Philosophy Course Descriptions

Fall 2017

PHIL-0001-01: Intro to Philosophy: The Meaning of Life
Prof. Jeff McConnell
The major types of philosophical thought and the central problems of philosophy are presented through study of some classic texts of the great philosophers. Offered each term. (May be used to satisfy the second half of the college writing requirement by students with credit for ENG 1.)

PHIL-0001-02: Intro to Philosophy: The Problem of Evil
Prof. Jeff McConnell
This section is an introduction to philosophy, with a focus on the problem of evil. We begin with a question that has occupied philosophers and theologians for centuries: Is the existence of evil consistent with the existence of a God? We read Augustine’s autobiographical Confessions, which documents his struggles with this question. We consider Leibniz’s attempt to show that we live in the best of all possible worlds, and we discuss Voltaire’s satirical response to Leibniz in his novel Candide. This debate over religion leads naturally to two more questions: What is evil? And is human nature evil? Some religious people think that humankind is "fallen," and that it is only through God’s "grace" that any good is possible. Kant had a different but related problem of evil: How can a rational person do evil? The problem arose for Kant because of his idea that humans are only motivated by selfishness or by morality. Evil actions, however, seem sometimes to be motivated by the desire to do the wrong thing because it is wrong. This has suggested to some an innate, irrational tendency to evil. A concern with irrationality runs through a number of writers who follow: Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Freud and Sartre. Finally, we conclude with some case studies. We discuss Bartolomé de las Casas’s A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies, in which he documents the atrocities committed by Cortez and other Spanish invaders against the native peoples of the Americas. There is also a careful reading of Hannah Arendt’s Eichmann in Jerusalem, her account of the trial of an architect of the Holocaust, in which she defends her famous thesis of the "banality of evil." There will be regular writing assignments, and occasionally students may be asked to view films related to the readings.

Offered each term. (May be used to satisfy the second half of the college writing requirement by students with credit for ENG 1.)

PHIL-0001-03: Intro To Philosophy
Prof. Susan Russinoff
The major types of philosophical thought and the central problems of philosophy are presented through study of some classic texts of the great philosophers. Offered each term. (May be used to satisfy the second half of the college writing requirement by students with credit for ENG 1.)
PHIL-0001-04 and PHIL-0001-05: Intro To Philosophy

Prof. Monica Link

In this course we will take up three broad philosophical topics. The first topic is the nature and structure of morality. How should we treat other human beings? What principles ought we to use in deciding when an action is right or wrong?

Next we will turn to questions in epistemology and the philosophy of mind. (How) can we be certain that we exist? That God exists? Are the mind and the brain identical? What constitutes thinking, and are computers able to experience this?

Lastly, we will discuss the metaphysical problem of free will. What is it, and do we have it? Is it compatible with the idea that everything in the universe is determined? Is free will a necessary condition for holding people morally responsible for their actions?

Readings will be drawn from both classic and contemporary philosophers.

Offered each term. (May be used to satisfy the second half of the college writing requirement by students with credit for ENG 1.)

PHIL-0001-06 and PHIL-0001-07: Intro To Philosophy

Prof. Ian Blaustein

This course introduces students to problems in metaphysics and epistemology through close reading of several classical texts of Western Philosophy. Metaphysics is the study of the fundamental nature of reality. We will focus on the following metaphysical questions: What are we? Are we immaterial things, bodily things, some combination? What happens to us when we die? Does God exist? Do we have free will? Epistemology is the study of knowledge. How could we ever come to know the answers to these metaphysical questions? What is knowledge and how do we get it? Is knowledge even attainable? Throughout our examination of these questions, we will also consider questions about values and what we should do. For example, what attitude should we take toward death? If we can’t be certain that some of our most fundamental beliefs are true, would it matter? If we don’t have free will, does that mean that everything that we do is pointless? Great philosophers have proposed sophisticated answers to these questions. We will read their works, consider their theories, and analyze and evaluate their arguments, with the objective of coming closer to our own answers, however tentative, to some of life’s biggest questions.

