

**Bentley University: Philosophy Department**

***PH 103: Ultimate Questions***

***Fall Semester 2024***

***T/TH 3:30-4:50 or 5:00-6:30***

*The Thinker,* Bronze Statue by Rodin outside the Rodin Museum in Paris, France

**Instructor: Dr. Kelly Cunningham**

**Office Location:** Jennison 221

**e-Mail:** kcunningham@bentley.edu

**Office Hours:** Tuesday 2:00-3:15 (in person) and Thursday 11:00am-12:30pm (Zoom, link on Brightspace)

and by appointment

**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

We all face questions on a daily basis. Some questions like *what should I eat for breakfast, how fast should I drive my car,* or *what color should I paint my room*, appear simple on the surface. However, justifying one’s answer requires an appeal to our reasons. Investigation of our reasons leads us back to bigger questions with less straightforward answers. This is because these bigger questions, or *ultimate* questions, invite us to consider things we often take for granted, such as the meaning of life and the nature of existence. Philosophers have pondered (and continue to ponder) these types of questions along with the implications they have for the more everyday sort of questions we encounter.

Throughout this course, we will explore four ultimate questions, each introducing students to a different branch of philosophy. The questions and their respective branches are as follows: What is knowledge? (epistemology), Does God exist? (metaphysics), How should one live? (ethics), and What is Beauty? (aesthetics).

**COURSE EXPECTATIONS**

In this course, you are expected to complete the readings or assigned video/audio materials before class. You should also be prepared to discuss them, so taking notes is recommended. Our in-class time together will be a mix of lectures, group discussion, and small group/ partner activities. Some of the topics we discuss in this course are controversial. Spirited debate is encouraged, but disrespectful behavior (towards me or your classmates) will not be tolerated**. Participation is required for this course, and it is not possible to participate unless you attend our sessions in-person.** This is an intro-level course, which means students are *not* expected to have prior philosophical knowledge. As an intro-level course, students can also expect that some of our class time will be devoted to developing basic writing, analyzing, and studying skills.

You can expect me to answer emails within 48 hours during the week (M-F). I try to stay off my email after 8pm, so anything received after that time will be responded to the following morning, I encourage you to come to my scheduled office hours or set-up an appointment if you have questions about the course material—it can be difficult to do philosophy over email! You can also expect me to look over drafts or outlines for your final assignments before office hours or a meeting, provided a reasonable time frame (I require **at least** 48 hours to read and comment on a draft before a meeting).

**COURSE OBJECTIVES**

Below you will find the objectives of this course:

* To develop a basic understanding of several branches of philosophy and the questions they each engage in
* To articulate informed and critical responses to the ultimate questions considered in this course
* To construct and evaluate arguments in both written and verbal forms
* To engage meaningfully with a diverse array of perspectives
* To deconstruct and think critically about challenging texts

**TEXTS & OTHER COURSE MATERIALS**

Please bring a writing utensil, something to write on, and the assigned text to class every day. All readings are available on Brightspace. No textbooks are required for this course.

**COURSE ASSIGNMENTS & GRADE BREAKDOWN**

**Participation (15%)**

The participation category of your grade will be calculated based on your efforts on exit slips and in-class activities. To complete them, you must be present on that day of class. Exit slips merely require completion for full credit and in-class activities/handouts will be graded on a ✓-, ✓, ✓+ scale. A ✓ or higher average will earn you full points for this category.

I understand that conflicts may arise, so I allow **three “no-questions-asked” absences** over the course of the semester. You can use these absences for any reason (job interview, mental health day, routine appointment, attending a wedding, etc.). Excused absences will also not count against you. Excused absences include illness, travel for unplanned family emergencies, and co-curricular activities. Advance notice is expected for excused absences. **Excessive absences will be reported through the proper channels.** It is acceptable to leave early or arrive late on occasion, I just ask that you do so quietly and in a way that respects our learning environment**. Patterns of lateness or early departure from class will adversely affect your final participation grade.** In compliance with federal guidelines [and Bentley University Academic policy,](https://catalog.bentley.edu/undergraduate/academic-policies-procedures/?_ga=2.267311691.459464984.1721947924-731384486.1706020812) students who do not attend or engage academically in any courses during the first week of class will be designated as a “no show” and will be dropped from all courses.

