



PHIL 100 Central Problems of Philosophy

Units: 4

Fall 2026—Mondays Wednesdays & Fridays—12:00-12:50

Location: Room 100, Dr. Joseph Medicine Crow Center for International and Public Affairs (DMC)

Instructor: Dmitri Gallow

Office: 205 Mudd Hall

Office Hours: 14:00–15:00, Mondays and Wednesdays

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Readings

All readings will be available through Brightspace.

Course Description

This course offers an introduction to philosophy. Its central goal is to give students an appreciation of the methods of philosophy and how they allow us to address philosophical questions. The questions we will consider this semester include: ‘Should we fear death?’, ‘Should we prohibit offensive or hateful speech?’, ‘Is morality objective or subjective?’, ‘Does time move forward, or is the flow of time an illusion?’, ‘Does God exist?’, and ‘Do we have free will?’. Sadly, no academic field can definitively settle what to think about these matters. Philosophy can, however, teach us about the costs and benefits of various answers to these questions, which distinctions we should bear in mind when thinking the questions through, and how our answers to some of the questions constrain which answers we can give to the others.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, students will gain a deeper understanding of the questions and methods of philosophy. In addition, they will be able to: 1) read, understand, and extract arguments from philosophical texts; 2) clearly explain the central philosophical questions covered in this course; 2) accurately describe the prominent answers to these questions; and 3) critically evaluate these answers.

Evaluation

Final grades will be determined by four components:

Midterm*	30%
Final*	30%
Oral Exams*	30%
Reading Comprehension Quizzes	10%

* The midterm, final, and oral exams are mandatory. If you never take a midterm, never take a final, or never take an oral exam, you will not pass the course.

For each of these four components, you will be assigned a letter grade. Each letter grade corresponds to a number between 0 and 10:

Letter :	A+	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D	F
Number:	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0

Using these numbers, your grade for the course will be determined by the calculation:

$$[\text{Course}] = 30\% \times [\text{Midterm}] + 30\% \times [\text{Final}] + 30\% \times [\text{Oral Exams}] + 10\% \times [\text{Quizzes}]$$

I will round to the nearest whole number.

Midterm and Final

There will be an in-class midterm on March 11th, and a (non-cumulative) final on Friday, May 8th (in our usual classroom, from 11:00–13:00). At the start of each lecture, I will provide an essay prompt on the material to be covered in that lecture. (That way, you know in advance what you really need to understand.) The essays on the midterm and final will be drawn (randomly—as in, using a random number generator) from these prompts. The expectation is that you will prepare by writing out essays for each prompt and come to class prepared to reproduce any of those essays.

Oral Exams

Over the course of the semester, there will be four opportunities to take an oral exam. An oral exam is the kind of activity which used to take place with ‘paper-writing’ assignments. Rather than handing in a paper, you will be asked to present your ideas, in person. The presentation will last between 10 and 15 minutes (depending upon the level—see below), and will be followed by about 10 to 20 minutes of ‘cross examination’ by your instructor, during which you will be asked to further explain your thesis and defend it from objections. Each oral exam must be on material which was covered since the last oral exam. Oral exam assignments come in two ‘levels’.

- Level 1: A level 1 presentation gives an exposition of an argument. With these presentations, you will be asked to select one particular argument from the readings and explain that argument, in your own words. Carefully identify the premises and the conclusion, and explain how the conclusion follows from the premises.
- Level 2: A level 2 presentation is a critique of an argument. This is just like a level 1 presentation, except that you will not only explain the argument from the reading, but additionally raise an objection to the argument you’ve presented. That is: you’ll give some reason to think that one of the argument’s premises are false, or some reason to think that the argument’s conclusion doesn’t follow from the premises.

You must start at level 1. Each time you take an oral exam, you will receive one of four evaluations:

- Not much progress
- Good effort
- Almost
- Complete

When you receive a “complete” at level 1, you may progress to the second level. If you receive any other evaluation, you may try again at level 1 with your next oral exam. You have four chances to progress through both levels. Your final oral exam grade is determined by your the highest evaluation and the highest level you are able to reach after four attempts.

