

PHI 107: Theories of Knowledge and Reality

Spring 2026

Instructor: Antonio Freiles

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Place & Time: Eggers Hall 111, TuTh 11:00am - 12:20pm

Office Hours: Thursday Afternoon and by Appointment

Course Description: Bertrand Russell, one of the most famous intellectuals of the last century, in *An Outline of Intellectual Rubbish* (1950), claimed:

Man is a credulous animal, and must believe something. In the absence of good grounds for belief, he will be satisfied with bad ones.

In this course, we will work to avoid having bad grounds for our beliefs by rigorously examining some philosophical questions. Does God exist? Does change occur? Is time travel possible? Do we possess free will? Do minds exist? Do humans persist through time? What is knowledge? What is an echo chamber? Can we wrong someone in virtue of what we believe? What is the nature of polarization? Through argumentation, we will critically provide a set of opposing answers to these questions.

Learning Objectives:

- (1) How to become familiar with philosophical views' main ideas, with particular attention to the main arguments used in their favor and the most popular objections against them.
- (2) How to read, interpret, and critically engage with philosophical texts.
- (3) How to formulate philosophical arguments in premise-conclusion format.
- (4) How to object and reply to the arguments analyzed in class.
- (5) How to debate philosophical views as a philosophically rigorous but kind and respectful interlocutor.

Course Materials: All the required readings will be posted on Blackboard under the heading 'Content'. Original class materials (handouts, slides, etc.) are the course instructor's intellectual property. You may download these materials for your use in this class. However, you may not provide these materials to other parties (e.g., websites, social media, other students) without permission. Doing so is a violation of intellectual property law and of the student code of conduct.

To be ready for in-class discussion and activities, you must consult every required reading before the start of the lecture they are assigned for. Finally, reading philosophy is not an easy task. Readings

are often complex and very time-consuming. Allocate some time of your day to read philosophy on the days the lectures are in session. Here is a very brief guide on what to look for when reading [philosophy](#).

Assessment: The assessment is in four parts.

1. Quizzes: 25 points of your course grade. There will be eight in-class content quizzes. The quizzes are in-class and closed-book, and they test your understanding of the content discussed the previous week. Quizzes will include reconstruction of the arguments in premise-conclusion format and short answers to questions about the materials. The lowest quiz grade will be dropped.

2. Attendance and Participation: 10 points of your course grade. Attendance is worth 5 points of your course grade, and it is required. However, I will excuse absences if they are due to religious observance or an email from Barnes Center informing me that the student cannot attend the class for health-related issues. Private doctor's notes will not be accepted. In-class participation is worth 5 points of your course grade, and it is required. You can participate in class, but if you prefer to avoid speaking in public, you must send me an email 24 hours before each class with a question about the material—except for when exams take place. Finally, the participation grade is conditional on the completion of two 1500-word take-home writing assignments aiming at completing the full analysis of an argument. These assignments are pedagogical exercises that would help you perform better on the in-class exams.

3. Exams: 55 points of your course grade. You will take two in-class closed-book exams. The first exam, on March 5, is worth 25 points of your course grade and covers the material studied in the first seven weeks of the semester. The final exam, May 1, is worth 30 points of your course grade and covers the entire semester's material.

4. Debates: 10 points of your course grade. Before each exam, we will have a review of the material covered. The [debates](#) will be an opportunity to review the exam materials. I will randomly choose a philosophical view discussed in the class with a lottery. One team, the opponents, will then defend the extracted view; the other team, the respondents, will object to the view. The class will have a total of four teams. The grade for this assessment is equal for everyone and is the average of the performances of all teams.

Letter grade: A 93 - 100; A- 90 - 92.99; B+ 87 - 89.99; B 83 - 86.99; B- 80 - 82.99; C+ 77 - 79.99; C 73 - 76.99; C- 70 - 72.99; D+ 67 - 69.99; D 63 - 66.99; D- 60 - 62.99; F 0 - 59.99.

Course Policies: the following policies will be applied throughout the course.

Academic Integrity: Do not cheat! It's unfair to your instructors and fellow students. Any established academic integrity violation may result in course failure, regardless of violation level. For details on SU's academic integrity expectations and policies, visit: <http://class.syr.edu/academic-integrity/policy/>. All work submitted for quizzes and exams must be yours alone. Communicating about quizzes or exam questions with anyone during the quiz or exam period violates academic integrity expectations. The use of AI to complete any assignment is explicitly prohibited and violates academic integrity expectations too.

Religious Observances: If you need to miss a class or deadline due to religious observance, you will be entitled to make-up opportunities if you provide notice by the end of the second week of class. You must do so through MySlice. You can find the relevant information [here](#).

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities: Syracuse University values diversity and inclusion; we are committed to a climate of mutual respect and full participation. There may be aspects of the instruction or design of this course that result in barriers to your inclusion and full participation in this course. I invite any student to contact me to discuss strategies and/or accommodations (academic adjustments) that may be essential to your success and to collaborate with the Center for Disability Resources (CDR) in this process. If you would like to discuss disability accommodations or register with CDR, please visit the Center for Disability Resources. Please call (315) 443-4498 or email disabilityresources@syr.edu for more detailed information.

