

Philosophy 1: Introduction to Philosophy

UC San Diego—Fall 2014

Professor Don Rutherford

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Office hours: W 1-3 pm, H&SS 8046

Class: MWF 12:00-12:50 pm

Course Description:

This course is an introduction to some of the central problems of philosophy and the methods used to investigate them. We will focus on the tradition of Western philosophy that begins with Socrates, who directed his fellow Athenians to three fundamental questions that concern any reflective human being: What can we know? What are we? How should we live?

The first question addresses the authority of those who claim to have knowledge that others are bound to accept. How do we identify those who have such knowledge? What distinguishes knowledge from belief or faith? What are the limits of human knowledge and how do we go about recognizing those limits?

The second question addresses our understanding of our own existence: the distinctive characteristics, if any, that make us human. Often these are linked to our capacity for thought, reason or moral responsibility and freedom of the will. Are these essential properties of human beings and, if so, how do they make us different from other forms of life?

The third question addresses issues of ethics or morality: Is there a right or best way of living for a human being? What are our duties to other human beings (or other non-human beings), and how do we go about recognizing those duties?

Each of these questions generates a complicated series of debates that take us far beyond the limits of a one-quarter introductory class. My goal is that you come away from the class with a solid understanding of the scope of philosophical inquiry and a good grasp of how philosophers make an argument on behalf of their views. You will find that philosophy has a lot in common with modern science, but that it addresses a broader set of questions that reflect our efforts to understand the shape of our own lives—questions framed from a first-person point of view. Among these is the question of how we should see scientific knowledge as informing our understanding of ourselves. Are we just as science tells us we are, or is it up to us to integrate that knowledge with an independently formed conception of ourselves?

In pursuit of answers to these questions we will be guided by a collection of historical and contemporary readings (all available online via the class TED site). The readings will form the basis of class discussion and your writing assignments. However, the aim of the class is not simply that you be able to regurgitate this material, but that you be able to engage critically with it through your thinking on the topics and that you begin to develop your own views on the questions that philosophy addresses.

Course Requirements (tentative): 3 short papers, and 1 longer paper in lieu of final exam.