Offered each term. (May be used to satisfy the second half of the college writing requirement by students with credit for ENG 1.)
PHIL-0001-08: Intro To Philosophy  

Prof. David Denby  
The readings for the course come from ancient, modern, and contemporary sources. We will read Plato's Apology and Meno in full and most of Descartes' Meditations and Hume's Enquiry. We will also read selections from Sextus Empiricus, Anselm, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, Ryle, Ayer, Chisholm, Jackson, Nagel and Armstrong. Although we will look at these in their approximate chronological order, the approach in this course will be problem-centered rather than historical; we will concentrate on live philosophical problems rather than studying intellectual history. The focus will be on four sets of issues: the mind-body problem and the nature of a person; the nature and existence of God; knowledge and skepticism; and the problem of free will and determinism. Other issues will also arise. The aims of this course are fourfold. First, to develop a sense of how puzzling, fascinating, and problematic some of these traditional issues in philosophy really are. Second, to gain some acquaintance with and understanding of the various positions taken and the methods employed by some of the great philosophers. Third, to develop the ability to think rigorously and critically both in philosophy and beyond. Finally something that is often thought to be impossible in introductory courses: to do some real philosophy ourselves.  

Offered each term. (May be used to satisfy the second half of the college writing requirement by students with credit for ENG 1.)

PHIL-0001-09: Intro to Philosophy  

Prof. Dilip Ninan  
Philosophers study some of the most difficult questions about ourselves and our world. This course is an introduction to some of the central questions of Western philosophy. Does God exist? How can we really come to know anything about our world? Are we free to act as we choose, or do forces over which we have no control determine all of our actions? What is the nature of morality? We will read and discuss historical and contemporary philosophical texts that aim to throw light on these questions.  

Offered each term. (May be used to satisfy the second half of the college writing requirement by students with credit for ENG 1.)

PHIL-0001-10: Intro to Philosophy  

Prof. Valentina Urbanek  
This course introduces students to problems in metaphysics and epistemology through close reading of several classical texts of Western Philosophy. Metaphysics is the study of the fundamental nature of reality. We will focus on the following metaphysical questions: What are we? Are we immaterial things, bodily things, some combination? What happens to us when we die? Does God exist? Do we have free will? Epistemology is the study of knowledge. How could we ever come to know the answers to these metaphysical questions? What is knowledge and how do we get it? Is knowledge even attainable? Throughout our examination of these questions, we will also consider questions about values and what
we should do. For example, what attitude should we take toward death? If we can't be certain that some of our most fundamental beliefs are true, would it matter? If we don't have free will, does that mean that everything that we do is pointless? Great philosophers have proposed sophisticated answers to these questions. We will read their works, consider their theories, and analyze and evaluate their arguments, with the objective of coming closer to our own answers, however tentative, to some of life's biggest questions.

Offered each term. (May be used to satisfy the second half of the college writing requirement by students with credit for ENG 1.)

**PHIL-0001-11: Intro to Philosophy**  
*Prof. Peter Levine*  
The major types of philosophical thought and the central problems of philosophy are presented through study of some classic texts of the great philosophers. Offered each term. (May be used to satisfy the second half of the college writing requirement by students with credit for ENG 1.)

**PHIL-0001-12: Intro to Philosophy**  
*STAFF*  
The major types of philosophical thought and the central problems of philosophy are presented through study of some classic texts of the great philosophers. Offered each term. (May be used to satisfy the second half of the college writing requirement by students with credit for ENG 1.)

**PHIL-0015: Intro to Linguistics**  
*Prof. Ariel Goldberg*  
(Cross-listed as PSY 64 and LING 15.) How humans encode language in their brains, so that they can produce and understand an unlimited variety of utterances in context. Language and other forms of communication; how children acquire language; biological basis of language; the structure of language -- phonology (sound structure), syntax (grammatical structure), and semantics (meaning).

