

24.00: Problems of Philosophy

Fall 2023

Description: This course is an introduction to some classic philosophical questions. Should I believe in God? Do I really know anything? Is morality objective? What should I do? Do I have free will? What does it take for me to persist through time? What's the meaning of life? We'll discuss the significance of these questions and assess the plausibility of various ways that these questions might be answered. The ultimate goal of the course is to develop your critical and argumentative skills: by the end of the course, you should be able to think philosophically for yourself.

Website: <https://canvas.mit.edu/courses/22125>

Instructor: Eliot Watkins (eliot@mit.edu). Office Hours: Tuesdays 12:15-1:15pm, in 32-D962.

TAs: Selina Guter (OH: M 11am-12pm, guter@mit.edu), Sakinah Munday (OH: R 4-5pm, sakimund@mit.edu), Sonia Pavel (OH: F 1-2pm, smpavel@mit.edu), Julian Perilla (OH: R 2:30-3:30pm, jperilla@mit.edu), Katie Zhou (OH: R 3-4pm, katie_z@mit.edu).

Lectures: 11am-12pm, Tuesdays and Thursdays, in 1-190

Recitations: Fridays. **R1 (Julian):** 10-11 in 56-180. **R2 (Selina):** 10-11 in 66-144. **R3 (Sonia):** 11-12 in 56-180. **R4 (Saki):** 12-1 in 66-156. **R5 (Sonia):** 12-1 in 56-180. **R6 (Katie):** 12-1 in 66-144.

REQUIREMENTS

Readings: Readings will be posted to Canvas. You must do the reading in advance of each class.

Attendance: You must attend all lectures and recitations.

Participation and Presentations: You will be assigned a recitation slot, which meets on Fridays. The recitations are capped at 18 per session. You will be expected to actively participate each week. Each of you will do one short, formal presentation in recitation, on a subject determined in discussion with TA. Together, the presentation and your participation constitute 10% of your overall grade.

Quizzes: There will be regular short written quizzes on the reading given in lecture. Completing the quizzes counts towards your participation grade.

Papers: You will write at least 5,000 words divided over three assignments and one rewrite, detailed below. There will be questions assigned to you for each paper, but for the final paper you may choose your own topic (in close consultation with your TA) if you wish. You cannot pass the course without writing every paper.

POLICIES

Laptops and electronics: Laptops, phones and tablets distract both you and those around you, so they're not allowed in lecture or recitation unless you've received permission from the instructor. (See below for accommodations).

Late policy: A paper loses 1/3 of a grade per day it's late. (e.g. an A- grade paper will turn into a B, if it's two days late.)

Word Counts: Each assignment has a minimum and maximum wordcount. Please include the word count of your paper at the top of the first page.

Anonymous Grading: TAs will grade papers anonymously. Please do not include your name on your paper. Instead, please put your MIT ID-number at the top of the first page and in the filename. Please submit your papers via email to your TA, as a PDF.

Plagiarism: All writing must be your own. Any text that's lifted verbatim from a source must appear in quotation marks and be appropriately referenced. Any text paraphrased from a source must be referenced too – changing the way something is worded **does not** make it your own writing. Copying or paraphrasing outputs from ChatGPT or other LLMs counts as plagiarism. In general, you are responsible for knowing what counts as plagiarism. You can review MIT's "Academic Integrity Handbook" [here](#). You can always ask your TA before you submit a paper, if you're unsure. Violations of the class's plagiarism policy will be taken extremely seriously.

Disability accommodations: If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting accommodation, please let us know as soon as possible. If you already have an Accommodation Letter prepared by Disability Services, make sure to bring it with you. Any information you share with us will be treated as confidential. If you are unsure whether you need accommodation or not, contact Student Disability Services, located in 5-104, and reachable by e-mail (uaap-sds@mit.edu) or phone (617-253-1674).

Writing Help: Clear and concise writing is an important component of this class. The MIT Writing and Communication Center (WCC) offers free one-on-one professional advice from communication specialists with advanced degrees and publishing experience. The WCC can help you learn about all types of academic and professional writing and further develop your oral communication skills. You can learn more about WCC consultations at <https://cmsw.mit.edu/writing-and-communication-center/> and register with the online scheduler to make appointments through <https://mit.mywconline.com>.

