

1 Course description

The purpose of this course is to expose you to philosophy by engaging with a variety of philosophical issues and arguments. Some of the questions we will ask include: How can it be fair to hold people responsible for their actions given that they're the product of forces (like their genes, upbringing, and circumstances) over which they had no control? Is it immoral to spend money on luxuries you don't need when you could use the money to help someone in dire need? Does the fact that you can think and feel mean that you have an immaterial soul of some kind, or are you just a complicated arrangement of atoms? Does God exist? Is there any reason to fear death? Are we living in a simulation, and does it matter if we are? Students can expect to come away from the course with informed opinions on a variety of existential questions and a better understanding of the challenges and rewards of thinking philosophically.

2 Contact

Lecture: Fridays 2pm–4pm

Location: LT11

Lectures will also be recorded and posted on Canvas in case you miss them, but I highly encourage you to attend in person. Lectures will *not* be broadcast live on Zoom; they'll only be posted as videos later.

Instructor: Ethan Jerzak

Office Hours: TBA

Office: AS3 floor 5, look for my name on the door

3 Prerequisites

None

4 Materials

None; all readings will be posted on Canvas.

5 Requirements

The course requirements are to:

1. Do the reading. Each reading is short; you should read it at least once before lecture, and then once again after the lecture.
2. Attend the lecture. You'll get most out of it if you leave your computer and phone in your backpack.
3. Attend the **tutorials**. Tutorials will run from Week 3 through Week 13. You get credit just by showing up. You can miss two tutorials for any reason with no penalty. **NOTE:** This allowance covers *every reason*, including ones that you might think should merit an official excuse like an MC or a funeral or an abduction by aliens. In the extremely rare circumstance that you accumulate three or more absences that you think should be excused, get in touch with your TA as soon as possible with the appropriate documentation. (15% of final grade)

4. Constructively **participate** in these tutorials. Your tutorial participation grade is based on the overall quality of your participation as determined by your TA. Good participation is participation that contributes to a good discussion: this can mean asking questions that stimulate discussion, arguing for or against the positions being discussed, helping to clarify the relevant concepts and positions—basically anything that makes tutorials more lively and enjoyable. Notably, just talking a lot is insufficient for good participation. Quality is more important than quantity, and dominating the discussion unduly can hurt your participation grade. (15% of final grade)
5. Take the **midterm** in week six. Multiple choice and true/false questions (30% of final grade)
6. Take the **final exam**. The exam will be a two-hour, in-person, paper-based MCQ exam administered on TBD. Room TBD. Further details to be announced later. (40% of final grade)

6 Miscellany

6.1 Disability accommodation

Students requesting academic accommodation should contact the NUS Student Accessibility Unit (SAU) (<https://nus.edu.sg/osa/student-services/student-accessibility-unit>) AND email me so that appropriate arrangements can be made.

6.2 Collective reward for reading the syllabus

If by Wednesday of Week 13, zero students have emailed me asking a question the answer to which is already on the syllabus or answered in a Canvas announcement, there will be a special surprise reward for everyone during the final lecture.

6.3 Chain of command

Administrative questions, comments, challenges, excuses, complaints, and in general everything not strictly about the content of the course (philosophy) should follow this chain of command:

1. Consult the syllabus and Canvas to see if the answer is already there;
2. If the answer isn't there, consult your TA;
3. If your TA doesn't have the answer, the TA will consult me.

6.4 Marking challenges

Sometimes you might disagree with the answer to a midterm question. You have a right to challenge any answer with your TA! Sometimes there are alternative readings of the question that make it genuinely ambiguous. The outcome of challenges will be as follows:

1. Challenge affirmed: you were right, and we'll give you credit.
2. Original call stands: your challenge was within the space of rationality, but ultimately we stand by our original judgment. You don't get credit but you don't lose any extra points. (Most challenges will probably fall into this category.)
3. Challenge denied: your challenge was not within the space of reasons; there was no even remotely plausible interpretation of the question on which your challenge makes sense. You don't get credit, and you lose 0.25 points for wasting time.

7 FAQ

1. I missed this week's lecture! What can I do to make it up?

Answer: Watch the recorded lecture posted on Canvas. No need to tell anyone; attendance isn't taken at lecture.

2. I missed this week's tutorial but I have a *really* good excuse! How do I get my absence excused?

Answer: See "requirements" above; everyone's first two are already excused, you don't need to tell anyone or give anyone documentation. (And, if you do try to give someone documentation, that counts as "asking a question the answer to which is already on the syllabus", causing the entire class to miss out on the week 13 secret special reward!) Only if you've accumulated three or more excuses that you believe to be valid do you need to be in contact with your TA. In this case, we will decide together how to proceed, but if you've missed that much (even for valid reasons) you should probably be thinking about applying for an official leave of absence from the university for this semester.

3. Something came up, and I can't make a tutorial this week. Can I attend a different one? Can I get attendance credit for attending a different one?

Answer: Attend, maybe; get attendance credit... less probable. It's up to your TA, and the TA of the section you want to go to instead. If there's room, and both TAs are feeling the spirit of generosity, maybe they'll take pity on you. But certainly there's no chance if you don't arrange it 24 hours in advance, or if it becomes habitual. Basically, just go to your scheduled sections, and if you miss one, don't sweat it, there's a generous policy for missing tutorials.

4. How do I prepare for the midterm?

Answer: Do the reading really carefully, and attend lecture. Pay attention at lecture, leave your computer and phone in your backpack. Take good notes at lecture. Handwritten, paper notes are most effective. (See: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0956797614524581> and <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fnbeh.2021.634158/full>)

5. Help! I just missed one tutorial, but I still see the record as "not present" on Canvas role-call. I thought our first two absences were excused?

Answer: Don't panic! Canvas reflects your *actual* attendance record, before the drop-lowest-two rule is applied. We'll calculate everything including this rule at the end.

8 Schedule (highly provisional, subject to change)

Week 1: Introduction: Philosophy and Arguments

Fri Jan 17, 2024

No reading assigned.

Week 2: Goodness

Fri Jan 24, 2024

Reading: Nozick, "The Experience Machine"

Week 3: Life and Value

Tutorials begin!

Fri Jan 31, 2024

Reading: Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (excerpts)

Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (excerpts)

Week 4: Right and Wrong

Fri Feb 7, 2024

Reading: Norcross, “Puppies, Pigs, and People”

Week 5: Death

Fri Feb 14, 2024

Reading: Nagel, “Death”

Week 6: Relativism

Fri Feb 21, 2024

Reading: Rachels, “The Challenge of Cultural Relativism”

Spring Break!

Fri Feb 28, 2024

No class

Week 7: God

Fri Mar 7, 2024

Reading: Perry, excerpts from Dialogue on Good, Evil and the Existence of God

Supplementary reading: Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamozov*, excerpt “Rebellion”

Week 8: Newcomb

Fri Mar 14, 2024

Reading: M. Gardner, “Newcomb’s Paradox”

Week 9: Appearance and Reality

Fri Mar 21, 2024

Reading: Bostrom, “Do We Live in a Computer Simulation?”

Week 10: No Class

Fri Mar 28, 2024

No class on account of NUS Well-Being Day

Week 11: Time-Travel

Fri Apr 4, 2024

Reading: Lewis, “The Paradoxes of Time-Travel”

Week 12: Personal Identity

Fri Apr 11, 2024

Reading: Parfit, “Reasons and Persons” (excerpts)

Week 13: Death

Fri Apr 18, 2024

No class on account of Good Friday