

Course Description

An examination of philosophical issues on the theme of relativism. Are moral standards relative to cultures and/or moral frameworks? Are there incompatible or non-comparable ways of thinking about the world that are somehow equally good? Is science getting closer to the truth? Is rationality -- the notion of a good reason to believe something -- relative to cultural norms? What are selves? Is there a coherent form of relativism about the self? Discussion of these questions through the writings of contemporary philosophers such as Thomas Kuhn, Karl Popper, Gilbert Harman, Judith Thomson, and Derek Parfit. Emphasis on ways of making these vague questions precise, and critical evaluation of philosophical arguments.

Texts

Perry, John. *A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality*.

Parfit, Derek. *Reasons and Persons*.

Harman, Gilbert, and Judith Jarvis Thomson. *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*.

Kuhn, Thomas. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 3 ed.

Additional Readings

Pryor, James. "How to Write a Philosophy Paper."

Blackburn, Simon. "The World."

Popper, Karl. Selections from *Logic of Scientific Discovery*.

Putnam, Hilary. "The 'Corroboration' of Theories."

Alston, William. "Yes, Virginia, There Is A Real World."

Assignments

There is a reading assignment for each class meeting. These are often relatively short, but many require close study, and you should not postpone them. In accordance with HASS-D regulations, you will be expected to write approximately 20 pages. These will be divided among 4 papers (the HASS-D requirement is at least 3). There will sometimes be short reading quizzes or study questions for the recitation sections. **You must complete these in order to pass the course.**

You are encouraged to discuss the writing assignments (and, of course, also the reading assignments) with each other, but the written work you submit must be entirely your own.

Your papers should not contain quotations or quotations masquerading as proper paraphrases: a statement of the ideas of one of the authors you've read must be couched in your own words. Do not **use** any footnotes. There will be no prizes for writing in anything other than plain English. Finally, remember that we want you to think seriously about the issues, and formulate and defend your own opinions. Your TAs will be looking for evidence of this.

Debates

The course divides into three parts. At the end of each part we will hold an in-class debate. Everyone is expected to participate.

Examination

In accordance with HASS-D regulations, in addition to the writing assignments you will be required to take a 3-hour final exam covering material dealt with throughout the term. The final exam will account for a substantial portion of the grade. The exam will be open book and open notes, at a time and place to be announced. There will be no mid-term exam.

Grading

60% papers, 25% final exam, 15% class and section participation.

Subject Matter

This course is primarily intended for those students who have not had any previous exposure to philosophy. It treats a small number of important philosophical questions in some depth. (For more breadth and less depth, try 24.00, Problems of Philosophy.)

The question that will occupy us for the first part is:

(1) What kinds of things are persons? Persisting soul pellets, living bodies, brains, or what?

You no doubt think that whether you **survive** some upcoming event (say a heart operation) is of great importance: normally, death is a bad thing. In a remarkable book, *Reasons and Persons*, Derek Parfit has argued that the right answer to (1) implies that, sometimes, you ought not to care at all about your survival: sometimes, death is as good as life. We shall examine Parfit's argument and critical reactions to it.

The second part will consider this question:

(2) Are moral standards absolute or in some sense relativistic?

Harman and Thomson's *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity* takes the form of a debate about the question (Harman being the moral relativist, and Thomson the moral objectivist). It's self contained, and mostly very clear and accessible. We will read and discuss more or less the entire book.

The question that is central to the third part is:

(3) Is the truth about external reality absolute or observer-relative?

Science seems to show that external objects are not colored or sweet in themselves but only in relation to human observers (Blackburn). This concedes to science the task of saying what objects are like "in themselves," but Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* casts doubt even on that. We end by asking (with Alston) what remains of objective reality when the philosophers are done.

Aim

By the end of the course you should be able to see your way through the swirling fog of metaphor that often surrounds these issues to a reasonably precise formulation of the central questions. You should also have some familiarity with the way in which a philosophical problem arises, and techniques by means of which one might try to solve it. And, with a bit of luck, you might even end up with strong philosophical views yourself.

A Note on the Readings

None of them are easy: they are not introductions to philosophy but rather examples of it. If you have trouble understanding what an author says, or any other question concerning the course, **please do not hesitate to ask.**

A Note on Class Participation

This is **strongly encouraged**. Talking about philosophy is one of the best ways of doing it. It is **much better** to say something you later realize is mistaken than never to say it at all.

A Note on Feedback

Your comments and criticism, expressed either to myself or the TAs, are **most welcome.**

Web Resources

On writing, see Jim Pryor's [Guidelines on writing a philosophy paper](#). Useful glossaries are Jim Pryor's [Philosophical Terms and Methods](#) and the *Dictionary of Philosophical Terms and Names*. The [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) is good, although nowhere near complete. An instructive site to browse is [David Chalmers' Web site](#). See the [MIT Philosophy page](#) for colloquia dates, other course information, etc.