

Writing Philosophy: Human Beings and Nature—Topics in Metaphysics, Mind and Action

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I. Course Description

This course serves as an introduction to topics in metaphysics, philosophy of mind and philosophy of action. The main question that ties these topics together will be: “how, if at all, do human beings stand apart from the rest of the natural order?” We explore three aspects of this question after an introductory unit.

The first unit covers some foundational debates about the methodology of metaphysics, and applies them to the study of ordinary objects. We will ask how objects are related to their parts, whether ordinary objects like tables and chairs really exist, and how “social” objects like cities, universities and money differ from physical objects. We will focus in particular on the nature of persistence—what makes something the same thing as it changes over time—with special attention to puzzles like the ship of Theseus.

The second unit covers personal identity. What makes you the same person you were 10 years ago? We will explore several answers to this question, including the possibility that there is no self that persists over time. We will build on what we learned in the previous unit and we will see that questions about the persistence of human beings are considerably more complicated than questions about the persistence of ordinary objects.

The third unit dives into philosophy of mind. One respect in which humans arguably differ from the rest of nature is that we have minds or souls, and other things do not. This at least has been a dominant position in Western intellectual history. We will read one of the key exponents of this view, Descartes, including his correspondence with Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia in which the mind-body problem is raised. We spend the next couple of weeks covering the objections to dualism and alternative positions.

Finally, we will cover the existence of God and free will. We will investigate several related questions. Do we have free will? If so, did we get it from God or can a naturalistic account of free will be given? Can our free will, or lack thereof, be a premise in a good argument for or against the existence of God?

II. Course Structure

Assignments

There will be two reflection assignments. The first will be due on the second week of class. Students should write 500-750 words about their previous experiences writing academic papers, and what they regard as their strengths and weaknesses as a writer. This is the ideal forum for students to set goals for how they wish to develop as a writer over the course of the semester. Students should identify ways that they want to improve at forming and communicating their ideas. A final reflection paper of about 500-750 words will be due at the end of the course. Students will reflect on their progress over the course of the term, and think about how their

experience challenged or surprised them. Students will identify aspects of written communication that they wish to improve further. Both of these assignments are graded on a pass-fail basis—they are each worth 5% of the grade.

Participation will constitute 15% of your grade and has three components. First, attendance at each seminar is required. Second, each week, students should email the professor a brief (<100 words) question or comment about the readings or previous week's discussion. Finally, students should contribute to class discussion, and the best way to do this is by listening to and engaging with your peers. Our goal in this seminar is to discuss these issues *with each other*.

There are three papers, worth 15%, 25% and 35% of the grade respectively. The first paper will be due in week 4; it should be no more than 750 words (about 3 pages double spaced). Students will analyze one of the puzzles we discuss in the first three weeks.

The second paper should be no more than 1,500 words (about 6 pages double spaced). This paper will be on personal identity. A draft or outline is due in week 7 and the final paper is due in week 9.

The final paper should be no more than 2,500 words (about 10 pages double spaced). In this paper, students will write an original research essay on a topic that we cover in the second half of the class. A proposal for this paper will be due in week 13. The final paper is due December 17.

Readings

Students will need to purchase one book, available at the Yale Book Store or online:

- Michael Huemer: "Knowledge, Reality and Value."

III. Schedule of Readings

Unit 1: Introductory Topics

Week 1: What is metaphysics? (8/30, 9/1)

- Quine: "On What There Is"
- Huemer 1.1 "The Ship of Theseus"

Week 2: Material Objects 1: The Special Composition Question (9/6)

- Thomasson, Amie L. 2010. "The Controversy over the Existence of Ordinary Objects." *Philosophy Compass* 5 (7): 591–601.
- **Reflection paper due at the start of class on 9/6**

Week 3: Social ontology (9/11, 9/13)

- Varzi, A.C. 2021. "What is a City?" *Topoi* (40): 399–408.