**PHIL-0024: Introduction to Ethics**  
*Prof. David Denby*  
At this moment, like every other, you're faced with a question: What should I do? People often say that, in general, what you should do is help others. But then they would, wouldn't they? Perhaps what you really should do is always act in your own self-interest. Perhaps that is what everyone else is already doing anyway (despite what they say).

Some people say that you should promote the values of your community or society. But some societies have vile values. Indeed, don't the values of our society need at least a little adjustment? Anyway, why should the fact that a society is yours mean that you should promote its values, especially if doing so is contrary to your self-interest?

Some people say that you should act according to God's will. But what does God will, exactly? And surely
we should obey Him only if He is good and commands us to do what is right. Yet that seems to mean that morality is independent of Him.

Some philosophers have argued that whether you should do an action depends entirely on its consequences (compared to those of its alternatives). But should you really ignore the past? Doesn’t just punishment, for instance, depend on whether the person is actually guilty -- a fact about the past?

Other philosophers have focused instead on the motives behind an action, in particular on whether you’re acting out of respect for others (and yourself). Still others have argued that whether you should do an action depends on a combination of these and perhaps other factors. But each of these suggestions faces problems: What on earth is "respecting others"? What is it to "combine" the various factors? Self-interest then? Maybe, but even self-interest is a tricky notion. Something is not in your self-interest simply because you want it, as every smoker knows. And maybe our interests, or at least the best means for achieving them, are mutually interdependent: perhaps the best way for you to get what you want depends on what I do and vice versa.

We will discuss all this in this course. After a brief introductory discussion of logic and the nature of ethical theory we will spend most of the semester critically evaluating a number of normative ethical theories. These will include various forms of Relativism, religiously-based theories, Utilitarianism, Kantianism, Egoism and Social Contract theories. We will also discuss self-interest, values, and other matters. Finally, we will discuss how to apply what we’ve learned to an issue of contemporary moral concern – probably abortion.

PHIL-0033: Logic
Prof. Susan Russinoff
*Satisfies Tufts Mathematical Sciences Distribution Requirement

How can one tell whether a deductive argument succeeds in establishing its conclusion? What distinguishes good deductive arguments from bad ones? Questions such as these will be addressed in this course. We will discuss what a formal language is, how arguments in English are to be expressed in various formal languages, and what is gained from so expressing them. In the jargon of the field, we will cover sentential logic, first-order predicate logic, identity theory, definite descriptions, and topics in metatheory. The course requires no specific background and no special ability in mathematics.

Phil 0035-01: Reality and Subjectivity
Professor Sigrún Svavarsdóttir
Is the scientific method as objective as it is often assumed to be? Are all our views completely subjective? Is there an objective reality? Are colors objective features of the world? Are there any objective moral facts? Is there any objectivity in ethics?

What are we even asking when we raise such questions? What is it for a method to be objective rather than subjective? What is it for a view to be objective or subjective? What is it for a fact to be objective rather than subjective? What are we looking for when we are looking for objectivity in ethics?
This term, Reality and Subjectivity will be taught as a seminar on objectivity, intended for freshmen and sophomores. There are no class prerequisites. Course requirements include reading and writing assignments as well as regular attendance and participation in seminar discussions.

PHIL-0042: Western Political Thought II  
Prof. Ioannis Evrigenis  
(Cross-listed as PS 42.) Central concepts of modern political thought. The views of those writers who challenged the dominance of Christianity: Machiavelli, Descartes, Hobbes, and others. Some of the main transformations of political thinking that characterized the Enlightenment: the possibility of scientific thinking and reasoning as the basis for human freedom. Nietzsche’s critique of the Enlightenment, and the ability to find political principles that are genuinely true or liberating.

PHIL-091-01: Ethics Bowl  
Prof. Susan Russinoff  
The Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl is a debate-style competition in which teams of undergraduates argue against each other to resolve cases of actual ethical dilemmas. The Ethics Bowl gives students a chance to enter an academic competition that combines excitement and fun with an educationally valuable experience in the areas of practical and professional ethics. Participating students can earn 1/2 credit (pass/fail) and will attend coaching sessions on Mondays and Wednesdays during the noon free blocks during the weeks leading up to the Tufts competition. These sessions will help students think through ethical questions and issues and prepare them to construct arguments to support their positions on the cases written for the Ethics Bowl.