GRADING

Participation and Oral Presentation:	10%
Paper I (1250 to 1500 words, due Oct 3):	15%
Rewrite (1250 to 1500 words, due Oct 19):	15%
Paper II (1750 to 2000 words, due Nov 9):	25%
Paper III (2000 to 2250 words, due Dec 12)	35%

SCHEDULE¹

R Sep 7 *Introduction*
No reading

Does God Exist?

T Sep 12 *The Ontological Argument*
Anselm of Canterbury, Chapter 2 of *Proslogion* (1077)
Gaunilo, extract from *On Behalf of the Fool*

R Sep 14 *The Fine-Tuning Argument*
Roger White, 'The Argument from Cosmological Fine-tuning' (2015)

T Sep 19 *The Problem of Evil*
Louise Antony, 'No Good Reason' (2015)

R Sep 21 *Pascal's Wager*
Daniel Korman, 'Why You Should Bet on God' (2022)
FIRST PAPER ASSIGNED

What is knowledge? How much do we know?

T Sep 26 *Knowledge and Justified True Belief*
Edmund Gettier, 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?' (1963)

R Sep 28 *Is Knowledge Analyzable?*
Timothy Williamson, 'Knowledge and Belief' (2015)

T Oct 3 *We know very little*
René Descartes, Meditation I from *Meditations* (1641)
FIRST PAPER DUE

¹ This is likely to be tweaked as the term progresses. Always check the website for the most up-to-date version.

R Oct 5 *We know a lot*
Gail Stine 'Skepticism, Relevant Alternatives, and Deductive Closure' (1976)

Is morality objective? Can we know the moral facts?

T Oct 10 STUDENT HOLIDAY, NO CLASS

R Oct 12 *Morality isn't relative*
Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, Chapter 2 (2006)

T Oct 17 *Evolutionary Debunking*
Sharon Street, 'Does Anything Really Matter or Did We Just Evolve to Think So?' (2015)

R Oct 19 *Moral Skepticism*
Sarah McGrath, 'Moral Disagreement and Moral Expertise' (2008)
REVISED PAPER DUE

What is the right thing to do?

T Oct 24 *What do we owe to those in need? Pt. 1*
Peter Singer, 'Famine, Affluence and Morality' (1972)

R Oct 26 *What do we owe to those in need? Pt. 2*
Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, Chapter 10 (2006)
SECOND PAPER ASSIGNED

T Oct 30 *The Doctrine of Double Effect; Killing and Letting Die*
Philippa Foot 'The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect' (1967)

R Nov 2 *The Trolley Problem*
Judith Jarvis Thomson, 'The Trolley Problem' (1985)

Do we have free will?

T Nov 7 *The Consequence Argument*
Peter Van Inwagen, 'The Incompatibility of Free Will and Determinism' (1975)

R Nov 9 *Moral luck*
Thomas Nagel, 'Moral Luck' (1979)
SECOND PAPER DUE

T Nov 14 *The Principle of Alternate Possibilities*
Harry Frankfurt, 'Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility' (1969)

R Nov 16 *Compatibilism*
Susan Wolf, 'Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility' (1987)

What are we? What can we survive?

T Nov 21 *The Psychological Criterion*
John Locke, Chapter 27 of *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690)

R Nov 23 THANKSGIVING, NO CLASS

T Nov 28 *Fission, Pt 1*
Derek Parfit, 'Personal Identity' (1971)
FINAL PAPER ASSIGNED

R Nov 30 *Fission, Pt 2*
David Lewis, 'Survival and Identity' (1976)

T Dec 5 *Animalism*
Eric Olson, 'An Argument for Animalism' (2003)

The Meaning of Life, and Conclusions

R Dec 7 *The Afterlife*
Samuel Scheffler, extracts from *Death and the Afterlife*

T Dec 12 *Conclusions*
No reading
FINAL PAPER DUE