

Syllabus
PHIL 430W-0 (3 Cr.)
Theory of Knowledge
Winter 2026

Instructor: Dr. Kristopher G. Phillips

Email: JPay

Class Meets:

W 5:30p-8:10p in TBA 01 (WHV Campus)

COURSE DESCRIPTION: : In our everyday lives we frequently say that we know things. We know, for instance, that two plus two equals four, that we are currently in southeast Michigan, or that we prefer burritos to every other food. Each of these claims, however, seems to demand different kinds of evidence. But what counts as evidence? What is knowledge? When do we shift from having some reason to believe something to knowing something? How do we make evidence-based choices? In this class we will discuss the nature of knowledge, the nature and structure of justification, and the nature of rational choice.

Course Learning Outcomes:

- *Charitable Thinking*: The successful student will begin to approach the positions and arguments of philosophers charitably (i.e. to take seriously and try to understand how a smart, thoughtful, and careful person might hold a view like that). A successful student will begin to understand why, even if it looks at first as if a view must be wrong, there are good reasons for why others might think it is correct.
- *Close Reading*: The successful student will demonstrate the ability to identify what a passage actually says (without imposing assumptions onto the text), what a passage logically implies, and how to connect a passage to its broader context.
- *Writing in Philosophy*: The successful student will be able to express some abstract and complex philosophical ideas in clear, precise, concise, and logical prose. The successful student's writing will be grounded in source texts without becoming a mere book report.

Skill and Intellectual Virtue-Based Outcomes:

- Curiosity: A disposition to wonder, ponder, and ask why. A desire to explore and understand.
- Carefulness: A disposition to notice and avoid intellectual pitfalls and mistakes. Striving for accuracy.
- Tenacity: A willingness to embrace intellectual challenge and struggle. Keep your eyes on the prize and don't give up.

I will evaluate your performance on these learning outcomes through contributions to our in-class dialogue, weekly reading responses, and a scaffolded, short term paper.

TEXTS: I will make the material for the introductory section of this course available on the first day. Please make sure to bring your books to class each meeting so that we can discuss the texts and engage in close-reading projects. *Virtue* by Heather Battaly. Polity Press (2015). ISBN: 9780745649542.
Epistemic Injustice: Power & The Ethics of Knowing by Miranda Fricker. Oxford University Press (2007). ISBN: 9780199570522.

SOME GENERAL ADVICE: This course presupposes a willingness to work hard and think critically about some very difficult problems. Philosophy is hard, you'll see – there really is no shallow end to the pool here. Students who read reflectively and attend class regularly are more likely to remain interested in (and maybe even enjoy!) the material, benefit from the class discussions, and develop the philosophical skills and level of comprehension required to continually improve in their thinking. Some notes will be provided every week, but these, the lectures, and class discussion will very likely be hard to follow if you don't do the readings or if you miss previous classes and do not pursue any of the options available for getting caught up. Please get to know your peers and chat about these issues even when you're not in the class! I think you'll find that philosophy is best done through dialogue, so build a philosophical community!

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SCHEDULE OF READINGS:

This schedule is tentative and open to revision.

Week 1 (Jan 14): Introductions; What is philosophy?; Logic, Reasoning, Knowledge

Week 2 (Jan 21): What is Virtue (Epistemology)?

Battaly: Chapter 1 (pp. 1-30)

Battaly: Chapter 2 (pp. 31-58)

Week 3 (Jan 28): What is Virtue (Epistemology)? continued

Battaly: Chapter 3 (pp. 59-85)

Battaly: Chapter 4 (pp. 86-107)

Week 4 (Feb 4): Virtue, Knowledge, Action, and Living Well

Battaly: Chapter 5 (pp. 108-130)

Battaly: Chapter 6 (pp. 131-149)

Week 5 (Feb 11): Acquiring the Virtues

Battaly: Chapter 7 (pp. 150-169)

Week 6 (Feb 18): No Class (Kris out of town)

Week 7 (Feb 25): Epistemic Injustice I

Fricker: Introduction (pp. 1-9)

Fricker: Chapter 1 (pp. 9-29)

Week 8 (March 4): Spring Break, No Class.