PHIL-0091-02: Chinese Philosophy  
Prof. Monica Link  
This course explores important questions about the self, and about the self living in the world, from the vantage point of various Chinese, Indian and Japanese classical schools of thought. In particular, we will consider questions such as:  
What makes for a truly free life? What does it mean to try to be a "not self" and to "not-think"? How should we navigate the mind-body relationship? What is natural and what is unnatural? How are order and change both important? What, if anything, is permanent? How should we view and manage suffering? What is the value and practice of meditation? What is the function of rituals? How can we live free but engaged lives?  
Texts we will cover include selections from the following works or thinkers: Daodejing (Tao Te Ching), Zhuangzi, Vedas, Upanisads, Bauddha Darsana, Bhagavad Gita, Dogen and Shinran.  
In addressing these questions, we will see how the thinkers from these Eastern traditions use historical anecdotes, legend, dialogue, metaphor, and meditation. Hence, we will also observe and discuss what it means do philosophy in ways that depart from the Western analytic tradition.

PHIL-103: Logic
**Prof. George Smith**

How can one tell whether a deductive argument succeeds in establishing its conclusion? What distinguishes good deductive arguments from bad ones? Questions like these will be addressed in this course. The principal text will be Richard Jeffrey's *Formal Logic*, though it will be supplemented by other texts and by notes from the instructor. The accent will be as much on coming to understand what the word 'formal' means in the title of Jeffrey's book as on what 'logic' means. We will discuss what a formal language is, how arguments in English are to be expressed in various formal languages, and what is gained from so expressing them. In the jargon of the field, we will cover sentential logic, first order predicate logic, identity theory, and definite descriptions. We will also look briefly at the history of logic. The course requires no specific background and no special ability in mathematics. Understanding why formal methods work will be as important as manipulating them. The course will require six written homework assignments and an open-book final exam. The homework assignments, which students are expected to work on in groups, form the core of the course. Students should anticipate spending an average of eight hours per week outside of class in this course.

**PHIL-112: Syntactic Theory**  
**Prof. Jeff McConnell**

Syntactic theory, the study of grammatical structure, is the core subcomponent of contemporary linguistics. Topics of the course include: Syntactic categories, phrase structure, long-distance dependencies, logical form, the interaction between syntax and the lexicon, the division of labor between syntax and semantics, syntactic universals, and the innate predispositions required for children to learn the syntactic structure of their native languages. Multiple theoretical approaches will be compared.

**PHIL-117: Philosophy of Mind**  
**Prof. Stephen White**

This course will focus on the nature of conscious experience, its relation to the subjective point of view, and the implications of both for the mind-body problem. We will also consider carefully the nature of the subjective point of view as it is involved in seeing a world that contains opportunities for genuine action, states of affairs worth striving for, and agents like ourselves.

We will begin by examining the Cartesian conception of consciousness, which holds that the intrinsic features of conscious experience are fully manifest and completely given at the time the experience takes place. The intuition behind this conception is that conscious experience has no hidden sides and no unnoticed features. This intuition supports the sense-data theories of consciousness and experience held by the major figures from Descartes to Kant and implicit in many contemporary arguments that there cannot be a materialistic account of "qualia."

We will go on to consider a wide range of problems for this conception of consciousness, such as our ability to perceive depth and to perceive aspects. We will then look at some of the contemporary alternatives to the Cartesian conception, including behaviorism, physicalism, and functionalism. Despite
the success of some of these theories in handling a number of the problems, the objection remains that such theories fail to explain the depth and significance of the distinction between those entities that do and those entities that do not enjoy consciousness.

