

Phil 101: Introduction to Philosophy

(Current as of 4/7/2026)

University of Wisconsin – Madison

Class Time: 11:00–11:50 MWF
Location: Ingraham 120
Course Website:
canvas.wisc.edu/courses/495357
Instructor: Matthew J. Maxwell
Contact: mjmaxwell3@wisc.edu
Office: Helen C. White 5146
Office Hours: R 9:30–11:30

Discussion Sections:
311 Thurs 9:55–10:45 2101 Mosse
312 Thurs 11:00–11:50 2101 Mosse
313 Thurs 12:05–12:55 2101 Mosse
Teaching Assistant: Thomas Hasler
Contact: thasler@wisc.edu
Office: Helen C. White 5160
Office Hours: W 8:45–10:45

Course Description

Does God exist? Should we ever believe conspiracy theories? Should our government promote some ways of living over others? How ought we live our lives? Is happiness most important or is something else? These are a few of the questions we'll be examining in this introduction to philosophy. We will be developing the skills to answer these questions through discussions with your peers and through writing assignments.

This course may be different from other courses you've taken. We will not be learning "content" in the usual sense. Rather, we'll be investigating reasons for the various answers to questions covered in this course. This course is not aimed at changing your mind or filling it up with facts and you will never be graded on what you believe about these topics. You should, however, come away with a better understanding of what you do believe, why you believe it, and how to discuss it with and communicate your reasons to others.

Learning Outcomes

The Department Learning Outcomes for this course are:

1. Describe some of the key questions within philosophy.
2. Explain some of the key positions that philosophers have defended.
3. Appraise philosophical arguments with clarity and charity.

In addition, this course will prepare you to:

1. Interpret complex texts accurately and analyze them logically.
2. Communicate precisely, concisely, and confidently in both writing and speech.

Required Texts

All required texts will be available via either the library or the course Canvas site.

Credit Hour Explanation (4 credits)

This class meets for a total of 4 class period hours each week over the semester and carries the expectation that students will work on course learning activities (reading, writing, studying, etc.) for about 2 hours

outside of the classroom for every class period hour.

Prerequisites

None

Classroom Discussion Norms

Discussion is one of the most important parts of this class. Here are a few guidelines to make the most of it!

- Listen actively and with an ear to understanding others' views. (Don't just think about what you are going to say while someone else is talking.)
- Criticize ideas, not individuals. We all can learn something from each other, even if our views don't necessarily align.
- Allow everyone the chance to speak.
- If you think something is missing from the conversation, don't wait for someone else; make the contribution yourself.
- Ask questions when you do not understand. Chances are that others also do not understand.
- Try not to silence yourself out of concern for what others think. So long as your contribution is sincere (i.e. not trolling), your perspective is likely useful.
- No recordings, please. Some of our discussions could be misunderstood outside of a philosophy classroom context.

Teams

Much of the work for this class will be done in teams of four or five. You will be assigned to a team in the first week of discussion section and will stay with your team for the entire semester. Please sit with your team in lecture as well as in discussion section.

Assignments

Readiness Assurance Tests (RATs)

There will be four readiness assurance tests throughout the semester. These are opportunities for you to test your individual and team knowledge of a topic and will be administered in discussion sections one week before the Multi-Day In-Class Essays.

Attendance Quizzes

Attendance is required for this course and will be taken via weekly quizzes in both lecture and discussion section. These quizzes will be graded "credit/no credit" and may only be taken during the class period.

If circumstances require that you will be absent for an extended period, contact the instructor or TA.

Multi-Day In-Class Essays

These three essays will be written in-class over the course of three days. The schedule for weeks with in-class essays will be:

- Day 1 (Wednesday): Receive the assignment and write the first draft.
- Day 2 (Thursday): Discuss drafts with your team in discussion section.
- Day 3 (Friday): Revise/rewrite your essay in light of team discussion.

You **must** complete a first draft, discussion, and final revision in order to receive credit for this assignment. More detailed instructions and additional materials will be provided with each essay prompt.

Final Exam

The final exam will be an essay similar to the in-class essays outlined above. However, there will be no discussion or second draft—you are expected to complete the essay in one session.

Grades

Assignment	Weight	Notes
RATs	20%	split between team and individual
Attendance Quizzes	15%	
Multi-Day Essays	45%	(3 × 15%)
Final Exam	20%	

Grade	A	AB	B	BC	C	D	F
%	100-93%	92-88%	87-83%	82-78%	77-70%	69-60%	Below 60

Course Schedule

(Subject to change. See Canvas for the latest version.)

Date	Readings	Assignments
Metaphysics and God		
1/21-1/23	Aquinas “Five Ways”	
1/26-1/30	Bayne “Arguments for the Existence of God”; Paley “Natural Theology”	
2/2-2/6	Gould “The Panda’s Thumb”; Bayne “The Problem of Evil”	RAT
2/9-2/13	Pascal “The Wager”	In-Class Essay #1
The Epistemology of Conspiracy Theories		
2/16-2/20	Hume “Of Miracles”; Keeley “Of Conspiracy Theories”	
2/23-2/27	Cassam “Bad Thinkers”; Nguyen, “Escape the Echo Chamber”	RAT
3/2- 3/6	no reading	In-Class Essay #2
Political Philosophy: Liberalism		
3/9-3/13	Mill “Limits to society’s authority”	
3/16-3/20	Hayek “Why I am not a conservative”	
3/23-3/27	Deneen “Unsustainable Liberalism”; Marcuse “Repressive Tolerance”	RAT
3/28-4/5	Spring Break	No Class
4/6-4/10	no reading	In-Class Essay #3
Ethics: Happiness and The Good Life		
4/13-4/17	Epictetus <i>Enchiridion</i> ; Pigliucci “Anger is temporary madness”	
4/20-4/24	Epicurus “Principal Doctrines”; Epicurus “Letter to Menoeceus”	

Date	Readings	Assignments
4/27-5/1	Ehrenfeld “Why Epicurean ideas suit the challenges of modern secular life”	RAT
Final Exam! 5/7	10:05 AM-12:05 PM, Plant Sciences 108	Final Exam

Email Policy

I check my email twice per day on weekdays; in the morning and in the afternoon. Any emails I get in the evening will (probably) be seen in the morning. You can expect a response within 24 hours on weekdays. If I haven’t gotten back to you in 48 hours, please send a reminder.

I do not typically check email on weekends or holidays.

Please plan ahead so that you receive a timely response!

Electronic Devices

The use of electronic devices, such as laptops, tablets, and cell phones, is prohibited in this class (with the exception of reasonable accommodations). Research and the instructor’s experience has shown that these are severely detrimental to your and your classmates’ attention. Please bring a paper notebook and pen or pencil for note-taking and the occasional in-class assignment.

Accommodations

While some discomfort is expected when discussing difficult topics, harm is never a positive outcome. Some of the material in this course may be extremely personal or otherwise distressing to some students. If this is the case for you, please reach out to me so that we can make adjustments or devise alternatives as necessary.

If you have learning accommodations through the McBurney Center, please let me know as early in the semester as possible. More information is available at <https://mcburney.wisc.edu/>

A Note on Plagiarism

All work turned in for this course must be your own. When using the words and ideas of others you must cite them as appropriate. While AI tools may be appropriate for some purposes, they are not appropriate for generating responses or writing essays in this class (and will frequently lead to poor essays and wrong answers). Work that I determine is substantially not your own will, at minimum, receive a score of 0 and may be subject to further sanctions.

Academic Statements & Policies

Additional statements and policies regarding this course are available at <https://guide.wisc.edu/courses/#syllabustext>