Week 9 (March 11): Epistemic Injustice II

Fricker: Chapter 2 (pp. 30-59)

Week 10 (March 18): Epistemic Injustice III

Fricker: Chapter 3 (pp. 60-85)

Week 11 (March 25): Epistemic Injustice IV

Fricker: Chapter 4 (pp. 86-108)

Week 12 (Apr 1): Epistemic Injustice V

Fricker: Chapter 5 (pp. 109-128)

Week 13 (Apr 8): Epistemic Injustice VI

Fricker: Chapter 6 (pp. 129-146)

Week 14 (Apr 15): Epistemic Injustice VII

Fricker: Chapter 7 (pp. 147-175)

Fricker: Conclusion (pp. 176-177)

Week 15 (Apr 22): Flex Day

Wrap up, Papers, general discussion.

Finals Week (Apr 29): Final Meeting? – reflection, thoughts, etc.

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ASSIGNMENTS, EVALUATION, POLICY:

“Extrinsic motivation, which includes a desire to get better grades, is not only different from, but often undermines, intrinsic motivation, a desire to learn for its own sake” – Alfie Kohn (1999), *Punished by rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A’s, praise, and other bribes*. Rev. ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Let’s Talk Motivation: In recent years I have become increasingly unhappy with grades as a measure of anything at all. I often tell my students that it’s probably easy to get an A in my class – you can relatively easily “hack” my grading system and figure out the “formula” for writing a paper for me. Once you figure it out, getting an A on papers in my classes is easy. But I don’t want you to get an A by “hacking the system.” I want you to push yourself to learn new things because you found something you’re excited about and wanted to try to go beyond what’s comfortable and familiar. I’ve long thought that an A- or a B+ that was the result of taking risks was worth more than a safe, but well-written A paper.

In short, grading is not a good measure of learning, and the focus on grades distracts from the real goal of education. If you’re aiming for a specific grade, you’re not aiming to get the most out of your educational opportunities.

Evaluation: Here’s what we will do. I will ask you to first share a short reflection paper in order to help us both better understand how you can get the most out of this class. In your reflection, please consider the following questions:

- (a) What are your reasons for taking this class?
- (b) What do you hope to get out of this class?
- (c) Where and how do you think you can improve on your academic work?
- (d) What do the course learning outcomes mean to you? How do you think you can work on improving with regard to them?
- (e) What are three concrete goals you’d like to work on over the course of the semester with regard to your academic work/performance? For example, you might want to work on reading comprehension, charitable interpretation, speaking up in class more often, etc.

In your initial reflection, I ask that you please identify some concrete goals that you intend to work on in my class this semester.

I will ask you to do a mid-semester check-in reflection paper where you will discuss the efforts you’ve put in, any progress you’ve made, and offer insights into how we can continue the upward trajectory or improve things in the second half of the term. In this and the final reflection, I expect you to point to the feedback you’ve received on your written work as evidence for your claims.

We will have a final reflection again at the end of the semester where you discuss what progress have you made with regard to our goals.

The idea is that we will **collaboratively** come to a determination about what sort of progress you’ve made, where you think you can continue to improve (and how to best do so). As such, I will not provide you with numerical or letter grades on individual assignments. I will provide *qualitative* feedback on your work (discursive comments regarding clarity, precision, critical engagement, etc.), but the gradebook will only

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note whether you turned the assignment in. With each assignment, I will inquire into the amount and nature of feedback you would like on your written work.

You are responsible for working with me to determine your final grade in this class. We will come to an **agreement** based on formal self-assessments, the collected feedback you received from me over the course of the semester, and a final discussion. It's really important that you develop a clear sense of the quality of your own work and how to evaluate it. It's a difficult skill to master and requires tremendous self-awareness. That's why we're going to work together to ensure that the assessment reflects the work you've done over the course of the term.

Assignments (Due dates are subject to change):

- **Introductory Self-Reflection Paper** (Due Jan. 21st).
- **Big Question in Philosophy** (Due Jan. 28).
- **SEP/Source Discussion and Tentative Thesis** (Due Feb. 25) .
- **SPRING BREAK** (March 4).
- **Mid-point Reflection Paper** (Due March 11)
- **Paper Outline** (Due March 25).
- **Paper Draft** (Due Apr. 8).
- **Final paper** (Due Apr. 22).
- **Weekly Reading Reflection Assignments** (due each Wednesday).
- **Participation** Philosophy is best done in open, careful dialogue with one another. I know not everyone is comfortable speaking in front of their peers, but I want to encourage you to genuinely engage one another regarding the ideas in the class. There are a number of ways one can be an active participant in the course. Whether that is asking questions in class, organizing discussion boards, setting up study groups, visiting during student hours, or something else you come up with, I'd like to see you really engage with both the material and one another. In order to do so, you must **attend class regularly**.

