

**FALL 2013**  
**PHI 231, SECTION 06**  
**THE BIG QUESTIONS**

- Location:** John Jay College of Criminal Justice  
524 West 59th St. / Room \_\_\_\_\_  
New York, NY 10019
- Time:** Tuesdays and Thursdays from 12:15 to 1:30 p.m.
- Instructor:** Dr. Douglas Ficek
- Email:** dficek@jjay.cuny.edu
- Office:** If you would like to schedule an appointment with me, please speak with me before or after class or send me an email with your relevant information (full name and course number).
- Objectives:** Socrates once said that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Many years later, Bertrand Russell commented that “many people would rather die than think – in fact, they do!”

At its heart, philosophy is about examining life and thinking critically about ourselves and the world we live in. When we do this, according to most philosophers, we use the one quality that makes us distinct as human beings – namely, *reason*. Of course, most philosophical questions cannot be answered with absolute certainty, and this could become an annoying theme for you as we proceed through the readings. Do not get too frustrated. Just remember that philosophy is best understood as a *journey*, not necessarily as a *destination*. Consider the following passage – again, from Bertrand Russell:

“Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves; because these questions enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination and *diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes the mind against speculation*; but above all because, through the greatness of the universe which philosophy contemplates, the mind also is rendered great, and becomes capable of that union with the universe which constitutes its highest good.”

In the first part of this course, we will look at four of Plato's dialogues: *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*. These dialogues depict the last days of Socrates, who was sentenced to death for, among other things, corrupting the youth of Athens, and they will illustrate not only what philosophy *is*, but also how philosophy is *done*. Holiness, justice, duty, immortality – we will explore these topics and more.

In the second part of this course, we will read René Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*, one of the founding texts of modern philosophy. You have probably heard the famous sentence, “I think, therefore I am.” This is from Descartes, and we will work to understand exactly what it means. Be prepared to doubt everything – from your body to your memory, from God to the external world.

In the third part of this course, we will consider one of the most important texts in the history of ethical theory: Immanuel Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. This challenging text is about nothing less than the Moral Law and our absolute duty to it. For Kant, what is morally right is morally right, regardless of circumstances, from which it follows that there are *no* exceptions to it. Ask yourself: Is it ever okay to lie?

In the fourth part of this course, we will consider another important text on ethical theory: John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism*. Unlike Kant, who disregards consequences, Mill bases his approach to ethical theory entirely on consequences. You have probably heard people say that “the ends justify the means.” Well, that is a utilitarian argument, and it is an incredibly influential way to make decisions, both personal and political.

In the fifth part of this course, we will raise the complex question of human inequality, using Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *A Discourse on Inequality* as our guide. Is inequality among human beings natural? Or is it unnatural – a deviation from an original human existence? Rousseau takes on these questions, and we will critically discuss his fascinating response to them, a response that continues to inspire social and political analysis today.

In the sixth and final part of this course, we will look at Charles W. Mills' *The Racial Contract*, in which institutionalized racism – or white supremacy – is explored as an especially oppressive form of unnatural human inequality. In this text, which is not even fifteen years old, political philosophy is criticized for its “normative whiteness.” We will work to understand this harsh criticism, and also to evaluate it.

**Outcomes:** John Jay College of Criminal Justice now requires that specific learning outcomes be specified on course syllabi. Here are three general learning outcomes: (1) students will be able to identify the central areas of philosophical inquiry (from epistemology to political philosophy); (2) students will be able explicate key texts on these areas of inquiry; and (3) students will be able to discuss these key texts both in class discussion and in their written work.

**Requirements:** You are responsible for all of the assigned readings, and to encourage your preparedness (and your participation), I will give you several pop quizzes throughout the semester. Together, these will count for twenty percent of your final grade, *so do not get lazy with the readings*. Be ready for a short essay format. *You can use your notes on the quizzes*.

In addition to these pop quizzes, you will be writing two papers, both of which must be *eight pages in length*. I will provide you with more information on these assignments as the semester progresses, but get ready for lots of writing. The first paper will count for twenty percent of your final grade, and the second paper will count for twenty percent of your final grade.

