PH100: Introduction to Philosophy
Worcester State University
Spring 2022 Course Syllabus

Professor Laura Kane

Course Description

Philosophy is the pursuit of questions that strike at the heart of all human understanding. Philosophers ask questions about everything, such as the nature of knowledge and truth (*Can we be certain about anything? What counts as knowledge? What can we have knowledge about?*), about the nature of reality (*Do humans have free will? What kinds of things exist?*), about the nature of right and wrong (*What am I morally obligated to do? Are there objective moral truths, or does morality depend on culture?*), about the nature of justice (*Why should we organize our lives in certain ways?*) and about what constitutes a good life.

For students new to philosophy, philosophical thinking can seem confusing or intimidating. Philosophers incessantly ask, "*Why*?" – even when these questions challenge our most cherished beliefs, including the beliefs we have about ourselves. These questions may make us feel as though we need to defend ourselves and our beliefs; this is precisely what philosophers are after! A good defense entails providing good reasons for what we hold to be good, true, valuable, or beautiful. A we attempt to answer the philosopher's questions, we may discover that we actually lack good reasons for holding some of the beliefs that we do – we believe them merely because our family or friends do, or because we have been taught to unquestioningly believe them by authority figures in schools, houses of worship, or political halls, or because we have never challenged ourselves to understand *just why* we have the beliefs that we do.

This course introduces many of the core questions that have shaped Western philosophy. We will focus upon what philosophy is and how philosophical thinking can lead us toward a greater understanding of the nature of truth, beauty, justice, and the good. Philosophy is valuable not only because it encourages reflection and critical thinking, but because it empowers us to formulate our own ideas – and it enhances our ability to appreciate others' diverse ideas, too.

Throughout this course, you will be asked to *do* philosophy: to engage in philosophical discussions with me and with your classmates, to examine the beliefs that you have, to challenge yourself about why you have those beliefs, and to explore new ways of thinking.

Discussion Board Post Assignment

There are 6 reading assignments with Discussion Board Posts (DBPs) required throughout the semester. **You are responsible for composing 5 DBPs over the course of the semester** (so, everyone gets one freebie). The course schedule includes all due dates and times**.** Your final DBP course grade will reflect the average of your 5 individual DBP grades (including '0's for additional missed posts).

DBPs must be posted to the Blackboard discussion board (you can find instruction for using the discussion boards on Blackboard). If for some reason you are unable to post, you can email your discussion post - *please be sure to email your response before the due date+time to receive full credit.*

Late DBPs will be accepted. A 10% penalty will be applied for every 24-hour period that elapses after the specified due date and time. Make-ups of missing posts (beyond the 10-day lateness period per post) will not be accepted.

The required composition of your discussion board post is as follows *(please see note below the grading rubric for* underline*special Week 6 instructions)*:

- **IDENTIFY** what you believe to be the most important part of the reading assignment, *in your own words*, in 2–3 sentences. This can be a summary of what you believe to be the **main thesis** provided by the author (this can also be thought of as the *main conclusion* the author reaches), or a **controversial assumption** grounding the author's position (for instance, some belief the author mentions that guides much of their thinking).
- **EXPLAIN** the reasoning behind your selection in 3–4 sentences: *Why have you chosen X as the main thesis offered by the author? Why is this particular assumption controversial?* Think about this section as providing **reasons** for *your* conclusion that *X* is the main thesis. You should use examples from the article to help make your case.
- **COMPARE** this reading to another reading we have covered in the course. In 2–3 sentences, **examine** the **similarity** between this reading and another (perhaps both authors reach the same conclusion, or share similar reasoning), or **examine** the **difference** between this reading and another (you can point to differences in the main theses, or differences in reasoning, and so on).
- **EVALUATE** the reading in 2–3 sentences. *Do you find the author's argument plausible/implausible? Persuasive/unpersuasive? Why?* Be sure to **justify** your evaluation by providing reasons that support your evaluation.
  FORMULATE a **question** for your classmates. This can be a question to kick off discussion (for instance, you can ask about how the author's argument might apply to something in your peers' lives), or a question about something you found unclear in the reading (for instance, you can ask a classmate to explain a concept, a term, or to clarify an example that you may have struggled with). *Be specific! Vague questions (such as, "did you like this reading?") can be difficult to answer meaningfully.*

Team discussion board posts will be graded on a scale of 0 – 4 (0=0; 1=50; 2=72; 3=88; 4=100) as follows:

Requirement	Incomplete / Does not Meet Expectations 0 – 1 (1=50)	Minimally Meets Expectations 2 (2=72)	Meets Expectations 3 (3=88)	Exceeds Expectations 4 (4=100)
Summary (of important part of reading)	Summary is missing or incomplete (0) / Summary does not reference anything specific from the reading assignment (1)	Summary vaguely references the reading assignment, but does not indicate that the student engaged with the reading assignment in a substantive way	Summary clearly references the reading and attentively summarizes the student's selection from the reading assignment	Summary clearly references the reading; summary completely and clearly outlines the student's selection while connecting the selection to the reading overall
Explanation of Summary (reason for summary selection)	Explanation of summary is incomplete or missing (0) / Explanation of summary does not logically connect to summary (1)	Explanation is not sufficiently motivated; examples used do not make the summary any clearer (may be irrelevant)	Explanation of summary is mostly clear and accurate; explanation indicates student's reasoning	Explanation of summary is relevant, accurate, and clearly indicates student's reasoning; explanation expands upon summary in insightful way

