Instructor  Philip Brewer
Email      PhilipBrewer@jalc.edu
Website    EthicsAndMoralProblems.Wordpress.com
• **Course name:** Philosophy 111-02  
• **Days and time:** MWF 11-11:50  

• **Instructor email:** PhilipBrewer@jalc.edu

• **Texts:** No textbook will be used in this class. **Return the book** if purchased. All reading material will be formatted by the instructor into booklets (like this one) and handed out in class.

• **Class website:** EthicsAndMoralProblems.Wordpress.com  
• Bookmark the class website. Use it to access course readings, homework assignments, vocabulary terms, study notes, and other relevant material.

• **Basic course requirements:**
  
  35 homework assignments    **35 points**  
  2 Quizzes                  **5 points**    
  2 short essays             **20 points**   
  Midterm exam               **20 points**   
  Final Exam                 **20 points**

• Students are allowed a total of **4 absences**. Each absence after the fourth will lower the student’s final grade by **1 percentage point**.

• While this is a “homework heavy” course, the assignments are quite easy. Keep in mind that last semester nearly every student received an A for the course. And you can too!
Left. Socrates. Born outside of Athens over 2,000 years ago, Socrates is considered to be the father of Western philosophy, and he was Plato’s teacher, who in turn taught Aristotle. So completely did he believe that practicing philosophy was required for human flourishing, Socrates argued not only that the unexamined life was undesirable, but that it was not even worth living!

Socrates spent much of his time in Athens’ public marketplace, interrogating his fellow citizens, demanding they give an account of why they lived the way they did. Convinced that most members of his society had become incapable of cultivating worthwhile desires and living worthwhile lives, Socrates accused existing Athenian traditions and institutions of having corrupted the Athenians, of having sentenced them to automated, unreflective existences, not even conscious of their own thoughtlessness. Ironically, when Socrates was 70 years old, a few very powerful Athenians accused him of corrupting the youth and put the philosopher on trial for his life. Athens charged Socrates with breaking a law against impiety.
What is Philosophy?

Welcome to philosophy class. It’s the first time many of you have encountered philosophy, and it often sounds mysterious and obscure to the non-initiate. So, what is it? For students new to philosophy and other non-academics, it’s helpful to review the popular conceptions of philosophy. Here are three.

1. One popular definition is that philosophy is the *quest for truth regarding ultimate matters*. Here, philosophy is understood as a type of inquiry that asks (and tries to answer) the most fundamental, most theoretical, most abstract questions human beings are capable of asking. For instance:

- Does **God** exist? Can we ever know for certain one way or the other?
- If God does exist, what is the nature of God?
- Does **faith** provide us with **knowledge**?
- Why does **something** exist instead of **nothing**? Can **being** come from non-being?
- What is **reality** made of? And what is beyond the filter of human perception?
- Does **sense-experience** provide a reliable description of reality?
- Where and how do mathematical relationships—numbers, sets, groups—exist?
- Are numbers real objects or simply constructions that describe relationships?
- Is **objective knowledge** possible? Or is all knowledge dubious?
- Do human beings have **souls**? If so, do souls outlive the death of bodies?
- What is the nature of the human **mind**?
- Do human beings have **free will**? Or is free will simply an illusion?
- Is **morality** absolute and universal? Or is moral truth **relative** to time and place?
- Why should we be moral at all?
- What is the best form of society?
- What is a **State**? What is government? Are they needed?
- When may a government or State be legitimately overthrown, if ever?
Philosophy brings you into contact with the most important and fundamental human questions. And a large part of the study of philosophy consists of looking at the answers that have been given to these philosophical questions by historically important thinkers. However, the aim of a philosophy class is not only to gain an understanding of the history of ideas, but also to help guide students in their own examination of these questions, so as to aid them in the attempt to formulate their own views about the world and their place in it. This accounts for the original definition of philosophy as “the love of wisdom.” This definition also signifies the etymological root of the word; for “philosophy” comes from the Greek *philosophia*. “Philo” means love, while “sophia” is the Greek word for wisdom.

**Philosophy (n.)**

Greek: *Philosophia*  
From: *philo* “loving” + *sophia* “wisdom”

By demanding that you confront the fundamental questions facing human beings, philosophy helps you live a more fully human life. *And just what exactly is that supposed to mean?* you might rightly ask. —What it means is that practicing philosophy enhances your self-knowledge and unique individuality. By exploring a range of philosophical ideas and questions, active students will better learn how to develop (or dismantle if necessary) their interests and desires, their convictions, and even their identity. Philosophy, then, leads to self-discovery and an expansion of consciousness. On top of this, philosophy can be thoroughly enjoyable, adding special pleasures of insight to many experiences, especially your reading and conversations, but also your experience of music, literature, art, and film.
However, many students who are new to this subject still wonder what the relevance is of studying, in our day and age, the abstract philosophical theories of people, most of whom are long dead. Well, it is relevant, and here’s why. The world we live in—the economic, scientific, legal, political, and religious institutions that have organized our world—is a product of the ideas of philosophers and thinkers scattered across history. In other words, the world that you and I inhabit has an intellectual history, and the ideas used to justify the organization of our world emerged from this intellectual history. We can’t hope to understand how our world works, where it’s headed—much less how to change it—if we remain ignorant of how this world came to be arranged. Frankly, it’s difficult to think of anything more relevant than that.

Learning how to properly ask and reflect on philosophical questions also makes a substantial contribution to your powers of articulation and expression. This owes to the philosopher’s insistence on clear, critical, and logical thinking. Philosophers address their important topics and questions through rigorous argumentation (defined on pg. 16). This focus on logical and critical thinking also trains you to see through cultural and intellectual fads as well as the often empty posturing of politicians; it insulates you from the often inane prattling of media pundits and protects you from foolish opinions and everyday nonsense.

By exploring a range of philosophical ideas and questions, active students will better learn how to develop (or dismantle, if necessary) their own interests and desires, their convictions, and even their identity. Philosophy, then, leads to self-discovery and an expansion of consciousness.
2. A second popular definition is that philosophy is *speculation about how to best live a human life*. We’ll hear someone speak of Jayla as being happy because “she has a beautiful philosophy of life” while noting that “Jon’s nihilistic philosophy of life is the reason he doesn’t care about or believe in anything at all.” Or a friend might encourage us to check out the Buddhist philosophy of suffering in order to understand why a Tibetan monk has renounced all worldly desires.

