a sympathetic or a non-sympathetic figure? Why?

Aristotle and the Patterns of Nature: *Metaphysics, On the Soul*

Read: Aristotle, *Metaphysics (Book A); On the Soul (Book A, B)*

Questions for Consideration:

For Aristotle, what is the basis of knowledge?

What are his criticisms of Plato?

In *On the Soul*, how does he employ strategies of category and generalization?

Hellenistic Philosophy and the Eclectic Mind

Read: Lucretius, *De Natura Rerum* (Book 2)

Questions for Consideration:

How does Lucretius (or Epicurus) explain physical causation and identity?

How does Lucretius respond to Hellenic philosophical categories?

Second Short Paper:

What are the implications of Lucretius' views of matter for Hellenic philosophy? In other words, how do Lucretius' ideas on matter and human knowledge relate to the ideas of Plato and Aristotle?

Arab Philosophy in the Golden Age

Read: Avicenna, *On the Nature of God*

Questions for Consideration:

What is the relationship between Logic and Islam for Avicenna?

What is the nature of the conflict between Al Ghazali and Ibn Rushd?

Reason and Revelation in Medieval Europe

Read: Aquinas, *Summae* (selections)

Questions for Consideration:

How does Aquinas reconcile Christian revelation with Aristotelian reason?

What are the strengths of the human mind for Aquinas? What are its limits?

Humanity in the Renaissance

Read: Christine de Pisan, *Book of the City of Ladies*
Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*

Questions for Consideration:

What traditions does Christine de Pisan draw upon in her defense of women?

Does Christine de Pisan have a positive view of humanity?

In what sense is Pico drawing on the Platonic tradition in his humanism?

Third Short paper:

Discuss how Christine de Pisan and Pico della Mirandola present positive views of humanity in their work. What are their respective justifications for this view? What do they draw upon?

Rene Descartes and the Crisis of Doubt

Read: Descartes, *Meditations* 1-3

Questions for Consideration:

How does Descartes' method lead him to his radical doubt and the notion of the great deceiver?

How does Descartes assert the certainty of his own existence?

How does Descartes' stress on his own mind differ from the views of Plato and Aristotle?

Is Descartes' proof of god's existence successful? Why is it necessary?

Rene Descartes and the Solace of Certainty

Read: Descartes, *Meditations* 4-6

Questions for Consideration:

How does Descartes move from his proof of god to the certainty of his own ideas?

What, for Descartes, is the relationship between the divine mind and the human mind?

How does Descartes establish the real existence of the physical world?

What, for Descartes, is the relationship between mind and body?

Blaise Pascal and the Limits of Understanding

Read: Pascal, *Pensees* (selections)

Questions for Consideration:

For Pascal, what are the implications of the infinite for human knowledge?

In *Pensees*, what is the distinction between knowledge and certainty?

Where may certainty lie, if not with mind?

Baruch Spinoza and the Unity of Existence

Read: Spinoza, *Ethics* (selections)

Questions for Consideration:

Based on the first two pages of Spinoza's ethics, what is the relationship between substance, attributes, and modes?

Which problems in Descartes' philosophy are addressed by Spinoza? How does he respond to them?

First Major Paper: Evaluate Continental responses to Descartes' Views

John Locke and the Blank Slate

Read: Locke, *Essay on Human Understanding* (selections)

How does Locke treat the Cartesian notion of innate knowledge?

For Locke, what are the intellectual faculties of humanity? Can they produce certain knowledge?

What is the link between Lockean epistemology and Lockean views of Political authority?

Robert Boyle, Isaac Newton, and the Nature of Natural Law

Read: Boyle, *On the Usefulness of Natural Philosophy*
Newton, *General Scholium* to the *Principia*

Questions for Consideration:

What appears to be the methodology of Boyle and Newton?

What does Boyle mean by “Ordinary Preserving Concourse”?

Do Boyle and Newton deal with “truth” in a Platonic, Aristotelian, or Cartesian sense?

Fourth Short Paper:

Discuss the concept of Natural law as it appears in the work of Boyle and Newton. Does it really exist? How do we come to know it?

The Enlightenment, Reason, and Equality

Read: Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (selections)
Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Women*
Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (selections)

Questions for Consideration:

What is Rousseau’s definition of equality and justice? Is it based on reason?

For Wollstonecraft, is there a clear difference between men and women as intellectual beings?

What intellectual traditions does Du Bois draw upon in his response to Booker T. Washington? How does he define real equality? How does he justify his definition?

David Hume and the Limits of Knowledge

Read: Hume, *Enquiry into Human Understanding* (selections)

Questions for Consideration:

For Hume, what do humans actually observe about the world?

What, for Hume, do humans infer rather than observe?

What is the effect of Hume's philosophy on the Enlightenment world view?

Kant and the Nature of Human Judgement

Read: Kant, Protologmena (selections)

Questions for Consideration:

How does Kant respond to Hume's views on human inference and custom?

For Kant, why is it necessary that human reason be universal?

Second Major Paper: Choose an experiment, an experience, or a major theory from one of your science courses and discuss how David Hume or Immanuel Kant would react to the fundamental assumptions behind that experiment, experience, or theory.

Epilogue – Knowledge, Subjectivity, and the Knower

In this section of the course, we will explore modern reactions to the early modern epistemologies we have explored in the course, particularly with respect to the confidence of Enlightenment culture and scientific thinking. We will examine some ideas of Marx, Nietzsche, and Gramsci, and we will explore the implications of notions of subjectivity and hegemony for contemporary discussions of race, gender, and knowledge. Readings will depend on how much time is left in the course at this point.

Fifth Short Paper: TBA