**Short Reflection Papers (10%x 3= 30%)**

Throughout the course you will be provided with short written reflection assignments. There are five opportunities to complete a short reflection paper, but **you only need to complete three to earn full credit.** Short reflection paper prompts are available on Brightspace. They will be graded on a ten-point scale. Short reflection papers should respond to all questions/ requirements listed in the description and should be **no more than 2 pages double-spaced**. Please use 1” margins, a legible font, and reasonable font size. In-text citations are required for quoted and paragraphed texts, but a separate bibliography/ reference list is not required for this assignment. Deadlines are listed in the course schedule. All short papers should be turned in via Brightspace.

**Midterm Exam (25%)**

Your midterm exam will be a mix of defining key concepts, text identification and explanation, and short-answer questions. A study guide will be posted to Brightspace at least two weeks before the exam and we will have a review session during the class prior to the exam. Please come prepared with writing utensils on the day of exams. **You are responsible for coordinating a time to make-up the exam in advance if you know that you cannot attend class that day**. Please see the accommodations section if you require testing accommodations. **Your midterm exam will be on Tuesday, October 29th.**

**Final Assignment (30%)**

For your final assignment, you may choose to revise and build on one of your short papers or respond to the available prompts on Brightspace. Additional prompts will be available three weeks before final papers are due. **Final papers should be between 4.5-6 double spaced pages** (not including references/bibliography). We will spend some time in class going over the prompts and best practices for writing an academic philosophy paper. Please use 1” margins, a legible font, and reasonable font size. In-text citations are required for quoted and paragraphed texts and bibliography/ reference list is required for this assignment and should appear on a separate page at the end of your paper. I do not care what citation style you use, so long as you use it correctly and consistently throughout the assignment. **Your final paper is due at midnight on the day of our scheduled final exam and should be turned in via Brightspace.**

**GRADING SCALE**

Your final grade will be calculated based on the points you earn for each of the assignments in this course. I use Bentley’s standard grading scale for assigning letter grades at the end of the semester. Extra credit opportunities require additional time and since not all students have equal access to leisure time, extra credit tends to disadvantage student-parents, students who provide care for other family members, and students who work. For this reason, **I do not offer extra credit.**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Grade Point** | **Letter Equivalent** | **Numerical Equivalent** |
| 4.0 | A | 95-100 |
| 3.7 | A- | 90-94 |
| 3.3 | B+ | 87-89 |
| 3.0 | B | 83-86 |
| 2.7 | B- | 80-82 |
| 2.3 | C+ | 77-79 |
| 2.0 | C | 73-76 |
| 1.7 | C- | 70-72 |
| 1.3 | D+ | 67-69 |
| 1.0 | D | 63-66 |
| .7 | D- | 60-62 |
| 0.0 | F | Below 60 |
| P | C- or better | 70 or better |

**POLICIES AND PROCEDURES**

All courses offered at Bentley University reflect our institution’s commitment to a set of core values and practices.  The links below will take you to full explanations of our policies and procedures related to accommodations and equitable learning environments.  As a student, you are expected to review and be familiar with each of these policies:

* [Bentley’s honor code and academic integrity system](https://catalog.bentley.edu/graduate/academic-policies-procedures/academic-integrity/)
* [Equity and bias reporting forms and procedures](https://www.bentley.edu/equity-reporting)
* [Student Disability Accommodations](https://www.bentley.edu/offices/disability-services)
* [Religious observances](https://catalog.bentley.edu/undergraduate/academic-policies-procedures/#Religious_Observances_Policy)
* [Bentley’s core values](https://www.bentley.edu/about/mission-and-values)

The links above spell out these policies in more detail, but I have copied several policies below for your reference.

**FERPA COMPLIANCE REMINDER**

To protect student privacy, FERPA guidelines state that professors are not to discuss grades via email. If you would like to discuss your grades, please come to office hours, email me to make an appointment.