	Level 1	Level 2
Not much progress	C-	B
Good effort	C	B+
Almost	C+	A-
Complete	B-	A

Reading Comprehension Quizzes

At the start of your recitation section, there will be a short comprehension quiz on the readings from that week. These quizzes will both test that you've done the reading and test that you've understood the reading. So there will be questions like "which of the following Latin terms does Nagel use in the reading for today?" and "Does David Lewis think that time travel is possible?" In order to help you understand the reading, the material in the reading will be covered in lecture before you are asked to do the reading (see the Course Schedule). Your four lowest quiz grades will be dropped to accommodate any absences—excused or unexcused. (If you expect to have more than four excused absences, come talk to me about it.)

Course Schedule

Jan 12 Course introduction
no reading

FREEDOM AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

Jan 14 Do we have free will, or are we determined to act as we do?
Syllabus

Jan 16 Can we both be determined to act as we do and have free will?
Sider, Free Will and Determinism

Jan 21 If we are determined to act as we do, can we be blamed for our choices?
Sider, Free Will and Determinism

Jan 23 Skill-building workshop: What are Arguments?
Frankfurt, Alternative Possibilities and Moral Responsibility

WELL-BEING

Jan 26 Should we fear death?
Notes on Arguments

First oral exam topics distributed

Jan 28 Should we fear death?
Epicurus and Lucretius (selections)

Jan 30 Skill-building workshop: Necessary and Sufficient Conditions
Nagel, Death

EPISTEMOLOGY

- Feb 2 Can we know things about the external world?
Necessary and Sufficient Conditions
First oral exams this week
- Feb 4 What could knowledge be like, so that we know things about the external world?
Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy, Meditations 1 and 2
- Feb 6 What could evidence be like, so that we know things about the external world?
Feldman, Skepticism, pp. 108–119

ETHICS

- Feb 9 Is it always right to do what produces the most good?
Feldman, Skepticism, pp. 119–128
- Feb 11 Or is it sometimes wrong to do what's best?
Mill, Utilitarianism
- Feb 13 Skill-building workshop: Counterexamples
Feldman, Kantian Ethics
- Feb 18 What are our moral obligations to those in need?
no reading
- Feb 20 What are our moral obligations to those in need?
Singer, Famine Affluence and Morality

PHILOSOPHY OF TIME

- Feb 23 Does time flow forward?
Arthur, World Hunger and Moral Obligations: The Case Against Singer
Second oral exam topics distributed
- Feb 25 Is time travel possible?
Sider, Time
- Feb 27 Skill-building workshop: Consistency and Inconsistency
Lewis, The Paradoxes of Time Travel

PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

- Mar 2 Why would an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good god allow evil and suffering?
no reading
Second oral exams this week
- Mar 4 Does the value of freedom explain why god would allow suffering?
Mackie, Evil and Omnipotence
- Mar 6 Skill-building workshop: The relations between logical notions
Swinburne, Why God Allows Evil
- Mar 9 What will be on the midterm?
no reading

Mar 11 **MIDTERM**

Midterm Review Sheet

Mar 13 No class

METAPHYSICS

Mar 23 Is it possible for there to be two things in the same place at the same time?

no reading

Third oral exam topics distributed

Mar 25 How do things persist through change?

Sider, Constitution

Mar 27 Skill-building workshop: Formal Logic

Wasserman, Material Constitution

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Mar 30 Should we prohibit some kinds of speech?

Fischer, An Overview of Classical Logic

Third oral exams this week

Apr 1 Is it even *possible* for speech to be free?

Mill, On Liberty, chapter 2 (selections)

THE PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

Apr 3 Can speech act theory help us understand what it is for speech to be free?

Fish, There's No Such Thing as Free Speech, and It's a Good Thing, Too (selections)

EPISTEMOLOGY

Apr 6 How do we form beliefs about the future?

Austin, How to do things with words Lecture VIII

Apr 8 Should we think that our beliefs about the future are true?

Hume, Skeptical Doubts Concerning the Operations of the Understanding (part 1)

Apr 10 What is enumerative induction?

