

Course Syllabus
Douglas Marshall
September 13, 2020

SKEPTICISM, GOD,
& ETHICAL
DILEMMAS

1 Logistics

TITLE: PHIL 115 - Skepticism, God, and Ethical Dilemmas

MEETING TIMES: Fall 2020, M W 2:30–3:40 p.m., F 3:10–4:10 p.m.*

MEETING LOCATION: Zoom (this is an online only course)

INSTRUCTOR: Douglas Marshall (dmarshall@carleton.edu)

OFFICE HOURS: W, 9:30–10:30 a.m., F, 4:30–5:50 p.m., via Google Meet or
Zoom

COURSE WEBSITE:

<https://moodle.carleton.edu/course/view.php?id=34255>

*NOTE ABOUT MEETING TIMES: All times listed are U.S. Central Time, the time in Northfield, MN. I am planning for this course to be *synchronous*. It is important that you be available to attend our class meetings via Zoom on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.

2 Course Requirements

1. Reading: It is crucial to the functioning of this course that you read the required texts carefully. If readings are assigned for a given class meeting, you should be sure to do the readings before class meets. Reading philosophical texts is hard. You will not be prepared if you don't do the reading carefully and critically. I strongly recommend doing every reading for the class at least twice.

2. Writing: You will be assigned a sequence of four papers to write as the course progresses. In the first paper, you will articulate a skeptical scenario that you take to pose a compelling threat to the possibility of human knowledge. For the second paper, you will revise your first paper and expand it

to include your assessment of how some philosophical resolution of skepticism that interests you would respond to the skeptical scenario you describe. For the third paper, you will articulate and either defend or criticize that argument for or against the existence of God which you take to be the most successful. For the fourth and final paper, you will devise your own ethical dilemma and discuss whatever solution you take to be the most promising response to your dilemma and some of the well known dilemmas described in the literature on the Trolley Problem.

You can get detailed paper topics and guidelines for writing papers in philosophy from our course moodle. Look for the block entitled “Resources for Writing Your Papers”.

3. Class Participation: Participation includes punctual attendance in class, contributions to class discussions, and regular Moodle logins. I will take attendance at each meeting. I encourage everyone to be part of our class discussions, and I suggest you set a goal of participating actively (like asking a question or describing your reaction to our readings) at least once per week. I will also periodically check on your Moodle logins. I expect you to log in to the Moodle at least twice per week, and I suggest that you log in to Moodle at least once every three days. There will be lots of updates to the Moodle as our course progresses.

If possible, you should avoid missing more than one week of class meetings. In cases where there may be good reasons for an extended absence, please work with the class deans on modifying course deadlines.

Course Requirements FAQ:

Are there any exams in PHIL 115? Is there a final exam?

No.

Do we need to buy any books? Is there a textbook?

No. All readings for the course will be available through the course website. In the first week of the course I do assign the movie *The Matrix*, and you’ll need to find a way to borrow, stream, or purchase a copy.

3 Tentative Schedule of Topics and Assignments

The following weekly schedule is approximate and subject to change. Please see the course website for up-to-date weekly readings and assignments. After this week, the readings for a given week will always be posted by Friday evening of the previous week.

WEEK	TOPICS	AUTHORS
1	Introduction to Philosophy Skeptical Scenarios	Wilfrid Sellars René Descartes
2	The Nature of Knowledge	Christopher Grau Edmund Gettier Robert Nozick
3	Solutions to Skeptical Problems	David Chalmers Catherine Elgin
4	Ontological Arguments for God's Existence	Anselm of Canterbury René Descartes
5	Cosmological Arguments for God's Existence	Thomas Aquinas
6	The Logical Problem of Evil (against God's Existence)	J.L. Mackie Alvin Plantinga
7	The Evidentiary Problem of Evil; The Trolley Problem	William Rowe Judith Thomson
8	The Doctrine of Double Effect	Philippa Foot Elizabeth Anscombe
9	Utilitarianism and the Trolley Problem	J.J.C. Smart Frances Kamm
10	Trolleys Revisited The Value of Philosophy	Judith Thomson Bertrand Russell

PAPER	TOPIC	TENTATIVE DUE DATE
1	A Skeptical Scenario	September 25 (Week 2)
2	A Proposed Solution to Skeptical Problems	October 9 (Week 4)
3	Critical Assessment of an Argument For or Against the Existence of God	October 30 (Week 7)
4	Ethical Dilemmas and Moral Principles	November 21 (Week 10)

4 Grading

First paper, 1.5 pages (maximum 450 words): 10%

Second paper, 5–6 pages (maximum 1,800 words): 15%

Third paper, 5–6 pages (maximum 1,800 words): 25%

Fourth paper, 5–6 pages (maximum 1,800 words): 35%

Participation: 15%

I will use the percentages above in computing a final raw score at the end of the semester for each student. Your final grade will be based on this raw score, but it will take improvement over the course of the semester into account.

Extensions Policy: You may hand in any paper for this class up to 48 hours late without penalty to your grade. When I calculate final grades, I will simply ignore up to 48 hours of lateness for all papers due in PHIL 115.

Aside from the automatic 48 hour extension, you may request an ordinary extension of a paper deadline so long as you make your request *before* the day it is due. Work that is late without an extension or beyond an extension will be discounted at the rate of one-third of a grade per day (A to A-, A- to B+, and so forth). Papers will not be accepted more than one week after the due date except under extraordinary circumstances. In such circumstances, arrangements should be made in consultation with the class deans.