There will also be a multiple-choice final exam. This will be comprehensive, *but you will be allowed to use your notes* (not for the duration, but for roughly fifteen minutes).

Attendance is mandatory, and excessive absences (more than three) will negatively affect your final grade. The same goes for tardiness. Get to class on time! Excessive tardiness will also negatively affect your final grade. Bottom line: *If you cannot fully commit yourself to this course, then you should not take it*.

**Caveats:** As an instructor, I am pretty easy-going. I do, however, insist upon a respectful atmosphere in the classroom. What exactly does this mean? It means: no phone calls, no texting, no sleeping, and no ridiculously long bathroom breaks. If your phone does go off during class, you can either sing a song for the class – Johnny Cash would be fantastic – or I can assign an additional writing assignment that *everyone* must do. This is not a joke.

“My flash drive broke” has become the new “My dog ate my homework,” and I will not accept it as an excuse for late or incomplete work. Please use dropbox.com or docs.google.com to ensure the security of your written work. Also, they are *free*.

Finally, I take academic dishonesty *very* seriously and will fail anyone who plagiarizes on any of the written work. Do not test me on this. Please review the official policy:

“Plagiarism is the presentation of someone else's ideas, words, or artistic, scientific, or technical work as one's own creation. Using the ideas or work of another is permissible only when the original author is identified. Paraphrasing and summarizing, as well as direct quotations, require citations to the original source.

Plagiarism may be intentional or unintentional. *Lack of dishonest intent does not necessarily absolve a student of responsibility for plagiarism.*

It is the student's responsibility to recognize the difference between statements that are common knowledge (which do not require documentation) and restatements of the ideas of others. Paraphrasing, summarizing, and direct quotation are acceptable forms of restatement, as long as the source is cited.

Students who are unsure how and when to provide documentation are advised to consult with their instructors. The Library has free guides designed to help students with problems of documentation.”

**Grading:**

Attendance – 10%  
Pop Quizzes – 20%  
First Paper – 20%  
Second Paper – 20%  
Final Exam – 30%

**Texts:**

Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates* (London: Penguin Books, 2003)  
René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (New York: Oxford World's Classics, 2008)  
Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (New York: HarperPerennial, 2009)  
John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2007)  
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality* (London: Penguin Books, 1984)  
Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997)

**Schedule:**

August 29 – Course Introduction

PLATO

September 3 – *Euthyphro*, 2a-10a

September 5 – NO CLASS

September 10 – *Euthyphro*, 10b-16a

September 12 – *Apology*, 17a-34b

September 17 – *Apology*, 34c-42a

September 19 – *Crito*, 43a-54e

September 24 – *Phaedo*, 57a-91c

September 26 – *Phaedo*, 91d-118a

DESCARTES

October 3 – *Meditations on First Philosophy*, pp. 13-17

October 8 – *Meditations on First Philosophy*, pp. 17-24

October 10 – *Meditations on First Philosophy*, pp. 25-37

October 15 – NO CLASS

October 17 – *Meditations on First Philosophy*, pp. 38-51

October 22 – *Meditations on First Philosophy*, pp. 51-64

KANT

October 24 – *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, pp. 55-60

October 29 – *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, pp. 61-73

October 31 – *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, pp. 74-88

November 5 – *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, pp. 88-113

MILL

November 7 – *Utilitarianism*, pp. 1-22

November 12 – *Utilitarianism*, pp. 23-55

ROUSSEAU

November 14 – *A Discourse on Inequality*, pp. 67-79

November 19 – *A Discourse on Inequality*, pp. 81-107

November 21 – *A Discourse on Inequality*, pp. 109-123

November 26 – *A Discourse on Inequality*, pp. 123-137

November 28 – NO CLASS

MILLS

December 3 – *The Racial Contract*, pp. 1-40

December 5 – *The Racial Contract*, pp. 41-89

December 10 – *The Racial Contract*, pp. 91-120

December 12 – *The Racial Contract*, pp. 120-133