290-10 Theory of Knowledge

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Recommended Citation
Szymkowiak, Aaron, "290-10 Theory of Knowledge" (2013). Philosophy Syllabi Fall 2013. 35.
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Xavier University
PHIL 290 - 10: Theory of Knowledge
Fall Semester, 2013

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Office: 222 Hinkle
Office Hours: TR 11:15-12:45, W 9:00 a.m. -- Noon
Class room: Logan 100
Time: TR 10:00 – 11:15 a.m.

Required Texts

Plato, Five Dialogues (Grube, trans. Hackett edition)
Descartes, Discourse on Method and Meditations (Cress, trans. Hackett edition)
Kant, Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics (Ellington, trans. Hackett edition)

Course Description

Theory of Knowledge will involve the central questions associated with science, religion, and metaphysics: What counts as knowledge, and how do we best seek it? What is nature, and in what degree are we a part of it? Is knowledge fundamentally a matter of certainty or probability? What is chance? Does nature follow laws? Does our manner of investigating nature change the kinds of answers we should expect?

We will approach these questions by placing special emphasis on contrasts between classical and modern views on truth. The centerpiece of the course will be the Cartesian revolution placing method and certainty at the core of discussions about knowledge. This will culminate in questions about the social and moral implications of adopting different conceptions of knowledge.

Attendance, Participation, Assessment, and Readings

There will be two exams during the semester, one a mid-term, and the other a final. Each of these will consist of a few short essay questions and will count for 25% of the total grade. There will be two essays written outside of class, each totaling 5-6 pages in length. These will each be worth 20% of the total grade. The remaining 10% will be determined by class attendance, participation, and possibly a few short in-class quizzes. Each student will be permitted a maximum of two unexcused absences without penalty. Any student missing 10 or more class sessions automatically fails the course. Exams taken late will always involve a grade penalty, barring severe circumstances (grave family or medical emergencies). A student must take both exams and turn in both essay assignments to pass the course.
Plagiarism of any kind will not be tolerated, and per Xavier’s official policy, will be met with a FAILING GRADE for the assignment and perhaps even the course. On this point, I highly recommend that students take the Xavier Library tutorial and accompanying quiz on plagiarism. Should any questions remain on plagiarism, either in the abstract or in the particular (that is, if one is not sure about an assignment one is about to turn in), please see the instructor. You will not have a second warning.

The following standards have been adopted for grading in the department of philosophy:

A= work that not merely fully and accurately reproduces class discussion, the main thread in an argument or the main philosophical significance of a text under discussion, but which goes beyond these and indicates a contribution of the student, giving evidence of a deeper understanding of the material in question.

B=work that shows a more or less complete and exact understanding of the issues, texts, and/or arguments as explained in class, clearly and logically formulated without going beyond such explanations.

C=work that shows basic understanding of the material but with errors, omissions and confusions of either a formal or material nature.

D=work that shows a minimal acquaintance with the material or serious logical and conceptual flaws in formulating responses to the question raised, the argument at issue, or to the philosophical text under discussion.

F=work that shows inadequate acquaintance with texts, issues, or ideas with little or no valid logical argumentation; or, the work is a plagiarism. In cases of plagiarism, which involve the use of published or other’s written work without giving credit, an F will be awarded for the semester and the student’s name reported to the Dean of the College.

CLASS ETIQUETTE: There will be NO Computers, Cell Phones, iPods, Electronic Tablets, or other electronic devices permitted in class, unless some device is required by a student to compensate for a medically documented disability.

There is NO “extra credit” in this course. You are in college and responsibility for achievement is yours. I will be more than happy to assist you with drafts of essays and exam answers before they are due – you may choose to avail yourself of this opportunity to produce drafts or not, but once a grade is assigned, the book is closed.

If you are a student athlete or a scholarship holder, DO NOT plead with your professor that you need a certain grade to remain active as a player or keep your scholarship. This is highly improper behavior and will be reported to the athletic director or scholarship authority in question.

This course will involve some very difficult reading. Do not become discouraged if first readings of the texts yield some degree of frustration and less-than-complete comprehension. It is crucial for students to read most if not all of the assignments more than once, though first readings should precede the class in which each text is to be discussed. Your success in this course depends in large part upon a willingness to come to class with questions and discuss
them. Should you anticipate absences, be sure to talk with your professor to make sure you are properly following the progress of the course in your absence.

Students will be expected to follow the lectures by reading the required texts. The following portions of these texts will be required reading:

**Plato:** *Meno* (the entire dialogue)
**Aristotle:** *Physics* Book II (p. 33-55 in Oxford Ed.)
**Descartes:** *Discourse on Method* (the entire work)
**Hume:** *Enquiry* (the entire work)
**Kant:** *Prolegomena* Preface, Preamble, First and Second parts (p. 1-63 in Hackett Ed.)

What follows below is a rough outline of readings to be covered on specific dates, and may be subject to some change depending upon our rate of progress, class discussion, and other factors. Once again, be sure to check regularly with the instructor and/or classmates if you miss class.

**Course Reading Schedule**

8/27: Introduction and Plato’s *Meno*
8/29-9/12: Plato’s *Meno*
9/17-24: Aristotle’s *Physics* Book II
9/26-10/3: Descartes’ *Discourse* Parts 1-3
10/8: Fall Holiday
10/10: MID TERM EXAM
10/15-29: Descartes’ *Discourse Parts 4-6*
10/31-11/19: Hume’s *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*
11/21-12/12: Kant’s *Prolegomena*

**Core Curriculum Goals**

Listed here are goals that have been agreed upon for courses taught in the university core. This course will aim to fulfill these goals in the following ways:

**GOAL 1:** *Students will be effective communicators in writing and orally*
In this course we will emphasize both class participation and written essays. Without discussion, success in philosophy is very difficult. In our essay assignments, we will stress the formulation of clear and arguable theses, the drawing of solid inferences from evidence, and the maintenance of cohesive style.

**GOAL 2: Students will be critical thinkers**

The comprehension of difficult philosophical texts, such as those included in this course, requires careful reading and the use of one’s critical intelligence. By thinking clearly about these texts and their competing claims, we will develop a sense for what makes stronger and weaker arguments. In doing this, we will examine central questions concerning the grounds of morality, the nature of reality, the possibility of certainty, the reasonableness of religious faith, and the limits of science and mathematics.

**GOAL 3: Students will be creators of new knowledge and expression**

An important question for PHIL 290 is whether knowledge itself is created or discovered. There is, nonetheless, an important sense in which each student must use his creative capacities to synthesize the various strands of argument being examined. The best philosophical thinking demands as much.

**GOAL 4: Students will be able to understand and appreciate the arts, humanities and science disciplines, and reflect on connections among these studies**

In studying Descartes’ *Discourse on Method* we will inquire into the notion of scientific method, and its application to many areas of life. Part of this inquiry will be whether there are kinds of knowledge external to science, and how these might best be defined or understood.

**GOAL 5: Students will be integrated individuals who articulate a coherent, ethical perspective on the world and their place in it**

As part of a coherent liberal arts education, PHIL 290 will aim at making students more thoughtful and serious human beings. In thinking through the implications of science, religion, mathematics, technology, and discourse, students will develop more complete and well-considered perspectives on matters shaping their world.