Analysis (comparison to other reading)	Analysis is incomplete or missing (0) / Analysis is too vague to discern any connection to other reading (1)	Connection to other reading is perfunctory or irrelevant	Connection to other reading is clear and well-motivated, but may not be comprehensive	Connection to other reading is clearly articulated, well-motivated, and comprehensive
Assessment (evaluation of reading)	Assessment is incomplete or missing (0) / Assessment does not include any relevant or clear reasons for student's evaluation (1)	Assessment is generic in character, does not indicate that student has engaged with implications of the author's argument(s)	Assessment is well-motivated and provides relevant reasons for student's evaluation	Assessment is well-motivated and insightful; student provides clear, comprehensive, and relevant reasons for their evaluation
Question (question for teammates)	Question is missing (0) or incomplete (1)	Question is too vague or general to motivate responses	Question is clear and specific to motivate discussion	Question is insightful and asks students to engage with reading in novel way

Week 6 Discussion Board Post Instructions

The discussion board post for Week 6, *Fake New or Echo Chambers?*, is a bit different, but will count as one of your five DBPs. For this assignment, you will draft a discussion board post that compares Nguyen's and Lackey's different takes on the root cause of our current environment of misinformation:

> In your post, please discuss whether Lackey's account of *fake news* or Nguyen's account of *echo chambers* is the more accurate explanation for our current misinformation environment. Be sure to provide at least 2 – 3 reasons in favor of your selected theory, and at least one reason that argues against the theory you find less accurate/persuasive. The reasons should be taken from the readings, and may connect to your own examples (using examples/arguments from the readings, put into your own words, is also acceptable).

Discussion Replies Assignment

There are 6 discussion replies required throughout the semester (one reply for each Discussion Board Post due). **You are responsible for composing 5 discussion replies over the course of the semester** (so, everyone gets one freebie). Your final discussion replies course grade will reflect the average of your 5 individual reply grades (including '0's for additional missed replies).

Try to think of your reply as a way to build upon what your classmate has written, to help others understand the readings (provide helpful examples, highlight portions of the reading that you believe reflect your classmate's post, etc.), or as a way to offer different interpretations of the reading, or to connect the reading to current events, other classes, etc.

Each discussion reply must satisfy the following criteria:

1. The focus of the reply must relate **either** (a) to the question posed by a student in their discussion post, or (b) directly to the content of a student's discussion post, or (c) directly to the content of another student's reply on a discussion post.
2. Try to think of your reply as a way to deepen engagement with our readings (by making new connections to other course materials, current events, or anecdotal experiences) and/or to help others understand the readings (by using examples or analogs that can clarify concepts or arguments). To this end, you should

provide helpful examples, highlight portions of the reading that you believe reflect your Teammate's post, or offer a counterpoint.

3. Replies should be roughly **175-225 words** in length.

Each reply will be graded on a scale of 0-4 (0=0, 1=50; 2=70; 3=88; 4=100):

- **0:** No reply submitted.
- **1:** The reply **does not relate to either** (a) the question posed by a student in their discussion post, or (b) directly to the content of a student's discussion post, or (c) directly to the content of another student's reply on a discussion post
- **2:** The reply relates to **either** (a), (b), or (c), but **does not** provide examples, highlight portions of the reading that you believe reflect your Teammate's post, or offer a counterpoint.
- **3:** Reply satisfies all criteria **except** length (the reply length is too short or too long)
- **4:** Reply satisfies all criteria

Late discussion replies will be accepted. A 10% penalty will be applied for every 24-hour period that elapses after the specified due date and time. Make-ups of missed replies (i.e., by posting more than one reply for a later reading assignment) will not be accepted. Only one reply will be graded per week.

Course Reading Schedule

Week	Readings and Activities
Week 1: *Introduction*	**To Read: T**he Syllabus and informational documents on Blackboard. **To Read:** Monroe Beardsley & Elizabeth Beardsley, "What Is Philosophy?"
Week 2: *Epistemology: What can we know? How can we know it?*	**To Read:** Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditation One **and** Meditation Two
Week 3: *Epistemology: What can we know? How can we know it?*	**To Read:** David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section II, "Of the Origin of Ideas" (Parts I & II)
Week 4: *Epistemology: What can we know? How can we know it?*	**To Read:** Lorraine Code, "Taking Subjectivity into Account"
Week 5: *Epistemology: What can we know? How can we know it?*	**To Read:** Briana Toole, "From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression"
Week 6: *Trust & Conspiracy*	**To Read:** Annette Baier, "Trust and Antitrust"

Week 7: *Trust & Conspiracy*	**To Read:** C. Thi Nguyen, "Escape the Echo Chamber" **and** Jennifer Lackey, "True Story: Echo Chambers Are Not the Problem"
Week 8: *Trust & Conspiracy*	**To Read:** Jamie Carlin Watson, "Expertise" **and** Quassim Cassam, "The Problem with Conspiracy Theories"
Week 9: *Assessment*	**MIDTERM EXAM**
Week 10: *Justice and Oppression*	**To Read:** Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Talking Identity"
Week 11: *Justice and Oppression*	**To Read:** Iris Marion Young, "Five Faces of Oppression"
Week 12: *Justice and Oppression*	**To Read:** John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (selections on Civil Disobedience and Conscientious Refusal)
Week 13: *Justice and Oppression*	**To Read:** Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail"
Week 14: *Justice and Oppression*	**To Read:** Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (selection)
Week 15: *Assessment*	**FINAL ASSIGNMENTS**