An important distinction in the philosophy of mind is the distinction between intentional states such as beliefs and perceptual states, which represent the world as being a certain way, and sensational states, such as pains, which allegedly do not. Much of the work in philosophy of mind on consciousness has focused on such sensational or qualitative states, but more recently the emphasis has shifted toward perceptual experience. Work on perceptual experience raises important questions about the nature of the concepts that figure in our intentional states in general, the relation of those concepts to experience, and the assumption of the normative nature of intentional states.

This leads to Kripke's work on Wittgenstein's rule-following paradox, important in its own right and as an objection to functionalism. (Objections such as Jackson's objection based on the knowledge argument focus on the alleged inadequacies of functionalism as a theory of qualia. The rule-following argument focuses on functionalism's alleged inadequacies as a theory of content--usually thought to be its strong suit.) We will then consider whether Kripke's own so-called "skeptical solution" to the rule-following paradox is tenable. The threat of meaning skepticism leads to a number of transcendental arguments, which have implications both for the concept of agency and for causal theories across a range of philosophical subdisciplines. And the requirement that we do justice to agency leads to an alternative to the usual conception of science--one in which the priority of theory to practice is reversed.

With these points in place, we will examine the relation between consciousness and the justification of our perceptual beliefs about the external world. Recent work on the "phenomenology" of perception has centered on the thesis of disjunctivism--that as between veridical perception and a matching hallucination there is no "highest common mental factor" in virtue of which we are given the world only indirectly. Disjunctivism provides an attractive (anti-skeptical) position in epistemology, but in its apparent denial of the reality of full-blown subjective experience in cases of hallucination, it raises seemingly intractable problems in the philosophy of mind. Our discussion, in this context, of the varieties of the "internal/external distinction" will not only cut across the boundary between epistemology and philosophy of mind, it will have important implications for every major branch of philosophy.

Finally, we will draw on our earlier discussion of concepts when we examine the notion of nonconceptual content. Here, the fundamental question is whether we can make sense of a kind of content that is radically different from the kind we normally suppose our mental states have in virtue of our having a natural language.

PHIL-118: Philosophy of Biology
Prof. Patrick Forber
We will examine the conceptual foundations of evolution, ecology, and genetics, with special attention to outstanding philosophical problems. The course begins with Darwin, and his original presentation of natural selection in the Origin of Species. We will then look at two very different "big picture" views on evolutionary biology and the importance of natural selection, the first defended by Richard Dawkins and the second, by Richard Lewontin. The course continues by discussing specific philosophical and theoretical controversies, such as those over the units of selection, the nature of fitness, altruism and spite, biological function, causation, individuals, and what natural selection explains. Students require some exposure to philosophy or biological science, preferably both. Course requirements include regular attendance and participation in discussion, short essay exams, and a final term paper.

**PHIL-121: Ethical Theory**  
*Prof. Sigrún Svavarsdóttir*

This is a course on general issues within normative ethics with special attention to what utilitarians, Kantians, and pluralistic deontologists have to say about these issues. What makes an action right or wrong? What is the primary object of moral evaluation: actions, motives, character traits, practices, or institutions? What value(s) ought to inform our actions? How exactly ought that value (those values) to inform our actions? Are there moral requirements that have nothing to do with value(s)? What is the relation between moral and rational action? Does morality require impartiality of us? Do moral duties arise out of relationships that we have with some but not all people? What role should or could moral principles play in our lives? How are moral principles to be discovered or justified?

Prerequisites: a minimum of one philosophy course, although two prior courses in philosophy are strongly recommended.

**PHIL-131: Epistemology**  
*Prof. Jody Azzouni*

Sometimes we know something, and sometimes we have just made a good guess. Can we tell the difference? Is there a method for recognizing that we know something? We usually can supply evidence for what we know. Must we always be able to do so for us to rightly claim that we know something? Evidence for a belief is usually something we know. Do we need evidence for our evidence? If so, how do we ever manage to know anything? Some philosophers, called skeptics, don't think we do know anything. In this course, we'll try to answer these questions, or at least explore them further. Readings will be from articles, both contemporary and classic. Requirements: Two 5-7 page papers, and weekly write-ups on the readings.