Unit 2: Personal Identity

Week 4: Personal Identity 1 (9/18, 9/20)

- Daniel Dennett: "Where am I?"
- Huemer chapter 12
- **Paper 1 Due 10pm on 9/22.**

Week 5: Personal Identity 2 (9/25, 9/27)

- Hume “Of Personal Identity”
- Derek Parfit: “Personal Identity”

Week 6: Buddhist Perspectives on Personal Identity (10/2, 10/4)

- Giles: “The No-Self Theory: Hume, Buddhism, and Personal Identity”

Unit 3: Mind (63 pages)

Week 7: Dualism and the Mind-Body Problem (10/9, 10/11)

- Rene Descartes: Selections from *Meditations*
- Selections from the correspondence between Descartes and Princess Elizabeth
- **Draft/Outline of Paper 2 due 10pm on 10/13**

Week 8: Materialism and functionalism (10/16)

- J.J.C. Smart: “Mind/Brain Identity Theory” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Week 9: The Intentional Stance (10/23, 10/25)

- Dennett: “The Intentional Stance” Chapter 1.
- **Paper 2 due 10pm on 10/27**

Week 10: What kinds of things are conscious? (10/30, 11/1)

- Schwitzgebel, E. 2015. “If materialism is true, the United States is probably conscious.” *Philosophical Studies* 172, 1697–1721.

Unit 4: God and Free Will

Week 11: Arguments for the existence of God (11/6, 11/8)

- Huemer chapter 9 (focus on 9.1 – 9.4)

Week 12: Arguments against the existence of God (11/13, 11/15)

- Huemer chapter 10 (focus on 10.1, 10.3 – 10.4)

Week 13: Free Will 1 (11/27, 11/29)

- Huemer Chapter 11
- **Final paper proposal due 10pm on 12/1**

Week 14: Free Will 2 (12/4, 12/6)

- Derk Pereboom: selections from “Living without Free Will”

Final Paper Due 3pm Sunday December 17 (along with second reflection paper)

IV. Resources

Resources on Writing Philosophy Papers, by Professional Philosophers

1. Jim Pryor’s Writing Guide: <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>

- This is in many ways the best guide to writing philosophy papers. We will discuss it in class.

2. Stephen Yablo's Writing Guide: <http://www.mit.edu/~yablo/writing.html>
3. Michael Huemer's Writing Guide: <https://spot.colorado.edu/~huemer/writing.htm>

Yale College Resources

1. You can take advantage of many resources at Yale's Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning, including making 1-1 appointments with a writing tutor. See their website: <https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/undergraduates/writing-center>
2. Your college has a writing tutor that you can meet with 1-1 to discuss your work.
3. Yale provides mental health services to students which are free and confidential. Here is the website: [https://yalehealth.yale.edu/directory/departments/mental-health-counseling#:~:text=In%20urgent%20situations%2C%20any%20student,\(203\)%20432%2D0290](https://yalehealth.yale.edu/directory/departments/mental-health-counseling#:~:text=In%20urgent%20situations%2C%20any%20student,(203)%20432%2D0290).

Misc.

Academic Integrity

- You are expected to maintain high standards of academic integrity. One component of this is, of course, fully adequate acknowledgment and citation of sources used in your written work. For helpful guidelines and advice, see <http://writing.yalecollege.yale.edu/understanding-and-avoiding-plagiarism>

Accessibility and inclusion:

- If you have a documented learning disability, please let me know as soon as possible and contact the Student Accessibility Services to make sure your needs are being met. Here is the website of the office of student accessibility: <https://sas.yale.edu/>
- In this course I aim to welcome diverse perspectives on the course's readings and topics. Our primary goal in each meeting will be to join with students in creating an open and inclusive environment for the pursuit of doing good philosophy together. Here is the website of the diversity and inclusion office: <https://your.yale.edu/community/diversity-inclusion/office-diversity-and-inclusion>