Hume, Skeptical Doubts Concerning the Operations of the Understanding (part 2)

METAETHICS

Apr 13 Are ethical questions subjective?

no reading

Final oral exam topics distributed

Apr 15 Or is morality objective?

Mackie, The Subjectivity of Values

Apr 17 Metaethics: further discussion

Enoch, Why I am an Objectivist (and Why You Are, Too)

THE PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE

Apr 20 Can we do science using only reasoning which is guaranteed to not lead us astray?
no reading

Final oral exams this week

Apr 22 Is science only in the business of *falsifying* theories?
Popper, Conjectures and Refutations (sections I, IX, and X)

THE PHILOSOPHY OF LOGIC

Apr 24 Should we think that *any* of our reasoning will lead us to truth?
Putnam, The 'Corroboration' of Theories

MEANING

Apr 27 Are our lives meaningless?
Carroll, What the Tortoise Said to Achilles
Haack, The Justification of Deduction (selections)

Apr 29 What is it for a life to be meaningful?
Nagel, The Absurd

May 1 What will be on the final?
Wolf, Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life

May 8 **FINAL**, in our usual classroom, from 11:00–13:00
Final Review Sheet

Laptop and Smartphone Policy

There is a large body of empirical evidence showing that using laptops and smartphones during lecture leads to lower long-term comprehension and worse grades.

For instance, [Glass & Kang](#) allowed college students to use electronic devices in half of the lectures for a course, and tested comprehension with in-class quizzes and a final exam. They found that, for material taught with electronic devices, students did as well with *in-class* quizzes but did significantly worse on the final exam. Their conclusion is that college students can *comprehend* material, even when their attention is divided between lecture and electronic devices, but they cannot *retain* the material nearly as well when their attention is divided.

Other studies have found similarly negative correlations between smartphone use and academic performance. [Kuznekoff & Titsworth](#) found that students who did not have smartphones with them during the lecture were able to recall more detailed information from lecture and scored a full letter grade and a half higher than those students who had their smartphones with them. [Kim et al](#) found that in-class smartphone use had a negative correlation with final grades. [Wood et al](#) found that students not using smartphones outperformed students with smartphones. [Ravizza, Hambrick, and Fenn](#) found that, even amongst students with higher ACT scores, increased use of laptops and smartphones was associated with lower exam scores. A [meta-analysis](#) looked at 63 studies, including 124,166 students, and concluded that “increased use of [smartphones and laptops] was associated with poorer academic outcomes.”

Your smartphone can affect your cognitive ability *even when you're not using it*. [Thornton et al](#) asked college students to perform various cognitive tests. Some students had their phones put out of sight, while others had their phones within sight. Those with their phones in sight performed worse.

In this class, I want you to be at your best. And I want you to retain as much of the material from lecture as

possible. So I will not allow you to use laptops or smartphones during lectures. If I see you with a laptop or smartphone out during lecture, I will remind you of this policy and ask you to put it away.

Academic Integrity

The University of Southern California is foremost a learning community committed to fostering successful scholars and researchers dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and the transmission of ideas. Academic misconduct is in contrast to the university's mission to educate students through a broad array of first-rank academic, professional, and extracurricular programs and includes any act of dishonesty in the submission of academic work (either in draft or final form).

This course will follow the expectations for academic integrity as stated in the [USC Student Handbook](#). All students are expected to submit assignments that are original work and prepared specifically for the course/section in this academic term. You may not submit work written by others or "recycle" work prepared for other courses without obtaining written permission from the instructor(s). Students suspected of engaging in academic misconduct will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.

Other violations of academic misconduct include, but are not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, fabrication (e.g., falsifying data), knowingly assisting others in acts of academic dishonesty, and any act that gains or is intended to gain an unfair academic advantage.

The impact of academic dishonesty is far-reaching and is considered a serious offense against the university and could result in outcomes such as failure on the assignment, failure in the course, suspension, or even expulsion from the university.

For more information about academic integrity see the [student handbook](#) or the [Office of Academic Integrity's website](#), and university policies on [Research and Scholarship Misconduct](#).