**PHIL-133: Philosophy of Language**  
*Prof. Dilip Ninan*  
(Cross-listed as LING 133). A central preoccupation of 20th century philosophy of language concerns how we manage to think and talk about objects in the external world. Starting with work by Frege and
Russell, we will begin by considering the "descriptivist" answer to this question. We will then examine a more recent movement (the "New Theory of Reference") that repudiates the descriptivist approach; here we will consider work by Kripke, Kaplan, and Putnam, among others. We will then move on to discuss the role of context and conversational purpose in determining the meaning of our words (Kaplan, DeRose, Grice). Finally, we will consider a challenge to the very idea that our words have determinate meanings (Wittgenstein, Kripke).

PHIL-0152: History of Modern Philosophy: Descartes, Spinoza, Truth, & Emotion

Prof. Amelie Rorty

Spinoza mounted a devastating attack on Descartes' view of the mind and its activities. What explains the dramatic differences in their views on 'truthfulness' and on what qualifies as knowledge? on the role of God in making knowledge possible? on the role of the body in obtaining knowledge? on the possibility of self-knowledge? on how error occurs? on the functions of the passions and their relation to truth and to human thriving? Who are their modern counterparts? We shall stage debates between Spinoza and Descartes on these issues, half the class --those of you who believe that there is 'a will' --- playing Descartes; those of you who are convinced by Spinoza's arguments against the existence of such a faculty will play Spinoza.

Readings: Descartes' *Meditations* and *The Passions of the Soul*; Spinoza's *Ethics*.

PHIL-186: Phenomenology & Existentialism

Prof. Avner Baz

Phenomenology seeks to uncover, or recover, human experience in the face of our own natural tendency to overlook it, and in the face of its distortion-through-over-intellectualization in traditional philosophy and in modern science. Against the tendency to suppose that we already know what our experience must be (like), since (presumably) we know, objectively, what we are and what the world is like, phenomenology calls upon us to 'bracket' that objective knowledge and to reflect upon our experience without traditional or scientific presuppositions. It claims that, ultimately, even the work of science presupposes this level of 'pre-reflective' experience, or the world as perceived before it is thought. This immediately raises the question of how we can recover for ourselves a level of relation to ourselves and to our world that, on the phenomenologist's own account, we normally and naturally pass over—interested as we are in objective facts and practical results. How can we know that, in criticizing existing theories for distorting human experience, we ourselves are free of challengeable presuppositions that distort our own account? The phenomenologist's answer is that we cannot know that: existing phenomenological descriptions of our experience are always open to challenges in the name of a truer description. And yet it is undeniable that neither traditional philosophy nor modern science has much to say that is enlightening about the special way in which we perceive and relate to our own body, for example; or about what it means to relate to another human being as an other; or about the way in which the back of an object, or what's behind our back, is present in our experience; or about how to understand those moments when we look at something differently and 'everything changes even though nothing has changed'; or about the way in which our past is present in our present (and how this makes freedom both possible and limited); or on how we know, and yet do not truly know, that we are going to die; or on how sexuality, for example, or class consciousness, or a childhood
trauma, affects the whole of our being. And it is also undeniable that phenomenology has much to say that is enlightening about these issues.

Existentialism reminds the traditional philosopher or 'the thinker' that, before all else—before any reasoning or theorizing—she or he exists. And this is not a conclusion—a proposition—that we necessarily arrive at if we follow Descartes’ reasoning in his first and second Meditations. It is a fact we live before we think it. Descartes doubts; and then 'realizes' that in doubting, he must exist. But before any reasoning or logical derivation he lives his doubt (if it's a genuine doubt)—he enacts it. Doubting is how he spends this moment of his life; and his present act of doubting will become part of what he’ll carry with him to the next moment. As the conclusion of a piece of reasoning, who knows what it means for me to exist? As something I undergo, however, my existence is undeniable. It is truly what I must begin with: not in the sense of being an Archimedean starting point or axiom for a logical derivation, which is how Descartes thought of it, but in the sense that, before all else, I exist. We each have been ‘thrown into the world’, and we come to every moment—even a moment of the highest and most abstract reflection—with an inheritance (personal, cultural, biological) that we are free to transcend in various ways, but not to choose. And we have no essence—no character—that precedes our interaction with the world and determines it in advance—we can only discover ourselves in our engagement with the world, not by pure, disengaged reflection or introspection.