Philosophers are just as concerned with the urgent *practical* questions that are crucial to how we, as human beings, decide to take up our own existence. They are the vital existential questions we ask ourselves in those rare, extraordinary moments when we draw into ourselves and reflect: *How should I make the most of the little time I have on the planet?*

This second popular definition of philosophy—“speculating on the meaning of life in order to know how to live well”—is particularly important. While this is less technical than most definitions provided by professional philosophers (i.e., academics and professors), this straightforward definition of philosophy nonetheless touches on something absolutely crucial. Because it’s true that philosophers aren’t exclusively concerned with those heady, abstract questions that can feel impractical: speculative questions about the nature of reality, of knowledge, of perception, of whether we have freewill. Rather, philosophers are just as concerned with the urgent *practical* questions that are crucial to how we, as human beings, decide to take up our own existence.

And what sort of questions are these? They are the vital *existential* questions we ask ourselves in those rare, extraordinary moments when we draw into ourselves and reflect: *How should I make the most of the little time I have on the planet?*
Below: Diogenes of Sinope, an Ancient Greek philosopher and founder of Cynic philosophy. Diogenes was a controversial figure who was banished from his hometown of Sinope after he took to defacing the state currency. After his exile, Diogenes moved to the great city of Athens where he used his simple lifestyle and behavior to criticize Athenian values and Athenian culture, what he saw as the infrastructure of a shallow and sick world. Making a virtue of poverty and simplicity, Diogenes had a reputation for sleeping in a large ceramic tub, and he became notorious for his stunts, such as carrying a lamp during the day claiming to be looking for an authentic human being.

Declaring himself a cosmopolitan (a citizen of the world instead of a city or country), Diogenes maintained that all the artificial growths of civilization were incompatible with happiness and that living-well required a return to the simplicity of nature. His cosmopolitanism was a critique of state authority and a radical claim in a world where a person’s identity was intimately tied to their citizenship of a polis (the Greek city-state). An exile and outcast, a man without a country or any state allegiances, Diogenes believed that he could be a physician to a person’s soul and improve them morally, while at the same time holding in contempt the values, lifestyles, traditions, and political institutions of his contemporaries. In other words, Diogenes continued to deface the currency—i.e., the “social currency”—of the Greek world, even after his exile.

Plato once described Diogenes as a “Socrates gone-mad.”
Human beings are creatures who often struggle to find meaning in a universe that, in many ways, appears quite meaningless. None of us asked to be born. We simply showed up onto the scene of a confusing and often painful world that’s beyond our comprehension and control. Yet habit, custom, common sense—in a word, normality—lulls us into routine-oriented existences, passively accepting as legitimate the world and the forms of life placed immediately in front of us, faintly aware that life has been living us and not the other way around.

3. A third popular tendency is the association of philosophy with the “college experience.” In most colleges or universities, a student like you inevitably winds up taking a philosophy course. For many students, this is the first time in their lives that they seriously question what it is they’ve grown up believing to be true. And while some students insulate themselves from the questioning attitude (because it can often cause great discomfort), many others are excited to discover that the big questions—which they’ve always wanted to ask, but have been habituated not to—are often the same questions asked (and beautifully “answered”) by the world’s most influential thinkers. Unsurprisingly, students tend to find the style of thinking that emerges in their philosophy class to be a refreshing departure from the unquestioning attitude that dominates most other spheres of life.

On a related note, the academic study of philosophy helps students learn to write clearly and read closely, with a critical eye. Here students learn how to spot bad reasoning and how to avoid it in their writing. But practicing clear writing and
When I say studying philosophy has changed my life, I mean it. I know I know, it sounds cliché to say that. But honestly, taking a philosophy class and having a professor that can challenge your current beliefs about everyday concepts is refreshing and needed in our generation. I can't stress that enough. I think that immersing the mind in philosophical writing provides a higher level of thinking than learning from textbooks.

I highly recommend checking out Plato's *Republic*. It's a huge philosophical work that contains dialogues between Socrates and other Athenian's during that time period, but it's a beautiful piece in its entirety. It's insane, but the topics in that work are still very much applicable today! Otherwise, why else would they still be mentioned?

Also, if you are looking for a completely different perspective on life and reality, look into Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave*. It’s my new favorite. It’s eye opening in a way that I can't even begin to describe. You start to think about concepts differently, or different concepts altogether. It makes you see familiar things so differently. And I'm starting to do that myself, and it’s so fulfilling.

If there is something I hope to walk out with at the end of my undergrad., it’s to gain as much insight and enlightenment as I can through utilizing philosophy…a degree would be nice too, I guess.

—Simran Matken, 
Northern Arizona University, 2017

careful reading requires that philosophers pay very close attention to language. We value clarity and precision in the use of our words. Thus, doing philosophy well means learning to say *exactly* what you mean and to *mean exactly* what you say. Many students—likely some in our class—who can write quite beautifully are nonetheless still unclear with what it is that they seek to communicate to their reader.

All of this makes philosophy, without a doubt, a very challenging subject to study. It requires that you inhabit a different sort of consciousness, where you suspend the certainty of many common sense beliefs. In fact, the distinguishing mark of philosophy is that everything is open to question. In philosophy class, the many presupposition that are taken for granted in other disciplines (and in everyday life) are interrogated to see whether or not there are good reasons to accept them, or whether they have problems which cast doubt on their acceptability.
Donny Smith, a second year student at the University of West Georgia had this to say when asked to describe to potential students his Intro. to Philosophy course.

Be prepared to be in over your head. Difficult material, tons of reading, hard to comprehend, a total mind-fuck. You’ll discuss God, death, reality, perception, and of course justice—oh, and anything else you only think about when you’re stoned. These classes make you feel dumb, which according to philosophy instructors means you’re probably getting smarter... go figure.