**TECHNOLOGY AND AI USE POLICY COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

During our first course we discussed and voted on the following AI use policy:

**Permitted uses of AI for this course:**

* You may use AI to gather more information about texts and authors, but keep in mind that information provided by AI sources may not be 100% accurate.
* You may use AI to check spelling, grammar, and other formatting-related matters.
* You may use AI to help you create an outline for your paper, but if you do so you must include attached the outline to your paper (this does not count toward your page limit).
* You may use AI to brainstorm objections to your short reflection paper answers.

**Not Permitted uses of AI for this course:**

* You may not use AI to write full sentences or paragraphs in your short reflection or final papers.
* You may not use AI to respond to objections it raises to your short reflection paper responses.

**Repercussions for violating our class AI policy are as follows:**

* 15 points/percent deducted from assignment grade for 1st offense.
* 0 points on assignments after 1st offense.

You may use your tablet or laptop to reference readings or take notes during class if you choose. Your laptops/tablets should not be used during class time for purposes not related to this course. Your cell phone, earbuds, or headphones should not be used during class. I will call you out if you are caught using them and if the behavior persists you will not receive participation credit for that day. If you are anticipating a time-sensitive phone call during class time, please inform me and plan to take your call outside the classroom.

**ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

All students are expected to adhere to Bentley’s Academic Integrity policy and Honor Code, which can be found on Brightspace and in the Undergraduate Student Handbook/Graduate Catalog. The policy essentially states that a student should not represent someone else’s work as his or her own. Plagiarism, cheating on exams or quizzes; or other instances of academic dishonesty will result in an “F” (0) on the assignment, and possibly for the course. Serious violations of our class AI Policy will also result in a report to the Honors council. In short, do not cheat. If you are struggling to complete assignments or understand course material, come to office hours, or arrange a time to talk with me.

**ACCESSIBLITY & ACCOMODATIONS**

If you are comfortable disclosing, please notify me privately if you have a documented disability that will interfere with the timing of your work or that requires other forms of accommodation. Bentley University abides by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, which stipulate that no student shall be denied the benefits of an education solely by reason of a disability. If you have a hidden or visible disability that may require classroom accommodation, please call the Office of Accessibility within the first 4 weeks of the semester to schedule an appointment. The Office of Accessibility Services is located in the Office of Student Success (JEN 336, 781.891.2004). The Office of Accessibility Services is responsible for managing accommodations and services for all students with disabilities.