Since creating, analytical, and critical thinking skills are part of the learning outcomes of this course, all assignments should be prepared by the student working individually or in groups. Students may not have another person or entity complete any substantive portion of the assignment. Developing strong competencies in these areas will prepare you for a competitive workplace. Therefore, **using AI tools is prohibited in this course, will be identified as plagiarism, and will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.**

For more information about academic integrity see the student handbook or the Office of Academic Integrity's website, and university policies on Research and Scholarship Misconduct.

Please ask your instructor if you are unsure what constitutes unauthorized assistance on an exam or assignment, or what information requires citation and/or attribution.

Course Content Distribution and Synchronous Session Recording Policies

Recording a university class without the express permission of the instructor and announcement to the class, or unless conducted pursuant to an Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS) accommodation. Recording can inhibit free discussion in the future, and thus infringe on the academic freedom of other students as well as the instructor. ([Living our Unifying Values: The USC Student Handbook](#), page 13).

Distribution or use of notes, recordings, exams, or other intellectual property, based on university classes or lectures without the express permission of the instructor for purposes other than individual or group study. This includes but is not limited to providing materials for distribution by services publishing course materials. This restriction on unauthorized use also applies to all information, which had been distributed to students or in any way had been displayed for use in relationship to the class, whether obtained in class, via email, on the internet, or via any other media. ([Living our Unifying Values: The USC Student Handbook](#), page 13).

Students and Disability Accommodations

USC welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. The [Office of Student Accessibility Services](#) (OSAS) is responsible for the determination of appropriate accommodations for students who encounter disability-related barriers. Once a student has completed the OSAS process (registration, initial appointment, and submitted documentation) and accommodations are determined to be reasonable and appropriate, a Letter of Accommodation (LOA) will be available to generate for each course. The LOA must be given to each course instructor by the student and followed up with a discussion. This should be done as early in the semester as possible as accommodations are not retroactive. More information can be found at osas.usc.edu. You may contact OSAS at (213) 740-0776 or via email at osasfrontdesk@usc.edu.

Support Systems

Counseling and Mental Health - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline - 988 for both calls and text messages – 24/7 on call

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline) provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across the United States. The Lifeline is comprised of a national network of over 200 local crisis centers, combining custom local care and resources with national standards and best practices. The new, shorter phone number makes it easier for people to remember and access mental health crisis services (though the previous 1 (800) 273-8255 number will continue to function indefinitely) and represents a continued commitment to those in crisis.

CARE-SC: Confidential Advocacy, Resources, and Education Support Center - (213) 740-9355(WELL) – 24/7/365 on call.

Confidential advocates, prevention educators, and professional counseling teams work to promote a universal culture of consent, as well as prevent and respond to sexual assault, intimate partner violence, stalking, or other relationship harm. Services available to all USC students at no cost.

Office of Civil Rights Compliance - (213) 740-5086

Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment, discrimination, retaliation on the basis of a protected characteristic, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants.

USC Report & Response - (213) 740-2500

The USC Report & Response website is the university's central reporting portal for concerns arising in the academic space or workplace. All concerns will be assessed and referred to the appropriate university office for resolution. Any questions about USC Report & Response or reporting, in general, can be referred to the Office of Professionalism and Ethics at ope@usc.edu.

USC Campus Support and Intervention - (213) 740-0411

Focuses on student success by assisting students in navigating and resolving complex issues through problem solving, presenting options, and connecting to resources.

USC Emergency Information

Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

USC Department of Public Safety

For 24 hour emergency assistance or to report a crime: UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323)-442-1000. For 24 hour non-emergency assistance or information: UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: 323-442-1200.

Office of the Ombuds - (213) 821-9556 (UPC) / (323-442-0382 (HSC)

A safe and confidential place to share your USC-related issues with a University Ombuds who will work with you to explore options or paths to manage your concern.

Occupational Therapy Faculty Practice - (323) 442-2850 or otfp@med.usc.edu

Confidential Lifestyle Redesign services for USC students to support health promoting habits and routines that enhance quality of life and academic performance.