Unfortunately, countless students who love philosophy and who might otherwise choose to major in it, feel an undeniable pressure (from their parents and from “economic expectations”) to select, instead, a major like accounting or business or finance because anything else feels impractical or irresponsible. Of course, this experience isn’t exclusive to philosophy. Students whose passions lie in creative writing, music, speech communication, the visual arts, comparative religion, and other fields feel the same economic pressure of “careerism” weighing on them.
I feel like after high school, most of us just went along with the idea of college because of parents, or because it feels necessary these days to form some sort of career path with a degree, or because of this thought that "what would I be doing if I wasn't in college?" I speak for myself especially with all three of these things. After high school, college wasn't really on my mind, but it was definitely on my parents’. During that time, I knew I accepted as true the notion that life required that I eventually establish some sort of career—because I foolishly believed that having a “career” was the only way that I could make something of myself. The idea of college didn’t really interest me. Nonetheless, I went with the flow. Luckily, philosophy helped me see through a lot of the world’s bullshit, when it comes to what makes life truly valuable.

—Timothy Wright
Former student of Univ. of West Georgia

Many of my own students here at this college and at SIU have told me that they loved the one or two philosophy classes they took as an undergraduate, and that they would have enjoyed taking more courses, but since they weren’t majoring in philosophy it didn’t seem practical. Even more unfortunate is when a student who falls in love with philosophy, or some other discipline, isn’t nearly as passionate about their chosen major. How many literature students, art students, music students, and philosophy students switch their majors, owing not to the strength of their passions and desires, but because of this perceived necessity to start a career path?
Influential 19th century philosophers

Top Left. Søren Kierkegaard
Bottom Left. G.W. Hegel
Center. Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx
Top Right. Friedrich Nietzsche
Bottom Right. Arthur Schopenhauer
As for the philosophy professor, popular stereotypes include the militant-atheist (asshole) professor\(^1\); the pot-smoking (hippie) professor, the radical-Christian (existentialist) professor; and the political-idealistic (revolutionary) professor. While some philosophers “blow students’ minds,” others bore them to tears; the good philosophy class will have you honestly questioning the worldviews you took for granted. But in the best philosophy courses, students learn how to reevaluate core beliefs about themselves and their world, desiring to radically transform both.

![Image of philosophers](image1.png)

Of course, if you major in philosophy, people will assume you care little about money and will find you intriguing, maybe even slightly dangerous. At the very least, studying philosophy will probably make you more interesting at parties for the rest of your life.

\(^1\) For example, there is a ridiculous caricature of a militant-atheist philosopher professor in the (excruciatingly bad) film *God is Not Dead*. 

---

13
These popular definitions are fine starting places for getting acquainted with the meaning of philosophy. And they are not wrong per se. For philosophers do seek truth regarding the ultimate questions facing human beings; philosophers are honest about the bizarre situation of human existence and formulate compelling visions of what it means to live a good, worthwhile life; philosophy professors do tend to be eccentric, controversial, and inspiring. The study of philosophy teaches you to approach problems from multiple perspectives, trains you to think carefully around complex situations, and refines your ability to articulate your thoughts to others in meaningful ways. But most importantly, for those who engage their philosophy class seriously, and with patience, philosophy can create a conversion that turns an entire life upside down, radically changing the lives of those who go through it.

However, there is a good deal more to unpack in these three conceptions of philosophy. So, starting with the first definition—the quest for the truth regarding ultimate matters—we’ll address in more detail all three popular notions of what philosophy is and gain a better understanding of the strange 2,500 year-old discipline, which one talented philosopher rightly described as the “highest flourishing of human thought.”

---

2 A description one of my professors gave years ago in a class not unlike this one.
1. The Quest for Truth Regarding Ultimate Matters

Philosophy is the purist of wisdom regarding the biggest and most fundamental questions that human beings can ask. But where this popular description of philosophy sometimes goes wrong is in the assumption (widely believed) that philosophy is just the *proliferation of opinions*: grandiose theories that can be proven neither right nor wrong. Because no one really has a once-and-for-all, absolute answer to the big “meaning of life” questions that philosophers are well-known—and sometimes poked fun at—for asking, it is assumed that “philosophical theories” (about the meaning of life or the nature of reality) cannot really be right or wrong.

Thus, in the popular imagination philosophy is wrongly assumed to be subjective or opinion-based. This is where popular conceptions of philosophy are unhelpful. When it’s assumed that philosophy is based on opinion rather than knowledge, the idea is that philosophy doesn’t give us facts about the world. It is then further assumed that philosophical theories are less reliable than the sort of knowledge provided by the hard sciences and even the (soft) social sciences. But philosophers don’t merely speculate on the topics that interest them, with their “heads in the clouds” as it were. Rather, philosophers address their topics through rigorous argumentation. And arguments, of course, can be better or worse than other arguments. Arguments can be valid or invalid, sound or unsound. Philosophical theories, therefore, are evaluated on the strength of their arguments.
Argumentation

Of course, there are two meanings to this word “argument.”

1. An oral disagreement, a quarrel, a conflict; this is the most common use of the word.

2. A process of reasoning involving a logically connected set of statements. These statements consist of premises (which function as evidence) and conclusions (statements derived from the premises).

It is this second meaning of “argument” that is essential to the practice of philosophy. Good philosophical theories are well-reasoned arguments. Below is an example of a “premises-to-conclusion” argument, consisting of two premises and a conclusion. This is one of the most basic logical forms, and it is known as a syllogism.

Premise 1 All men are mortal;⁴
Premise 2 Socrates is a man;
Conclusion Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

This is a valid argument with true premises. Thus, it is a sound argument.

Now, in order to be a good argument, or what logicians refer to as a sound argument, two requirements must be met: first, the premises must be true; and second, the argument must be valid. An argument is valid only if the conclusion logically follows from the premises. That is, if an argument is valid, it would be impossible for the premises to be true and for the conclusion to be false at the same time.

⁴ “Valar morghulus” for those of us who are fans of Game of Thrones.
Here the Socrates syllogism is expressed in variables only, which renders the logical structure of the argument more apparent:

**Premise 1** All M are P;
**Premise 2** S is an M;
**Conclusion** Therefore, S is a P.

Here, the logical form itself demonstrates that validity can be determined simply by examining the structure of the argument, regardless of what the variables in the premises might refer to.

The argument that concludes that Socrates is mortal is clearly sound, for premises 1 and 2 are true and its conclusion necessarily follows from them both. Remember, however, that what makes an argument valid is not that it has true premises and a true conclusion. What makes an argument valid, rather, is the pattern of its reasoning. In a valid argument, the conclusion is logically necessary, given the premises. And a validly structured argument is valid even if the premises are blatantly false—validity is about logical structure.

