

Metaphilosophy

Instructor: Tom Kaspers (kaspers@uchicago.edu)

Meeting Time: TBD

Office Hours: TBD, Gates-Blake Hall, 309

Course Description

What is philosophy? Is it the inquiry into the fundamental nature of reality? Or is it an inquiry into how we ought to live our lives? Is there progress in philosophy? And is this progress undermined by widespread persistent disagreement? Is there a philosophical method, and should there be one? What is the goal of philosophy? Is it knowledge, understanding, or something else? The goal of this course is not to find the One True Answer to these questions. It is for you to develop your own answers, so that next time you are at a party and say you study philosophy, you can finally explain what that actually means.

Course Goals

This course is meant to:

- Teach you how to write a professional philosophical essay
- Introduce you to the field of metaphilosophy
- Help you become more self-conscious as a philosopher
- Have you reflect on the importance of philosophical inquiry
- Promote the academic merits of collaboration

Course Setup

Class attendance is mandatory and crucial for succeeding in this course. Our shared purpose is to write a philosophy essay that is of the same length and quality as essays that might be published by solid mid-tier philosophy journals. To achieve this, we must first do a lot of reading. The first three weeks of the course are dedicated to gaining a shared background in various metaphilosophical topics, and to try to find a suitable topic to write about. At the end of these three weeks, we shall create and vote on various essay proposals, and I will make a large reading list based on the winning proposal. We will collaborate to try to get through this reading list; every student should read different papers and discuss their potential relevance in class. At this time, we will try to write early sections of the essay in class. In the last three weeks, class time will be devoted entirely to drafting and revising the essay.

Assignments

This quarter, we'll be experimenting with a novel kind of assignment: the collective essay. You'll be graded on your individual contributions to this essay. There are many different ways of contributing, such as doing background research, writing draft paragraphs, rewriting drafts, critiquing parts of the draft essay, thinking up new ideas or new arguments/counterarguments, finding relevant papers or books, notetaking, providing feedback on each other's contributions, etc. Ultimately, all your contributions to the essay will be filtered through me, but to encourage collaboration not just with me but with your fellow students, you can choose to tackle these activities in groups and self-report on who did what (instead of having to communicate all your activities directly to me).

Your grade will consist of three parts: brainstorming, background reading, and writing. To do well, you must actively participate in each part. However, it is possible to make up points in every part too. For example, a student who was not super instrumental in the brainstorming phase can still get an A if they greatly contributed to the background research or the actual writing process. As I appreciate that it can be unclear how much of an effort is enough and that you might worry that the ways in which you've contributed have flown under the radar, I will settle the final grade in conversation with you, and you are encouraged to make your case for your desired grade.

Moreover, I will email each of you at the halfway point of this course to let you know what grade you are on track for.

Here's a very rough breakdown of what each grade signifies:

A: You fully participated in the process, and your contributions significantly improved the essay.

A-: You fully participated in the process, and your contributions had a limited but meaningful impact on the essay.

B+/B: You fully participated in the process, but you didn't contribute enough to the essay OR you made a crucial contribution (such as coming up with a major argument for the essay) but didn't participate enough in every stage of the process.

B-: You mostly participated in the process, and you made some limited contributions, but you didn't fully engage in every stage of the process.

C: You participated in the process but didn't attempt to actually contribute anything concrete.

D: You didn't really participate in the process and made no concrete contributions to the essay.

Provisional Reading Schedule

The reading schedule only covers the first three weeks, as the reading for the remainder of the quarter will depend on our essay topic.

Mar 22: Ranalli, "The Puzzle of Philosophical Testimony" and Fumerton, "You Can't Trust a Philosopher."

Mar 24: Elgin, "Disagreement in Philosophy" and Bernáth & Tózsér, "The Biased Nature of Philosophical Beliefs in the Light of Peer Disagreement."

Mar 29: Barnett, "Philosophy Without Belief" and Beebe, "Philosophical Scepticism and the Aims of Philosophy."

Mar 31: Chalmers “Why Isn’t There More Progress in Philosophy?” and Dellsén et al., “What is Philosophical Progress?”

Apr 5: Williams, “Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline” and Dewey, “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy”

Apr 7: Moulton, “A Paradigm of Philosophy: The Adversary Method” and Plunkett, “Metalinguistic Negotiations and the Methodology of Philosophy”