Health: Mental health and overall well-being have a significant impact on academic success. It is important to develop skills and resources to effectively navigate stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health concerns. Please familiarize yourself with the range of resources the [Barnes Center](#) provides and seek out support for mental health concerns as needed. Counseling services are available 24/7, 365 days a year, at 315.443.8000, and I encourage you to explore the resources available through [the Wellness Leadership Institute](#).

Email Policy: I will reply to your emails within 24 hours on weekdays.

Laptop and Phones Policy: laptops and phones are not allowed for note-taking unless prior arrangements with CDR have been made. Pencils, notebooks, and tablets are allowed instead. Students using laptops or phones in class will not receive the attendance and participation grades for the lecture.

Deadlines Policy: absences for quizzes, debates, and exams are justified only if they satisfy the criteria illustrated in *Attendance and Participation*. If a student misses a single quiz without any previous notice, the quiz grade will count as the lowest and thus will be dropped. In contrast, if a student misses more than one quiz, a debate, or an exam without any previous notice, the student will not receive a grade for that assignment.

Extra credit Policy: extra credit will not be granted. The assignments already allow you to excel and improve your grade.

Office Hours: I will hold office hours every Thursday after class. You must book them in advance [here](#). No-shows count as absences towards your participation grade. Similarly, your presence during office hours counts positively towards it (e.g., if you did not participate in a lecture, your participation during office hours would equalize the score).

Schedule: each reading shows its complete length in terms of pages. However, for every title's reading preceded by "excerpts from", we will not read the totality of the pages, only some parts.

Week 1, Introduction

- January 13, Syllabus Day & Toolkit.
- January 15, David Bayless, *Divine Hiddenness: Do Some People Not Find God Because God Doesn't Exist?* (pp. 4).

Week 2, Metaphysics: Theism

- January 20, *Quiz #1* & J. L. Mackie, excerpts from *Evil and Omnipotence* (pp. 13).
- January 22, Blaise Pascal, excerpts from *Pensées* (pp. 3), & Roger White, *The Argument from Cosmological Fine-Tuning* (pp. 8).

Week 3, Metaphysics: Material Objects

- January 27, *Quiz #2* & Mark Hinchliff, *The Puzzle of Change* (13 pp.).
- January 29, Ted Sider, excerpts from *Temporal Parts*. (pp. 20).

Week 4, Metaphysics: Time-travel

- February 3, *Quiz #3* & Heather Dyke, *The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Time Travel* (pp. 5).
- February 5, S. Keller and M. Nelson, *Presentists Should Believe in Time-Travel* (pp. 13).

Week 5, Metaphysics: Free Will

- February 10, *Quiz #4* & Harry Frankfurt, *Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility* (pp. 11), & Robert Kane, *Libertarianism* (pp. 10).
- February 12, Workshop Day: *How to Analyze an Argument*.

Week 6, Philosophy of Mind: The Mind-body Problem

- February 17, *First Writing Assignment Due* & Thomas Nagel, *The Mind-Body Problem* (pp. 4).
- February 19, Descartes, excerpts from *Sixth Meditation* (pp. 10), & Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia's *Letter of May 1643* (pp. 4).

Week 7, Philosophy of Mind: The Mind-body Problem

- February 24, *Quiz #5* & David Papineau, excerpts from *The Case for Materialism* (pp. 19).
- February 26, Frank Jackson, *Epiphenomenal Qualia* (pp. 8), & [Mary's Room](#).

Week 8, Exam Week

- March 3, *First Debate*.
- March 5, *Midterm*.

Week 10, Philosophy of Mind: Consciousness

- March 17, David Chalmers, *Could a Large Language Model be Conscious?* (pp. 17).
- March 19, Ned Block, *Can Only Meat Machines Be Conscious?* (pp. 11).

Week 11, Philosophy of Mind: Personal Identity

- March 24, *Quiz #6*, John Locke, *Of Identity and Diversity* (pp. 5), & Thomas Reid, *Of Mr. Locke's Account Of Personal Identity* (pp. 2).
- March 26, Derek Parfit, excerpts from *Personal Identity* (pp. 26).

Week 12, Epistemology: Knowledge

- March 31, *Quiz #7* & Edmund Gettier, *Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?* (pp. 3).
- April 2, Robert Nozick, excerpts from *Philosophical Explanations* (pp. 18), & [The Dream Argument](#).

Week 13, Epistemology: Relevant Phenomena

- April 7, *Quiz #8* & C. Thi Nguyen, *Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles* (p. 22).
- April 9, Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice and A Role For Virtue in the Politics of Knowing* (pp. 20).

Week 14, Epistemology: Polarization

- April 14, *Second Writing Assignment Due* & Patrick Brooks, *On The Origin of Conspiracy Theories* (pp. 20).
- April 16, Thomas Kelly, *Disagreement, Dogmatism, and Belief Polarization* (pp. 23).

Week 15, Final Week

- April 21, Kevin Dorst, *In Defense of Epistemic Empathy* (pp. 4).
- April 23, *Second Debate*.