For instance, the ridiculous argument on the next pages has a logical form that is identical to the syllogism in the above argument, but with two obviously false premises and an equally obvious false conclusion. Yet, it is equally valid. It is not, however, sound; for soundness requires true premises in addition to validity.
Premise 1  All rounds things are donuts;
Premise 2  Socrates is a round thing;
Conclusion  Therefore, Socrates is a donut.

Now, if in validly structured arguments, the truth of the premises guarantees the truth of the conclusion—meaning that the conclusion necessarily follows from them—then in invalid arguments, the conclusion does not necessarily follow from the premises (even if the conclusion is itself a true statement). Likewise, an argument can be invalid even if it has true premises, just as a valid argument can have false premises.

Premise 1  All good teachers come to class on time;
Premise 2  Professor Simpson comes to class on time;
Conclusion  Therefore, Professor Simpson is a good teacher.

Let’s assume the above premises are true. Nonetheless, do the two premises provide adequate support for the argument’s conclusion? That is, does the conclusion that Professor Simpson is a good teacher necessarily follow from the truth of the premises?

The conclusion does not logically follow from the premises.
—Can you see why?

The conclusion does not follow from the premises for the simple reason that it is quite possible that there are many bad teachers who nonetheless come to class on time (all of my worst teachers in high school were quite punctual, after all).
For instance, perhaps one is bad at teaching because he cannot explain class material clearly, or because she assigns too much or too little class work, or because they are unable to make learning exciting. The fact that a teacher always comes to class on time does not exclude the possibility that they are bad at teaching because of some other reason. Therefore, the above argument is invalid because the truth of the premises does not provide good support—is not good evidence—for the truth of the conclusion. In valid arguments, the truth of the premises necessarily implies the truth of the conclusion.

***

“Validity,” “invalidity,” “soundness,” “unsoundness”—these are some of the basic concepts one learns in an introduction to logic class. Logic is a sub-discipline of philosophy. Logic classifies different argument constructions; identifies common fallacies (forms of reasoning that appear to be valid, but are faulty); and studies the logical forms that are common to all valid inferences (the step of logically moving from premises to a conclusion).

\[
p \\
p \rightarrow q \\
\therefore q
\]

A logical form known as Modus ponens. This logical structure is always valid.

As you might imagine, there are several advanced systems of logic, just as there are several advanced systems of mathematics. But what all the systems of logic have in common is that they all strive to be “sciences of reason,” the systematic study of the “laws” that govern valid reasoning.
Recognizing the importance of logic and argumentation to the practice of philosophy is fundamental, precisely because it uproots one of the most common misconceptions about philosophy, namely that philosophical views are mere opinions. Believing that philosophical views are just matters of opinion leads one to believe that any philosophical position is just as good (or bad for, that matter) as any other. So, what exactly is an “opinion”?

An opinion is a belief that is not backed up with evidence. In common usage, saying “it is my opinion that X is the case” is the same as saying “I believe that X is the case.” Thus, an “opinion” is typically taken to mean “an unsupported belief.” But philosophy attempts to replace opinion with knowledge when it comes to the fundamental questions that face human beings. Those who entertain the belief that all philosophical views are mere opinions assume, further, that there are no better or no worse opinions on philosophical matters, making philosophy ultimately inconsequential—meaning that after the opposing opinions are stated, there would be no point in discussing important matters any further.

Dismissing an argument that one disagrees with as “just someone’s opinion” is quite common in everyday discourse;
it’s something of a mental reflex. One problem with this mental reflex is that it often functions as a **personal defense mechanism**. In other words, dismissing someone’s argument as a “mere opinion” insulates a person from having to question their own beliefs when they are confronted with evidence and arguments that contradict those beliefs.

In debates or conversations about the most important topics, your argument-backed, philosophical position **may not be dismissed** by others as a mere opinion. If someone wishes to disagree with your philosophical position, they are obligated to provide counter-arguments of their own. In other words, they are required to articulate well-reasoned critiques that call into question both the reliability of your argument’s evidence and the validity of your pattern of reasoning. However, the uncritical attitude, which would have all arguments reduced to opinions, reveals an intellectual laziness which happens to run rampant when it comes to controversial topics, such as discussions about racism, religion, and politics (topics frequently addressed by philosophers). This uncritical attitude is as dangerous as it is common, for it nourishes ignorance, thoughtlessness, and subservience to the status
quo in people who might otherwise be thoughtful and reflective members of their community.

To recap: philosophy is the practice of addressing the most fundamental questions that face human beings. But philosophy is neither the mere proliferation of opinions on those topics nor grandiose theories which can neither be proven right nor wrong. Rather, when philosophers investigate those fundamental questions, they proceed through rigorous argumentation, which can be lengthy and complex and which requires close and careful scrutiny. It is true, however, that as philosophers we may begin inquires with our existing beliefs and intuitions. But what is required of us is that we defend those beliefs with genuine arguments and reliable evidence and that we become brave enough to adjust or even abandon those beliefs and opinions in light of reason and new evidence.

Thus, philosophical thinking involves reasoning about and arguing for the position in question. And again, a philosophical position that is backed up with arguments and evidence is never simply a matter of opinion. Of course, only some philosophers will actually translate their complex arguments into logical formulas (like the syllogisms provided earlier). Thus, being proficient in logic isn’t required for reading and practicing philosophy. Yet, studying logic is still important, as it can help one learn to distinguish good reasoning from bad reasoning. Philosophers here at John A. Logan offer an introductory course in logic, but in our class we are much more concerned with the less abstract—less formulaic—practice of critical thinking.
Critical Thinking

Determining the soundness and validity of an argument requires critical thinking. This refers to the ability to evaluate the “pattern of reasoning” exhibited by a person’s argument. And an argument’s pattern of reasoning is the path it takes from its first premise to its conclusion. Practicing critical thinking requires that you learn to:

- **Identify an argument’s path of reasoning**
  In other words, identify the various premises and conclusions in the argument and then determine how those premises are intended to support the argument’s conclusion.

- **Evaluate the truth of its premises**
  That is, evaluate the strength and reliability of the evidence (if any) that was used to support the premises.

