Syllabus: Fall 2014

Department: English and Modern Languages
Course Number/Section: PHIL 1370/01
Course Title: Philosophy of Knowledge
Professor: Dr. Michael J. Matthys
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Course Description:

This course involves a survey of major knowledge systems, with an emphasis on the scientific and humanistic methods of inquiry. In addition, the course serves as a way of helping students integrate the curriculum, examining the ways in which disciplines in the humanities, arts, and sciences are, in their different methods, ways of pursuing truth and knowledge. We will examine the nature of knowledge, as that which involves a search in some sense of objective reality, and we will see how some of the great philosophers in history view this search as a process in which we learn, sometimes painfully, to question some of our basic commitments, and rid ourselves of our prejudices and presuppositions. University education ideally and historically requires a willingness to open one’s mind to uncommon possibilities that enlarge the mind and awaken it to universal truths. The sciences pursue their truths inductively, the mathematician deductively, and the artist creatively. We will examine the writings of major figures in each of these disciplines, with a view toward understanding the contributions of the various disciplines in taking their different paths toward a common objective.

Prerequisite: None

Required texts:

Ways of Knowing, Selective Readings, Dodson and Avery
Elements of Knowledge, Arthur Stewart
Experiments in Elements of Knowledge, Arthur Stewart

Learning Outcomes:

1. Students will understand the ways in which an arts and sciences core curriculum implies a common search for universal truth through distinct paths and specific methods relevant to each path.

2. Students will improve the critical reasoning practices and communication skills needed for their college education and subsequent careers.

3. Students will be engaged in an introduction to the history of philosophy and ideas, and will
develop an appreciation of the various foundations of knowledge in rationalism, empiricism, and pragmatism.

4. Students will achieve more informed understandings of contemporary personal and social issues.

Core Curriculum Objectives

Critical Thinking:
Through short writing assignments, students will demonstrate competency in critically analyzing arguments, pinpointing the author’s goal (conclusion), and examining the premises that the author uses in support of the goal of his or her argument. Beyond this, students will demonstrate an ability to question an author’s premises, examining any assumptions that the premises entail, highlight the historical, political, cultural or circumstantial conditions upon which the premises rest. In addition the student will be expected to arrive at a position of his or her own in relation to the argument under consideration, while taking into account other positions against which the student’s own is developed.

Communication:

Communication will consist of two parts:
(a) Writing: Using their reading assignments, students will compose clear critical/analytical essays with a clear thesis and introduction, along with clear and organized supporting paragraphs. Students will also use the standard conventions of English grammar and punctuation, and will write clear and efficient sentences.
(b) Speaking: Through the use of discussion groups, students will address the group, presenting their own essays to the group, responding to questions from their fellow students, and raising questions of the their own concerning the essays of others in the group. Students will be assessed on posture, gesture, eye-contact, and clear use of their voice, and the quality and nature of interaction with their group members.

Social Responsibility:

In essays students will demonstrate a commitment to understanding that philosophical ideas lie at the basis of Western culture and civilization. As such students will demonstrate an understanding of the meaning of civility and civilization, showing how respect for ideas, laws, and principles lies at the basis of each. In relation to this, students will recognize the concept of justice as it develops in the natural law tradition, and understand competing theories that arise out of the modern period.

Personal Responsibility:

In essays and tests, students will demonstrate an understanding of the idea of self, as it develops in various philosophical systems, along with the problem of free-will and its philosophical justification in terms of moral responsibility. Students will also demonstrate personal
responsibility by helping organize the topics for discussion in their discussion groups, as well as demonstrating leadership in presenting their ideas for a group discussion and responding to questions from fellow students in ways that show sensitivity to and respect for the viewpoint of others.

Disability Accommodation:

It is the policy of Lamar University to accommodate students with disabilities, pursuant to federal and state law, and the University’s commitment to equal educational opportunities. It is the student’s responsibility to register with Lamar’s Disability Support Services (880-8347) as quickly as possible. Any student who feels s/he may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact the professor directly during the first week of the course.

Academic Honesty:

Lamar University students will not cheat, lie, plagiarize, or tolerate those who do. Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated on any course assignments. Should you be found responsible for a dishonest incident, the course instructor will assign a reasonable penalty, which may include failure of the course. If you do not consent to the findings and/or penalty, you must file an appeal with the department chairperson within five days, as specified in the student handbook (available at www.my.lamar.edu).

Drop:

It is your responsibility to make sure that you are officially enrolled in this course. If, at any point, you decide not to participate in this course, it is your responsibility officially to drop or withdraw from enrollment. Failure to do so may result in a failing grade. Drops after the course begins may carry financial penalty in that full reimbursement may not be possible.

Attendance:

Attendance will be taken daily. No points will be deducted from your final grade due to absence, but no extra credit or extra participation points will be given to any student who has over three unexcused absences. Participation points for group discussions will be given a zero for any absence without a satisfactory excuse.

Grading and Evaluation:

There will be four examinations, including the final examination; each examination will cover material beginning from the preceding examination. Examinations will be both written (short essay, definitions) and multiple choice in character. Please bring a scantron #882-E and a soft-leaded pencil for each examination. Examinations will come from lectures and assigned reading material. Absences from any examination must be made up by appointment in my office prior to the exam’s being handed back. Failure to do so will result in a grade of zero for the exam.
Should the student miss an examination because of illness or some other unavoidable reason, documentation for the excuse must be provided, and a comprehensive make-up exam will be given to the student at the end of the semester, the grade for which will substitute for the missing exam.