The philosophers we will study in this course are phenomenologists. They are also existentialists (Merleau-Ponty much more so than Husserl). For Merleau-Ponty, the fact of our existence is the fact of our embodiment—not in the trivial sense that we each have a body, but in the much deeper and more difficult sense that we are our bodies—not our bodies as science conceives of them, however, but our bodies as we (and others) perceive them. It will be interesting for us to think how, for all of the differences between them, Husserl’s work made Merleau-Ponty’s work possible: how within the span of two great Texts—Husserl’s Cartesian Meditations (based on his Paris Lectures) and Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception—we can go from Descartes' Meditations to the most radical overthrowing to date of Cartesian metaphysics.
saying that the theorist takes the agents’ utility functions and subjective probability functions for granted then states theses about what will maximize the agents’ expected utility—theses that are completely factual?

Understood in this way, decision theory seems to lose most of the critical edge they might have been thought to have. Derek Parfit makes this point by imagining someone who is “future-Tuesday indifferent”: offered a choice between a negligible pleasure today and an enormous pleasure next Tuesday, he or she always opts for the negligible pleasure today. And offered a choice between a negligible pain today and a prolonged and excruciating pain next Tuesday, the subject always opts for the latter. Such a preference structure seems irrational—the subject makes normal choices regarding every other day in the future except Tuesday—but it seems there is nothing on this instrumental conception of rationality to be said against it.

Christine Korsgaard generalizes this point by saying that on this conception, practical reason has no normative force—there is nothing more to acting rationally than acting on one’s strongest desire, and whatever desire we act on will be, by definition, the strongest. It is as though we are torn between thinking of the agent as subject to norms and reasons and as productive of external behavior that is justified (when it is) and thinking of the agent as the kind of thing whose external behavior is merely explained as the causal product of an appropriate belief-desire pair.

A related foundational challenge concerns how utilities or values might be compared across agents. The standard ways of constructing utility functions for agents do not readily permit interpersonal comparisons. This raises skeptical concerns for rational accounts of group action and theories of justice.

Game Theory. The situation becomes more problematic when we consider game theory. Dominance reasoning says we should defect in the classic prisoner’s dilemma. But the application of dominance reasoning assumes that one should treat oneself as an agent and the other player as part of the causal machinery of the world. But what justifies this assumption? And if we drop it, the results are arguably very different from what the orthodox theory holds.

This connects to a general problem that game theory poses in striking clarity: is cooperation ever rational? That game theory seems to sanction noncooperation in the two-person, one-shot prisoner’s dilemma is tempered by the fact that if the game is repeated for the same players a kind of cooperation can be sustainable. Is this good enough? Arguably it is not. For the version of the prisoner’s dilemma that seems to pose the greatest threat to social cooperation is the many-person prisoner’s dilemma—a public goods game—essentially the situation that generates the “tragedy of the commons.” Do we, then, simply solve the problem through private ownership backed by laws? It seems not, since an effective system for enforcing the law is itself a shared or public good, and its availability presupposes the solution to a many-person prisoner’s dilemma apparently more difficult than the one it was postulated to solve. Application of considerations such as these to problems such as global warming and just distribution will be discussed.

Structure of the Course We will cover contemporary decision theory and game theory as a way of framing questions about their philosophical foundations. Topics in philosophy will include parts of the theories of action, meta-ethics, justice, and practical and theoretical reasons. The text for decision theory and game theory will be Michael Resnik’s Choices but the focus will be on key articles from the philosophy literature. There will be some problem sets requiring no more than high-school algebra (though possibly not suitable for the extremely math phobic). The primary emphasis, however, will be on carefully argued philosophy papers. There are no formal prerequisites, but curiosity and some degree of intellectual maturity will be assumed.
PHIL-0191-04 Seminars: Philosophy of Mathematics

Prof. Jody Azzouni

Mathematics has been the major source of philosophical bewilderment and speculation right from the beginnings of philosophical thought (among the ancient Greeks) until today. There are two issues that concern philosophers that will be the two centerpieces of this course.