Let’s continue unpacking the popular conceptions of philosophy, addressing the second popular definition: that philosophy is speculation about how best to live a human life.
2. Speculating on How to Best Live a Human Life

As we’ve noted, philosophers do not occupy themselves exclusively with the tremendously abstract questions about freewill or the nature of reality or the existence of God or the relationship between experience, perception, and knowledge, etc., etc. On the contrary, philosophers are just as devoted—if not more so—to the honest interrogation of the human condition, where two fundamental questions come to the surface:

- What is the meaning of human existence?
- What is required for humans to live truly worthwhile lives?

Some of the greatest thinkers throughout history—Socrates numbering among them—have prioritized these questions above all others, especially above those speculative inquiries that are detached from the practical urgencies of living a good life. No inquiry, these philosophers argue, is more urgent, more vital, more desperately in need of our attention, than the quintessential human question: how do we realize well-lived lives, especially in the midst of a world that is rife with pain, confusion, struggle and conformism.

The world that you and I have inherited and must live in is decidedly not a world of our own making: the forms of life that we have inherited and perpetuate were organized and arranged well in advance. Because of that, we tend take for granted the legitimacy and acceptability of this world and its arrangements—no matter how stupid, no matter how cruel. Accordingly, the traditional set of desires, goals and options that are on offer for us also tend to be taken for granted as legitimate and acceptable—no matter how mediocre, no matter how shallow.
But perhaps the various desires, options, and forms of life that are on offer for us are *neither legitimate nor acceptable*. Even so, this does not stop the masses of human beings from automatically accepting those forms of life as inevitable, just as peasants living under the ruthless systems of theocratic feudalism and hereditary aristocracy—which were justified by the idea of the *Divine Right of Kings*—tended to accept their world as normal, legitimate, and acceptable, when it is obvious now that such forms of life were anything but.

Along with most of the philosophers and great thinkers throughout history, we can safely draw the conclusion that human beings, both as individuals and groups, have been sentenced to a life of ignorance and naiveté. This means that only on the rarest of occasions do humans actually stop to question the basic arrangements of their world in order to consider whether it could—and whether it *should*—be totally transformed from top to bottom, and done so in accordance with desires and goals that are not simply socially programmed and “on offer” by the existing world.

To state this even more plainly. For more than 30 centuries of Western philosophy, one singular theme has re-occurred, more than any other, across the ages: namely, that social norms and values are more often than not simply artificial rules converted by human thoughtlessness into unchanging natural principles that subsequently go unquestioned, from one generation to the next. The blind obedience to these social norms and values exhibits the state of slumber and mindlessness that characterizes most people. For most people live a life of quiet resignation and submission to the existent, to the *status quo*—to the *world-inherited*. 
On top of this, our lives have been stamped by the universe with a death sentence. Every philosophy of life—the philosophy that asks “how do we live well”—must contemplate what the appropriate attitude is to take up with regard to our mortality. And though we put it out of mind—preoccupied with the crowds, the commodities, and the careerisms that define individual lives—this awareness of death’s certainty is what defines our very being, our very nature. *We are all beings-towards-death.*

As death-bound beings, we experience our own **contingency**—the sheer fact that we *are* and that we do not *have* to be. This is not as simple as the obvious fact that, had our parents never met, we could not be here. Rather, it is the insight into the difference between what we are and *that* we are, that underscores a person’s experience of their own non-necessity. Theories of “living-well” must account for mortality and address what it means to live well as “death-bound beings.”

*Surrealist painter Rene Magritte substitutes a coffin in the place of Madame Récamier. Récamier was a popular French socialite, whose great beauty enticed many men to fall in love with her. A simple reminder of death’s inevitability, the only trace we have of Madame Récamier in Magritte’s painting is her iconic, white gown cascading to the floor.*


*Right. René Magritte’s Perspective: Madame Récamier by David. 1951.*
Each and every one of us will die. We have been dying since the moment we came into this world, moving always forward, unalterably, in the direction of death. We will not be spared this event nor saved from it. That is, no one can live our bodily deaths for us. Your death is entirely your own. For the atheist and for the Christian, for the courageous and for the coward—it will be the same. No matter how terrifying the event, you will have to die. Let yourself be gripped by this event: your unique, your own-most, individual death which exists for you only.

Of course, there will always be decisive moments when a person confronts his own mortality (her being-towards-death), trembles before the sheer “what-the-fuckness-of-existence,” and grows anxious about the path their life has taken. If there are simply no clear and unambiguous explanations as to why we exist in the first place, how do we live truly meaningful lives in the face of our inexorable death? What is required of us in order to take up our existence and our possibilities consciously, deliberately?

"She would have died later anyway. That news was bound to come someday. Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow. The days creep slowly along until the end of time. And every day that’s already happened has taken fools that much closer to their deaths. Out, out, brief candle. Life is nothing more than an illusion. It's like a poor actor who struts and worries for his hour on the stage and then is never heard from again. Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."  

_—Macbeth_  
—Shakespeare

_I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to confront only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived._  

—Henry David Thoreau
Living Well and the Acute Sensation of Being

Draw into yourself. Stop thinking. Perceive the flow of time and fixate on the very passing of moments, one into another. Become conscious of whatever is given immediately to your senses. And experience the phenomenon of those things themselves: their enduring, unceasing presence. The matter around you hums with being. Being is subtle; it is strange; it is surreal. Apprehend your own presence, from one moment to the next—you too are be-ing.

Fleetingness Presence Perception
The flow of time, the flow of being, and that you are witness to it, can feel dreamlike, inexplicable. Be open to this. Be present to it. You are a part of this flow. Let Being itself, be unusual. —You are here. You are conscious. You exist. What is this?

Talk of mysteries! — Think of our life in nature — daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it — rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The solid earth! The actual world! Contact! Contact! Who are we? Where are we?