Homework questions on various readings will be assigned on a regular basis. These questions will be graded in class. Failure to do the assignment will result in a grade of zero for that assignment. If the student missed the class, and turns in the assignment prior to the assignment’s being handed back, the homework will be accepted as late, with a small penalty. Any homework that was not handed in, or that was given a penalty, can be made up by the student’s doing extra credit work, provided that the student does not have excessive absences.

Extra credit papers will be accepted during the semester. The nature of these papers and other requirements, such as attendance, will be described in a separate handout.

The final examination must be taken on the scheduled date, unless excused. Travel plans and travel problems will not be accepted as excuses, nor will work-related problems. Please plan your work schedule around this and all other examinations.

The student’s points on all examinations, homework, and papers will be added together and divided by all possible points that a students could make on all these areas. The decimal will then be moved two places to the right, giving the student an average for the semester. In general grade totals will be assigned based on a weighting that should be roughly as follows:

Examinations and homework: 70% of grade.
Papers: 25% of grade.
Group discussion: 5% of grade.

**Grading Scale:**

A final average of 90 to 100 will earn an A, 80 to 89.99 a B, 70 to 79.99 a C, 60 to 69.99 a D, and 0 to 59.99 an F. Students whose average ends in something like 70.6 will ordinarily have their grade bumped up, assuming that there are no circumstances relating to matters such as absences that will deny the student this advantage.

Course Outline (All reading assignments are from *Ways of Knowing*, unless otherwise noted.)


**Week 2:** How does philosophy differ from science: Is psychology a science, if it studies the mind? What alternative forms of psychology are there? Do the social sciences have standards of inquiry that differ from the physical sciences? Homework: “What is Behaviorism?” J. Watson, 161-174; What is a Social Fact?” E. Durkheim, 175-184.
Discussion groups: examination and discussion of homework assignment on Russell.

Week 3: Do the sciences assume frameworks within which their questions arise? Can these frameworks be questioned within scientific activity? What is the primary framework of biology? What are the primary frameworks of physics?
Discussion groups: examination and discussion of homework assignments
Paper topic: Does Darwinian evolution account for all human behavior?

Week 4: How does the ancient model of science differ from the modern? How does Descartes seek to establish the foundations for modern science? How do mind and matter differ, and how do they relate, according to Descartes? How does this account differ from Aristotle's?
Discussion groups: Examination of Darwin paper topic and homework assignments.

Test 1: Multiple choice, short essay, definitions.

Week 5: Discussion groups: consideration of paper topic. Plato's "Allegory of the Cave."
Lecture: The natural law tradition, and how it begins in Plato's Allegory.

Week 6: Discussion groups: Examination and discussion of homework assignments.
Lecture: Hume's questions concerning the universality of causality, and what this says about knowledge of universals. Peirce's response to Hume's skepticism. Rationalism, empiricism, and pragmatism contrasted.

Week 7: Discussion groups: consideration of Polkinghorne homework.
Does the scientific model offer the possibility of creativity in the universe? Is freedom of will consistent with any aspect of science?

Test 2: Multiple choice, short essay, definitions.

Week 8: Discussion groups: consideration of previous homework.
Lecture: How can the arts be considered as "ways of knowing"? What is the "spiritual" dimension in art, and how is it known? How does artistic creativity differ from other human activities?
Paper topic: Can popular forms of art contain the philosophical or spiritual aspects to which Kandinsky and Hindemith refer?

Week 9: Discussion groups: Consideration of paper topic and homeworks.
Lecture: Plato’s complaint against the arts: the moral and metaphysical problems, their effect on character in the individual and in society, and their removal from reality. Aristotle’s response to Plato: the therapeutic value of the arts on the individual and society. Art as a manifestation of universality.
Paper topic: What examples of art in the present might confirm Plato’s warnings about the moral effects of art on character? Is Aristotle’s response to Plato relevant today?

Week 10: Discussion groups: Consideration of paper topic and homework.
Lecture: How does Zen Buddhism approach to the universe contain an implicit criticism of Western philosophy and culture?
Paper topic: What movies and books that you have seen and read illustrate the Zen point of view?

Week 11: Discussion groups: consideration of paper topics.
Test 3
Lecture: Does ethics have a sense of objectivity? What is an objective orientation? Does it apply to ethics?

Week 12: Consideration of homeworks.
Lecture: How does a utilitarian approach to ethical problem-solving differ for a Kantian?
Paper topic: What is an ethical position on a current ethical issue, and how would Kant and Mill try to resolve the issue?

Week 13: Discussion groups: consideration of paper topic.
Lecture: What is an argument? How evaluate arguments? What logical fallacies are there?
Homework: Ch 4-6, Elements of Knowledge and Questions for Review; “A Dialogue on Natural Religion,” Hume, 291-300.

Week 14: Discussion groups: homework exercises.
Lecture: What are the basic arguments in favor of God’s existence? What are the basic arguments against God’s existence? What logical fallacies sometimes are committed in these arguments?
Paper topic: What logical arguments are most convincing concerning God’s existence? Or: what arguments do you find against God’s existence?

Week 15: Discussion groups: Consideration of paper topic.
Test 4 (final)