**COURSE SCHEDULE**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Date** | **Topic** | **Readings/Videos (to be completed before class)** | **Assignments Due** |
| 9/2-9/6 | **Welcome Week:** |  |  |
| Week 1 | T: Syllabus Scavenger Hunt |  |  |
|  | TH: Philosophy & Its Questions |  |  |
| 9/9- 9/13 | **Welcome Week (cont.) & Start Unit One: What is Knowledge?** |  |  |
| Week 2 | T: Start Plato’s *Meno* |  |  |
|  | TH: Knowledge & Recollection | Read up to 82b in Plato’s *Meno* |  |
| 9/16-9/20 | **Unit One: What is Knowledge?** |  |  |
| Week 3 | T: Continue Plato’s *Meno* |  |  |
|  | TH: Can Virtue be taught? + Argumentative Basics & Fallacies | Read up to 95a in Plato’s *Meno* |  |
| 9/23-9/27 | **Unit One: What is Knowledge?** |  |  |
| Week 4 | T: Do I exist? Does the World? | Descartes,  *Meditation One* |  |
|  | TH: Mind & Body | Descartes, *Meditation Two* |  |
| 9/30-10/4 | **Unit One: What is Knowledge?** |  |  |
| Week 5 | T: Existence of God | Descartes, *Meditation Three* | Short Reflection Paper Option #1 due at start of class—turn in on Brightspace |
|  | TH: Truth & Falsity | Descartes, *Meditation Four* |  |
| 10/7-10/11 | **Unit One and Unit Two Bridge Week** |  |  |
| Week 6 | T: God’s Existence, Existence of the World | Selected Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia & Descartes + Descartes, *Meditation Five* | Midterm Exam Study Guide Available |
|  | TH: The Mind-Body Problem, Solved? | Selected Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia & Descartes + Descartes, *Meditation Six* |  |
| 10/14-10/18 | **Unit Two: Does God Exist?** |  |  |
| Week 7 | T: No class—Fall Break |  |  |
|  | TH: Anslem’s Ontological Argument + Mid-course Evaluations, | Anslem, *Five Ways* |  |
| 10/21-10/25 | **Unit Two: Does God Exist?** |  |  |
| Week 8 | T: Existentialism & Atheism | Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism” (read or listen to lecture) | Short Reflection Paper Option #2 due at start of class—turn in on Brightspace |
|  | TH: Finish Discussion of Existentialism + Review for Midterm Exam |  |  |
| 10/28-11/1 | **Unit Two and Unit Three Bridge Week** |  |  |
| Week 9 | T: Midterm Exam |  |  |
|  | TH: Duality & Nothingness | Selections from Lao Zi’s *The Dao De Jing* |  |
| 11/4-11/8 | **Unit Three: How should one live?** |  |  |
| Week 10 | T: Utilitarianism & Effective Altruism | Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” |  |
|  | TH: Critiques of Effective Altruism |  |  |
| 11/11-11/15 | **Unit Three: How should one live?** |  |  |
| Week 11 | T: Function Argument, Happiness, and Human Flourishing | *Nicomachean Ethics Nicomachean Ethics* Book II, chapters i-vi, viii-ix |  |
|  | TH: Choice, Deliberation and Becoming Virtuous | Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* Book III chapters i-vii by Aristotle |  |
| 11/18-11/22 | **Unit Three: How should one live?** |  |  |
| Week 12 | T: Hard Choices & Self-Identity |  |  |
|  | TH: Loving as a moral concept | bell hooks’ *All About Love*, Chapter 1 “Give Love Words” | Short Reflection Paper Option #3 due at start of class—turn in on Brightspace |
| 11/25-11/29 | **Unit Three and Unit Four Bridge Week** |  |  |
| Week 13 | T: Taste, Morality, and Beauty | Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste” |  |
|  | TH: Thanksgiving Break, No Class |  |  |
| 12/2-12/6 | **Unit Four: What is Beauty?** |  |  |
| Week 14 | T: Beauty as Ideal Form+ Course Evaluations | Diotima’s Speech in Plato’s *Symposium* begins on the page number 144 or page 34/60 in the PDF | **Final Paper Prompts Available** |
|  | TH: Discuss Everyday Aesthetics + Writing Workshop | Watch: Yuriko Saito, “Everyday Aesthetics and World-Making” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ktwTiUl_fEQ>  OR read Yuriko Saito, “Neglect of Everyday Aesthetics” | Short Reflection Paper Option #4 due at start of class—turn in on Brightspace |
| 12/9-12/13 | **Unit Four: What is Beauty?** |  |  |
| Week 15 | T: Reading Day, No Class |  | Short Reflection Paper Option #5 due by midnight on Monday 12/9—turn in on Brightspace |
|  | TH: No Class, Finals Week |  |  |
|  | **Finals Week** |  |  |
|  | Attend your final block to ask questions and edit your final paper.  Final for 3:30-4:50 section 02: Wednesday 12/11 3-5pm  Final for 5:00-6:20 section 04: Tuesday 12/17 3-5pm |  | **Final Paper Due by midnight on day of scheduled final (turn in via Brightspace)** |

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

**Writing Center**

The Writing Center offers one-on-one tutoring for writing and presentations, for students of all years and skill levels. Located on the lower level of the Bentley library (room 023), the Writing Center provides a welcoming and supportive environment in which students can work on writing or presentations from any class or discipline. Students are encouraged to visit at all stages of the process; they can bring a draft, an outline, or just some initial thoughts and questions. Staffed by highly skilled student tutors, the Writing Center is open six days a week, with conferences available online or in-person. Students are encouraged to make appointments in advance. Appointments can be made at https://bentley.mywconline.net. Hours and additional information are available on the Writing Center SharePoint site.

**ESOL Center The English for Speakers of Other Languages Center**

The ESOL Center, located in the lower level of the library, Room 026) offers writing and English language support to students who are English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Its faculty tutors specialize in working with multilingual writers and can provide feedback and strategies on writing for all your course and career-related writing. Day and evening appointments can be scheduled through https://bentleyesol.mywconline.net or by dropping by the ESOL Center to see if a faculty tutor is available