—Thoreau

Perhaps the single most philosophical experience you can have is when this sort of awareness—this acute sensitivity to the flow of being and time, to the drama of existence—is transformed into an urgent, creative question: Are there ways of thinking, acting, and living that might be more satisfying and more exciting than the ways I think, act, and live today?
Living Well and the Acute Sensation of *Freedom*

When we ponder it with seriousness, this question is often accompanied with the feeling of a certain sort of peril. There is something dangerous about freedom. Transforming your relationship to existence, taking up of one’s life as an intentional project of creation, experimentation, and individuality—the passion-filled attempt to be *fully alive*—involves risk. Social norms, expectations of success, the desires for creature comforts, the practical considerations of economic realities, and of course all of those personal relationships that revolve around established forms of life: these may be felt as obstacles to the individual who has begun to apprehend, and desires to seize, the full range of possibilities that exist for their life.

The *acute sensation of freedom*—that one can choose this, and now that path, that an entire form of life could be jettisoned or constructed at will—is often experienced as a result of self-awareness of being. In other words, the awareness that you can make so much of your own life, creating it as you will, can be generated by the wonder of self-consciousness. The miraculous and unknown: this is life. Living well requires being-aware of being free.

Is it your wish, my friend, to go into solitude? Is it your wish to seek the way to yourself? Then linger a moment, and listen to me. “They who seek, easily get lost,” thus speaks the herd. And you have long belonged to the herd. The voice of the herd will still be powerful in you. And when you say to yourself “I no longer have a common conscience with the herd masses,” it will be felt as an agony to you.

*Lonely one, you are going the way to yourself. Lonely one, you are going the way of the creator.*

—Friedrich Nietzsche
Existential Crisis

Becoming acutely conscious of being, of one’s existence, of existential freedom is extraordinary, almost mystical to experience. Yet, this does not erase the fact that the meaning and the nature of existence is full of the most gnawing uncertainty and doubt. Tens of thousands of traditions, over tens of thousands of years, have tried to overcome this uncertainty and doubt—with religion, philosophy, ideology—but the uncertainty, the brute inexplicability, of existence remains. It can unsettle us. It can overwhelm us. It can unhinge us from normal reality, if we are brave enough to confront it.

I think about my daughter now—what she was spared. Sometimes I feel grateful. Doctor said she didn’t feel a thing, went straight into a coma. And then, somewhere in that blackness she slipped off into another deeper kind. Isn’t that a beautiful way to go out, painlessly, as a happy child?

Trouble with dyin’ later is that you’ve already grown up. The damage is done. It’s already too late.

I think of the hubris it must take to yank a soul out of non-existence and into this—meat. And to force a life into this…thresher. And as to my daughter—she spared me the sin of being a father.

Rust Cohle
—True Detective

Right. The Scream of Nature by Norwegian Expressionist Edvard Munch in 1893. The Scream is often associated with the sudden dawning of an existential crisis.
Learning to Desire

What is the greatest thing you can experience? It is the hour of your greatest contempt. It is the hour in which even your happiness becomes loathsome to you, and so also your reason and virtue. The hour when you say: What good is my happiness? It is poverty and filth and wretched comforts. But my happiness should justify existence itself!

The hour when you say: What good is my reason? Does it long for knowledge, as the lion for his prey? It is poverty and filth and wretched comfort!

The hour when you say: What good is my virtue? It has not yet driven me mad! It is all poverty and filth and wretched comfort!

The hour when you say: What good is my justice? I do not see that I am filled with fire and fuel. But the just are filled with fire and fuel.

Have you ever spoken thus? Have you ever cried thus? If only I have heard you cried this way! Where is the lightning to lick you with its tongue? Where is the madness with which you should be cleansed?

H ave you ever spoken thus? Have you ever cried thus? If only I have heard you cried this way! Where is the lightning to lick you with its tongue? Where is the madness with which you should be cleansed?

I tell you: one must still have chaos in oneself to give birth to a dancing star. I tell you: you still have much chaos in you.

But alas! There is coming a time when man will no longer give birth to any star. Alas! There is coming the time of the most despicable human, who can no longer despise himself, and is incapable of real desire.

This is the Last Man. He believes he has discovered happiness.
Against the logic of Submission

According to the logic of submission, life is merely something that happens to us, something that we “make the best of,” a perspective that defeats us before we’ve even begun to struggle to create beautiful lives. The point, then, is to make the decision to take one’s life back in its totality.

For the philosopher of life, this means to be awakened, and to help awaken others, from that slumber and submission—to regain possession of one’s individual mind, as the source of one’s values, principles, passions, and desires. This is a socially dangerous idea that has, historically, placed philosophers and their students into conflict with the existing social order. To this day, it continues to place philosophers and their students into conflict with the existing social order. But ultimately, this is the only real solution available to anyone who has contemplated, as Diogenes put it, “the insanity of the human world.” Moved to decisive action by our passions, and against all the odds, we come to view life differently—or, more precisely, to live differently. Taking responsibility for our lives—this is a leaping spark that ignites the soul and becomes self-sustaining.

Finally, let’s address the third popular conception of philosophy—it’s association with the “college experience.”
3. *The Association of Philosophy with the “College Experience”*

The last popular conception of philosophy we’ll discuss has to do with the association of philosophy with the “college experience,” in particular the experience of freshman and sophomores as they encounter philosophy for the first time in a classroom. We noted much earlier that philosophy class becomes, very often, the first time that young people begin to seriously question what it is they’ve grown up believing to be true. We also noted that, unfortunately, countless students who love philosophy, and otherwise might choose to major in it, feel an undeniable pressure (from their parents and from “economic expectations”) to select, instead, majors that they imagine will give them a “leg up” on the job market upon graduation. This is the line of thought we’ll continue to develop here.

**Welcome to College**

Why are you here? In this school? In this classroom? This question is a natural starting point, one that you have hopefully begun to ask yourself. More and more, undergraduates view college as a pre-professional training ground where the central priority is developing one’s marketability for the job hunt after graduation. While the logic behind this approach is aimed at keeping future doors open, this trend has a tendency to actually close doors, in two important ways. First, on an existential level, it is crucially important for us to *take every opportunity we can* to explore what concerns us, fascinates us, challenges us, and motivates us on this all-too-fragile journey we call life. But allowing
the boom and bust indicators of the employment market to become one’s guide to learning seems more stifling than stimulating. Don’t let the perception that you must become “marketable”—that you must form a “career path”—tear you away from potentially exploring what it is that truly fascinates you.