Submitting Assignments: All assignments will be due on Wednesdays. You may elect to type them using your SecureBooks, or you may write them by hand. I have no preference. Whatever is easiest for you.

SmartBook Submissions: If you elect to type your assignments, please title the files the following way: PHIL430_Reflection1_FirstInitialLastName (e.g. PHIL430_Reflection1_KPhillips). This makes everything easier for everyone involved.

Paper Submissions: Please make sure your name is on it and that you have labeled each item so I know which assignment it is I'm reading.

Scaffolded Term Paper

Over the course of the semester, I will ask you to write a philosophy paper on some topic of your choosing (as long as it's related to philosophy). I want you to start with a big question. What is something you've always wondered about? I will help you tailor the question and find sources that address that question. I will then ask you to carefully read and articulate what various philosophers have said about that question. I want to see how you engage with the texts, so I expect to see a thoughtful, charitable, reconstruction of the arguments at issue grounded in the texts themselves. At this point, I would also like to see a tentative thesis – what are you adding to the conversation? I would like to see some sort of critical engagement with the argument (where are possible weaknesses) and some discussion beyond what was covered in class. This is about demonstrating understanding and thinking critically, not

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about content retention. Then I'll ask you to produce a paper (roughly 2000-3000 words) on that subject. I will give more details in class.

Ten Reading Reflections (There will be one each week, but you only need to do 10 in total).

I have included a handout with more details but in short, the responses must engage with the text in three different ways total (though you're allowed to engage in more ways than this, if you want to). Your three reflections must be from at least two different groups (comprehension, queries, connection, criticism, epiphany, or other). Use separate paragraphs for each reflection task. There is no word minimum or maximum, but you should write at least three sentences for each of your three engagements. Be sure to label each reflection, include the page numbers from which you're getting the information, and state how long it took you to do the reading as well as how long it took to do the reflection.

Note: I recognize that the texts are challenging and that you might find yourself struggling to fully understand them. This is both normal and something I expect! It is not important that you "get everything right" with these; **I only ask that you try your best.** These reading responses are a low-stakes opportunity to practice getting better at reading and interpreting challenging texts. There are a number of times in your life where people will rely on your inability or unwillingness to read difficult material and will thus hide things in obscure writing. This is an opportunity to get practice in order to head that off.

I welcome revisions on all written work in light of comments. I firmly believe that we get better at writing, thinking, and so forth by returning to our work and refining it in light of feedback. I want you to succeed, but as this is likely to be your first (and perhaps your *only*) introduction to philosophy, I'd like to afford you the opportunity to get as much as you can out of this class. As the final paper is due during finals week, there will not really be an opportunity to revise that paper, but my hope is that by that point in the term you'll have a better idea of how to write a philosophy paper than you do coming in, so you should be in good shape.

Classroom Conduct: The classroom constitutes a community of which we are each an important part. The very foundation of philosophy as a discipline is the ability to charitably listen, understand and represent the views of ourselves and others. Philosophy as a discipline requires careful dialogue. As such, respect for your fellow student, your instructor, and the course is of critical importance. We can, should, and will disagree with one another often, but this *MUST* be conducted with respect. Different contexts have different norms for how one might express respect. In philosophy, engaging critically with another's ideas is often a sign of respect – it indicates that the ideas are serious and worthy of consideration, even if we ultimately may not agree with them. It may take some getting used to, but we will identify concrete ways to think about how we can demonstrate respect for one another through our philosophical dialogue.

Attendance: I do not have a formal attendance policy, but philosophy is hard even if you come to class. You are responsible for information that I offer in class that is not in the readings (which will also help you better understand what you're reading). I understand that things may come up that are outside of your control, so please do not worry too much if you cannot make a class due to extenuating circumstances. Otherwise, please do your best to come to class and be present.

OTHER IMPORTANT POLICIES & RESOURCES

University Policies In addition to the articulated course specific policies and expectation, students are responsible for understanding all applicable university guidelines, policies, and procedures. The [EMU Student Handbook](#) is the primary resource provided to students to ensure that they have access to all university policies, support resources, and student's rights and responsibilities. Changes may be made to the EMU Student Handbook whenever necessary, and shall be effective immediately, and/or as of the date on which a policy is formally adopted, and/or the date specified in the amendment. Electing not to access the link provided below does not absolve a student of responsibility. For questions about any university policy, procedure, practice, or resources, please contact the Office

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of the Ombuds: 248 Student Center, 734.487.0074, emu_ombuds@emich.edu, or visit the website at www.emich.edu/ombuds. [CLICK HERE to access the University Course Policies](#)