5 Continuity of Instruction in a Time of Crisis

We are living in a difficult time. Deeply disturbing racial injustices are taking place, and so is social unrest. COVID-19 is interfering with our ability to be at college in the normal way. The upcoming U.S. election—which takes place during this academic term—does not look like it’s going to be an easy process. My point is that in times like these, we will need to exhibit flexibility with each other throughout the term.

I have done my best to design the course so that everyone can be successful, even if illness or external factors beyond our control mean that some of us may have to be absent for some of the class. If your personal situation is affecting your ability to engage with the course, please contact the Dean of Students Office so we can work towards reasonable accommodations. If technological problems are limiting your ability to participate, please contact the ITS Helpdesk at 507-222-5999 or helpdesk@carleton.edu.

6 Privacy

In some instances, videos of our class will be recorded either by me or by students for purposes of study or review. Class members should not share, replicate, or publish the recording, in whole or in part, or use the recording for any other purpose than for class-related studying. Recordings of class sessions that include student participants should not be saved or used past the end of the term. In particular, I will delete any audio or video recordings that include students within one month after the academic term is over. In return, I ask that you not share the videos I create for purposes of this course.

7 Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

Carleton College is committed to providing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students. The Disability Services office (Henry House, 107 Union Street) is the campus office that collaborates with students who have disabilities to provide and/or arrange reasonable accommodations. If you have, or think you may have, a disability (e.g., mental health, attentional, learning, autism spectrum disorders, chronic health, traumatic brain injury and concussions, vision, hearing, mobility, or speech impairments), please contact disability@carleton.edu or call Sam Thayer ('10), Accessibility Specialist (x4464) or Chris Dallager, Director of Disability Services (x5250) to

arrange a confidential discussion regarding equitable access and reasonable accommodations.

8 The Writing Center

The Writing Center is offering a full schedule of videoconferences with peer writing consultants who can work with you during any stage of the writing process (brainstorming to final proofreading). Hours and more information can be found on the writing center website (<https://www.carleton.edu/writing-center/>). You can reserve specific times for conferences by using their online appointment system (<https://writingcenter.carleton.edu/>).

If you are a second language writer and believe you might benefit from working individually with a writing consultant on a regular basis this term, email Renata Fitzpatrick, Multilingual Writing Coordinator (rfitzpatrick@carleton.edu). She can arrange once- or twice-a-week meetings between you and a specific writing consultant throughout the term.

9 Academic Integrity

All work submitted by you is assumed to be your own original work that has not been submitted elsewhere. Any words or ideas borrowed from other sources must be properly attributed. Any cases of suspected dishonesty will be forwarded to the Academic Standing Committee, as required by Carleton's policy on academic integrity. In confirmed cases of academic dishonesty, I will recommend a penalty ranging from a failing grade for the assignment to failure in the course. Carleton College may pursue further action.

For more information about academic integrity at Carleton and guidelines about how to avoid plagiarism in your work, please go to: <https://www.carleton.edu/writing/plagiarism/>.

10 Course Description

PHIL 115 is an introductory course in philosophy designed for students with little or no prior background. We will start to engage in the practice of philosophy by discussing the following topics:

1. Skepticism. There is a broad range of skeptical arguments which purport to show that knowledge is impossible for us, or that human knowledge

is much smaller in scope than we might have hoped or expected. One standard skeptical strategy is to argue that you don't know that you are not a subject in an elaborate computer simulation (as in the movie *The Matrix*). But if you don't know that you are not a subject in a computer simulation, then you don't know very much. For instance, you don't know that you're in Minnesota right now. We will first consider such skeptical strategies, then examine attempts to refute or otherwise overcome skepticism.

2. God. Philosophical theists have produced a large collection of arguments which attempt to prove that God exists, including "ontological" arguments and "cosmological" arguments. Atheists, in turn, have produced arguments which attempt to prove that God doesn't or cannot exist; one common strategy is to insist that the existence of God is incompatible with the existence of the evil in the world that is already known to exist. We will consider arguments of all these types with a view towards determining whether belief in the existence of God, or belief that there is no God, can have a rational basis in argument.

3. Ethical Dilemmas. Sharply defined dilemmas can be useful in order to figure out which actions are ethically permissible and which are ethically forbidden. One recent (but nonetheless famous) dilemma developed by Judith Thomson is called *Bystander at the Switch*: you are a bystander who happens to be standing at the switch which controls a trolley. If you don't flip the switch, the trolley will run over and kill 5 people who are working on Track A. If you flip the switch, you will turn the trolley onto Track B, killing the one person who is working there. Are you morally permitted to flip the switch? Are you morally obligated to flip the switch? We will consider a number of variations on the *Bystander* dilemma in the hopes of arriving at a coherent set of moral principles that explain when it is morally permissible to harm or kill innocent, non-threatening people.

11 Course Objectives

- A. To begin to learn about philosophy by engaging in the practice of it.
- B. To learn how to offer a reasoned defense of a claim in writing.
- C. To get acquainted with the tools (library-based and online) you would use to research a philosophical topic of interest to you.

D. To be in a position to continue studying philosophy after our course is over, either through more coursework at Carleton or on your own.