Second, on a more pragmatic and strategic level, a great number of employers are not primarily interested in an employee with “specialized skills” anyway. Do a quick Google search on “what employers are looking for,” and you’ll find thousands of sites that suggest employers’ main concerns are finding potential employees who can 1) creatively solve problems; 2) communicate effectively and work well with others; and 3) efficiently manage their time. I would argue that passionately exploring any major while in school will challenge you to develop such skills. The point being: you need to learn to make decisions on terms that work for you. Think about what you value in this world and what you imagine could be improved about it.

Ask yourself: what are the origins and the consequences of the values I embrace? What kind of vocation will allow me to live out these values and will allow me contribute to the changes I aspire to see?

What should education be about? Job training? What about a theory of education that maintains something like this: education should be about leading us into imaginative domains, where we can gain the critical and intellectual tools needed to change ourselves and our world—to build a world that is truly responsive to our desires for beauty, justice, and goodness.
The Edu-factory

Consider this. Human beings are a deeply curious, learning-oriented species. But if this is so, why then do the great majority of students, who were once so relentlessly curious, hate school and yearn to get out? Furthermore, if school is truly a place to learn about the world, then why is it designed to remove students from the daily activity of their community—in some cases for up to 25 years? The answer to these questions lies in understanding how school tends to invert the learning process. Rather than create a setting where young people can explore their curiosity, most schools are set up to ensure that students consume predetermined curricula in a predetermined process of scheduled courses and assignments.

Colleges and universities offer a particular orientation toward reality—it’s a worldview of sorts, based on a set of assumptions that are built into the degree-oriented process of university schooling. One of these basic assumptions is that a university becomes successful in proportion to the amount of revenue it generates and in proportion to the number of potential employees it successfully churns out for the marketplace. Yes, perhaps higher education could be reorganized such that its primary mission was to lead students into experimental and imaginative domains, where they gain the critical and intellectual tools needed to change themselves and to change the world. And sixty years ago, to some extent, there were some universities—though more or less reserved for upper-class white males—that made this
one if its guiding principles. But increasingly over the last forty years, orientation to education has been further and further de-emphasized in universities and colleges, and instead this orientation has been relegated to the mission statement of only a few, severely underfunded, humanities programs.

Every year, colleges and universities are structured more and more to function like giant factories, producing a certain sort of commodity for the market. *You, the student, has become that commodity:* a pliable and obedient producer and consumer, who knows well how to follow orders. With your student loans, you are already generating enormous profits for the banks—*just by being here.*

Schooling has disciplined you for this role over the last twelve years of your life. After all, the “student” is a creature who has been taught to ask for a permission slip just in order to take a piss.

The edu-factory churns out commodities. And this is dangerous. It’s part of an existential transformation of a student into a **commodity**—a source of profit accumulation—that has been well underway for quite a long time. We were told by our parents and by society to focus on finding a career, to focus on being successful. Yet, we’ve
also been instructed to find a job that was “meaningful” to us. Thus, we’ve been taught, in other words, to learn to associate our quest for meaning in this life with money and the scramble to get it. But there is a consequence to this: it often traps our desires for freedom and happiness in the economy. Our world is arranged such that the only desires that are deemed acceptable—that are deemed valid, that are not dismissed as impractical—are desires that channel your energy into the economy.

And of course, a further consequence of this is that we often sever from our lives, sometimes completely, any desire that isn’t conducive to finding a career. Finally, we may forget how to desire altogether. Let’s conclude this introduction to philosophy class with a final conception of philosophy.
So, philosophy reflects on the most fundamental questions human beings are capable of asking, and more often than not, philosophy is encountered for the first time in college. The important questions that become topics of interest for philosophers are addressed with clear, precise writing and rigorous argumentation, argumentation that is often lengthy and complex; and among the fundamental questions philosophers interrogate, one of the most important is what does it mean to live a worthwhile life.

What’s important to understand, further, is that there is no concise or neutral definition of philosophy. And as it turns out, in order to define what philosophy is, one must philosophize. One does not actually have to “do chemistry,” for example, in order to adequately (and neutrally) define it as “the science that deals with the composition and properties of substances.” That philosophy is so self-reflective is one of its most unique characteristics—a characteristic that is not shared by other disciplines, which can usually be defined without much trouble. Nonetheless, I will offer here a final definition of this strange 2,500 year old discipline. Philosophy is best understood, best defined, as a unique style of consciousness that calls one to a radically different way of being—of thinking—in the world. Philosophical thinking takes on a fundamentally different orientation to the world than ordinary, everyday consciousness.

For instance, our daily lives are mostly full of things that keep us busy and preoccupied. But every now and again we
draw back into ourselves and wonder *what is it all about?* And then we might start to ask some very fundamental questions that “ordinary consciousness” normally wouldn’t think to ask. This moment of reflection can happen in any aspect of life. In politics for instance, people always bandy about the terms “freedom,” “justice,” “equality,” and “democracy.” But every now and again, someone comes along and asks: “Yea, but what do these concepts actually mean?”

- What do we mean by “freedom?”
- What do we mean by “justice?”
- What do we mean by “democracy?”
- What do we mean by “equality?”

In fact, we might begin to wonder whether democracy is in conflict with all sorts of things. We normally associate the concept of “democracy” with the idea of “equality.” But then again, the concept of democracy also tends to mean the “rule of the majority.” So what if the majority decides strip away the freedoms of minority groups? If majority-rule democracy is in conflict with equality, is it *still* democracy. Perhaps democracy is also in conflict with the economy. In this country, we are told that it is good and necessary to spread democracy around the world. But does our own economic system really encourage, or even tolerate, the spread of democratic forms of life? Consider these questions:

- Is our economy democratically organized?
- Do communities collectively and democratically decide how to use and distribute goods and resources?
- Should we directly vote on economic questions?
Ordinary consciousness does not ask such questions; thus ordinary consciousness, is usually in a state of passive ignorance about the basic contradictions built into our traditions, values, and social institutions.

Let’s consider a few other questions that, when asked, clearly exhibit that one’s consciousness has expanded beyond the everyday “taking for granted” of the world’s arrangement. Reflecting on the concept of “freedom,” one might ask: *is what we consider a “free market” actually free?* For instance, consider what most of us do to survive in this world.

- We participate in wage labor.
- That is, we sell our ability to perform work in exchange for a wage, without which we couldn’t live.
- We consider selling away our labor and time to be one of our most basic freedoms.

