

Puzzles & Paradoxes: Cognition and its limits

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COURSE SUMMARY:

Philosophy is a most peculiar area of inquiry because part of what it is to be a fully rational agent is thinking about what it means to be a fully rational agent – but when thinking thinks about thinking, it can tie itself into knots. Often, these knots are playful and amusing curiosities, but paradoxes have a way of becoming paralyzing “antinomies of reason”. From the paradoxes of Zeno and Epimenides in Ancient Greece to their more recent progeny, including Russell’s Paradox, Cantor’s Paradox, and the Prisoner’s Dilemma, these problems have bedeviled philosophers and catalyzed thinking in epistemology, metaphysics, mathematics, ethics, and beyond. We will explore the variety of analytic techniques, critical skills, and logical tools that have been developed in response, in order to disarm those paradoxes – insofar as that is possible – but also to deploy those powerful strategies on traditional problems in philosophy.

There are good reasons for thinking that Philosophy is not really a *single* area of inquiry at all, but rather a motley combination of several areas. All of the following questions count as philosophical, but it is hard to see what, if anything, they have in common.

- * What are *minds*? How do they relate to brains? Can computers think?
- * What is the *meaning* of life? Is it the same for everyone? Does life even *have* a meaning? How should we go about trying to answer questions like these?
- * Do scientific changes, cultural relativity, differences in perspective, and human limitations mean that we can never really *know* anything?
- * How should I live my life? What makes a life a *good* life? What’s the right thing to do? Is there an objective right and wrong? How could we know?
- * Is there a God? Is there an afterlife? Is there *any* way, short of dying, to get definitive answers to these questions?
- * What makes an object a piece of *art*? What makes a work of art *good* or *bad* art? Is it just a matter of personal preference?
- * Do numbers exist? What sorts of things are numbers? Are mathematical truths all provable? Are mathematical truths *necessarily* true? Why?

- * What is the best form of government? What criteria should we use in deciding what the best form of government would be?
- * Are there principles of *good reasoning* that apply in all areas of intellectual inquiry – including inquiries into the topics above?

Perhaps Aristotle had it right: *Philosophy begins in wonder*. The myriad debates and dialogues that constitute philosophy may have little else in common but they do have this. Moreover, we can wonder about anything, from the immensity of the cosmos, to human dignity despite that immensity; from the mysteries of the universe to the mystery of life; from the beauty found in mathematics to the precision found in music; and from the profundity of great literature to the cleverness of a good joke. Sometimes the wonder of it all is hard to see because we've become jaded and cynical as we've lost our child-like ability to appreciate it all, but it can all be *wonderful*, if we can get the right mind-frame about it.

In this course, we will examine an assortment of paradoxes, dilemmas, and puzzles with several ends in mind. First, by examining some of the more playful problems that have concerned philosophers, we can develop **strategies** that can be applied to other, more complicated and pressing philosophical problems. Second, to untangle these knots, we will need to master some of philosophy's standard logical and **conceptual resources**. Third, perhaps we can learn something about the **nature of philosophy** from these peculiarly and characteristically philosophical problems. And last, but by no means least, we should have some fun.

The topics we will address in this course are only a small sample of the spectrum of philosophical questions. We will focus on these areas:

- (i) logic and language,
- (ii) personal identity,
- (ii) rational decision theory,
- (iv) skepticism and knowledge.

Our discussions will fall largely within three of the major sub-fields of Philosophy: Epistemology, Logic, and Metaphysics. **Epistemology** is the theory of knowledge. It deals with such questions as whether knowledge is possible, what counts as knowledge, and how such concepts as belief, knowledge, truth, and rationality are related. Whenever we ask, "*How can we know?*" we are asking an epistemological question. **Logic** is the study of rational inference. It too is concerned with truth and rationality independent of the particular topic at hand insofar as those concepts connect with questions about the consistency and consequences of our beliefs. **Metaphysics** is the study of ultimate reality,

including such questions as what is truth, what really exists and what makes something the same thing over time. These areas are not independent, nor are they independent of other areas in philosophy, such as philosophy of language, ethics, philosophy of science, aesthetics, political philosophy, and philosophy of religion.

We will also venture into the field of *meta-philosophy*, asking questions *about* philosophy. Is philosophy a science or an art? What is the proper method for philosophy? How does philosophy relate to psychology, physics, sociology, and other disciplines? When we raise “meta-questions” about other disciplines, we leave those disciplines behind and enter philosophy. For example, the questions “*Do numbers really exist?*” and “*What is the nature of mathematical knowledge?*” are not mathematical questions. They are meta-mathematical, philosophical questions. Similarly, when we ask *about* economics, e.g., whether it is a science, we are not asking a question *in* economics. In contrast, meta-philosophy is itself a subfield of philosophy. Just as part of what it is to think rationally is to think about rationality, part of what it is to think philosophically is to think *about* philosophy. There is something peculiar about that kind of self-reference – whether it is thought thinking about itself or language speaking about itself. It is characteristic of philosophy. And, as we shall see, it is characteristic of many kinds of paradox.

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS & READINGS:

FIRST WEEK:

Prelude: Logic as Philosophical Methodology

MONDAY: Puzzles, paradoxes & other philosophical questions

• **READINGS:** Quine, Ryle, Salmon

TUESDAY: Logic and the Paradoxes of self-reference

• **READINGS:** Aristotle, Quine, Gardner

First Movement: Thought-experiments in Philosophy [Contrivances]

WEDNESDAY: Minds & Brains: The Turing Test and Chinese Room

• **READINGS:** Descartes, Ryle, Smullyan, Turing, Nagel, Searle

THURSDAY: Persons & Things: Paradoxes of Personal Identity

• **READINGS:** Dennett, Taylor, Parfit, Daniels, Appiah

Interlude: Arguing Philosophically

FRIDAY: Logic, Rhetoric, and Dialectic

• **READINGS:** Nozick, Hempel, Cohen, Gilbert,

SECOND WEEK:

Second Movement: Fiction in Philosophy

MONDAY: Persons & Other Fictional Characters

- **READINGS:** Dennett, Walton, Nozick

Reprise: Thought-experiments in Philosophy [Idealizations]

TUESDAY: The Paradoxes of Rational Action

- **READINGS:** Kavka, Bennett, Hofstadter

Third Movement: To believe or not to believe?

WEDNESDAY: To Believe or Not To Believe –

- **READINGS:** Descartes, Unger, Lehrer, Smullyan, Zhuangzi

THURSDAY: Skepticism, Induction

- **READINGS:** Hume, Russell, Salmon, Feyerabend

Coda: Philosophical Miscellany

FRIDAY: To infinity and beyond

- **READINGS:** Zeno, Hilbert, Cantor, Gödel

TEXTS FOR THE COURSE:

- Douglas Hofstadter and Daniel Dennett, editors, *The Mind's I* (To be purchased prior to the course).
- Supplemental articles (These will be available as pdf documents distributed prior to the course or as handouts during the course).

GRADING FOR THE COURSE:

Grades for the course will be based on class participation (20%), two in-class quizzes (20%), a mid-term (30%), and a take-home final essay, to be submitted within four weeks after the end of the course (30%).