The first is an ontological question. Mathematical theorems and proofs are concerned with what seem to be very strange objects: points that have no dimension, lines that have one dimension, numbers (that seem to exist nowhere in space and time). These objects seem to be eternal. (Everything else seems to come into and go out of existence, but not the number 1.) So one topic is: what are mathematical objects? Some philosophers are nominalists. They think there are no mathematical objects. They think, therefore, that mathematical statements are not what they appear to be. “There are infinitely many prime numbers,” looks like it is about a kind of object, prime numbers. This statement (which is proved in mathematics) states there are infinitely many of these things. Nominalists think there can’t be objects like this.

This is a debate in ontology. We’ll be looking closely at debates like this.

The other is mathematical proof. Mathematical proof seems very odd. We reason everywhere, not just in mathematics. But somehow what we discover in mathematics seems firmer than what we discover about anything else. Over time, what we think is true about physics has changed. And it can still change. But, somehow, what we discover about mathematics never changes. Once we discover it, we know it forever. Furthermore, arguments in other areas lead to disagreements. But in mathematics it seems that proofs are convincing to people who understand them in ways that proofs in other areas aren’t. One suggestion for what is going on is that mathematical proofs are just objects of pure logic. But many philosophers and mathematicians disagree with this. The way that mathematicians go about discovering proofs, and the ways that proofs are written down don’t make them look like objects of pure logic. It is simply not obvious what it is about mathematical proof that makes it special. This is the second topic of this course.

The readings will be from Mark Colyvan’s “An introduction to the philosophy of mathematics,” and additional articles in philosophy of mathematics that will be posted on Trunk.

Prerequisites: One previous course in philosophy, or permission. A course in logic is desirable as well. The mathematics presupposed is high-school mathematics. Other mathematics needed will be presented in class. The issues in philosophy of mathematics are ones that arise just by thinking about numbers and how we prove results about them.

Requirements: One term paper. Weekly write-ups of a ½ page to a page due each week on the readings assigned that week.

PHIL-0191-06 Seminars: Environmental Ethics

Prof. Sheldon Krimsky

Systematic investigation of selected problems in philosophy, the subject to vary from term to term. Recommended: Two courses in philosophy.
PHIL-0191-07 Seminars: Collective Responsibility

 Prof. Erin Kelly

This course will be concerned with collective action, wrongdoing, liability, blame, and guilt. We will analyze the moral and legal dimensions of conspiracy and complicity, including relevant notions of causation. More generally, we will evaluate notions of group action and group identity and consider the moral implications of group responsibility for individual members. We will be interested in the relationship between identity and solidarity as well as in how moral obligations arise through joint action. We will consider examples of collective violence in the form of oppression and unjust wars and consider civil disobedience and nonviolence as strategic responses. Finally, we will consider possibilities of redress for historical injustice.

PHIL 197-01: Ethics, Law, & Society

 Prof. Lionel McPherson

This course forms the core of a certificate program in Ethics, Law and Society, administered through the philosophy department. We will study how moral and political philosophy relate to questions of public importance. The seminar will study a range of practical ethical questions concerning such themes as: international justice, especially regarding migrants and "the resource curse"; income and wealth inequality; multiculturalism and religious toleration; mass incarceration and the aims of punishment; and climate change.

We will approach these questions by considering case studies and by evaluating moral guidelines for resolving conflicts and dilemmas. We will be especially concerned with the challenges to ethical thought posed by ethnic, religious, and political diversity.

Requirements for the course include two short papers and a longer term paper.

PHIL-291-01: Graduate Seminar: Scientific Realism

 Prof. George Smith