But consider the matter this way: It appears that the most precious things we have in this world are our *time* and our *labor* (the work we are able to do). But in order to survive, the only option the world has given (most of) us is to *sell away* those very things which are most precious and valuable. From here, a philosophical consciousness may begin to ask other (perhaps dangerous) questions.

- Are there other ways of arranging our world, so that we don’t have to sell away our labor—the most precious thing we have—but keep it?
- Can the world be arranged so that we are empowered to decide—with our family and our friends and our community—how we all want to use our time and labor?

- Can communities be arranged so that we all use our time and labor to go to work producing the beautiful and just world we want, instead of selling our time and labor to corporations (who often make the world a worse place)?

When one starts thinking like this, and asking these sorts of fundamental questions, they are engaging in political philosophy and the philosophy of economics. In fact, we can subject any field of human activity to this attitude of fundamental questioning. Thus, there can be a philosophy of anything:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Philosophy of life</th>
<th>Philosophy of race</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environmental philosophy</td>
<td>Philosophy of religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy or art</td>
<td>Philosophy of science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy of friendship</td>
<td>Philosophy of love</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Left. The *Thinker*. A bronze statue often used to represent philosophy
A good name for this attitude of radical questioning is “philosophical consciousness.” Philosophical consciousness is a way of life more so than a list of questions. What we might call “ordinary consciousness,” on the other hand, is the everyday attitude that takes for granted the acceptability of the world and the forms of life immediately in front of it. Ordinary consciousness accepts the existing social reality—all the world’s artificial arrangements—as normal, natural, valid, and preferable. Ordinary consciousness says: “this is just the way things are. This very natural way of being adjusted to the world has to do with ready-made standing habits of mind: those mental predispositions and mental reflexes which carry you seamlessly, unquestioningly, through life. One might put it like this: Ordinary consciousness has to do with the way one moves through the continuum of everyday existence, with all the normal expectations that go along with it. The world that we’ve inherited—that is, the reality that was constructed for us before we ever even showed up (by institutions and traditions)—is tacitly accepted by our ordinary, everyday consciousness as natural and legitimate, along with the ideas and values used to justify those institutions and traditions.

Philosophical consciousness, on the other hand, is quite skeptical of the supposed validity, naturalness, and acceptability of the immediate world on offer. By attempting to create a space for a philosophical consciousness to emerge, our course will emphasize social, political, and economic questions, thereby introducing students to social and political philosophy. In turn, our analysis of the world—and of the contemporary upheavals unfolding within it—will become more far more sophisticated.
Ours is a Messy and Complex World

Now, our world is very messy and very complex. Misunderstanding and ignorance are perpetuated everywhere: from your friends and your parents; from your teachers and pastors; from your politicians and your media. Thus, there is mass confusion regarding whether or not (and to what extent) exploitation, domination, and destruction, are actually built into the very systems and structures that have shaped our shared, social reality. And we simply don’t yet have the intellectual tools to fully understand the threats and complexities of the world we live in.

- Ours is world undergoing human-caused climate change and ecological catastrophe.
  - We are currently witnessing a major species die-off in the biosphere and are now living through Earth’s 6th **mass extinction event**.

- Ours is a world characterized by an extraordinary level of incarceration.
  - The U.S. has imprisoned people (largely defined by race and class) at a rate that is simply unprecedented in world history.

  - In 2014, this **mass incarceration** fueled the rise of an enormous social rebellion, against the criminal justice system and the frequency of police brutality against black bodies in the U.S.
**World Population**

The U.S. makes up only 5 percent of the world's population, but houses a quarter of the world's prisoners with more than 2 million criminals behind bars.

**Expected vs. observed numbers of extinctions since 1900**

- **Expected**
  - Mammals: 1.26
  - Birds: 2.38
  - Reptiles: 1.01
  - Amphibians: 1.46
  - Fishes: 2.84

- **Observed**
  - Mammals: 35
  - Birds: 57
  - Reptiles: 8
  - Amphibians: 32
  - Fishes: 66

Source: Accelerated Modern Human-Induced Species Losses: Entering the Sixth Mass Extinction

**Piketty split**

United States

Ratio of total household wealth to national income

Percentage of total net household wealth held by:
- Top 0.1%
- Bottom 90%

Source: Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, NBER working paper 20625
• Ours is a world characterized by staggering economic and wealth inequality.
  o In the last few decades, the wealth and economic inequality in the U.S. has reached historic levels not seen since the **gilded age** of the late 1920s.
  o OXFAM reported in 2017 that eight men own the same wealth as the 3.6 billion people who make up the poorest half of humanity.

• Ours is a world under the influence of powerful, **transnational corporations** that often wield more power than sovereign states.
  o Lobbyist for these corporations tend to write many of the world’s laws and can sue countries in transnational courts if those countries violate “**free trade**” agreements.

• Our is a world where vast numbers of people are connected with one another virtually at all times through social media, yet human lives are more and more characterized by isolation, anxiety, depression, and generalized misery.
  o The suicide rate in the U.S. has increased 24% since the early 1990s.
A significant portion of our class will be dedicated to rendering clear how our existing political, systems, economic systems, and social systems have organized the world for us, shaped our lives and desires, and injected crises into nearly every sphere of social reality. And how does this bent on social and political analysis exhibit a philosophical consciousness. Well, at its best philosophy desires an intervention into the world-inherited, in order for world-building. This requires that philosophical consciousness dismantle the resistance we all feel to making a personal and collective commitment to changing the world.

This ethic of philosophizing in order to intervene into the construction of world’s was the guiding orientation of Western philosophy at its inception over 2000 years ago with the philosophy of Socrates, and it is an orientation to philosophy that that we shall try to develop over the course of the semester.
Welcome to philosophy class. It’s the first time many of you have encountered philosophy, and it often sounds mysterious and obscure to the non-initiate. So, what *is* it?

Philosophical consciousness is quite skeptical of the supposed validity, naturalness, and acceptability of the immediate world on offer, along with its institutions and the ideas that justify them. Creating a space for this form of consciousness to emerge, our philosophy course will emphasis social, political, and economic questions, thereby introducing students to social and political philosophy. In turn, our analysis of the world—and of the contemporary upheavals unfolding within it—will become more far more sophisticated.