PHIL 2300: Puzzles and Paradoxes

TR 10:10–11:25am · Goldwin Smith 142

Professor: Arc Kocurek
Email: awk78@cornell.edu
Office Hours: R 2–3pm · Goldwin Smith 237

TAs: Alejandro Vesga
Email: ajv79@cornell.edu
Section: F 11:15am–12:05pm · Rockefeller 132
Office Hours: W 1–2pm · Goldwin Smith 344

Lu Zhou
Email: lz446@cornell.edu
Section: F 9:05–9:55am · Goldwin Smith G24
Office Hours: M 1–2pm · Goldwin Smith 223

Description

The goal of this course is to get you puzzled. We will explore a number of tough philosophical questions about the nature of time, identity, logic, science, belief, decision, and value. Some of these questions have widely accepted answers, but many do not. Questions such as: Is time real? What is it to survive? Is infinity coherent? How is science possible? Are we living in a computer simulation? What is rational? Why do we value the future more than the past? Are we rationally compelled to believe in the existence of God? And finally, why is death bad? By examining these questions, you will become better acquainted with the aims and methodology of contemporary philosophy and hone the analytic skills required to engage with these questions.

Required Materials

Clark, Paradoxes from A to Z (3rd edition).
All other required readings will be made available online through Canvas.

Optional text: Sainsbury, Paradoxes (3rd edition)

Grades

Discussion 10% 12 in total, 2 skips
Exercise Sets 15% 3 in total
Reading Quizzes 20% 24 in total, 2 points each, 40 points max
Short Papers 45% 3 in total, 900–1200 words
Peer Reviews 10% 2 in total
Participation 3% bonus

Academic Integrity

In this course, we will strictly adhere to the University Policy on Academic Integrity, as outlined in the Code of Academic Integrity (http://cuinfo.cornell.edu/aic.cfm). Any violation of this policy will be reported immediately. Violations will, at the very least, result in an F on the assignment in question, but may also to lead to an F in the class, suspension, or other penalties.
Assignments

Discussion
Each week, you will have an opportunity to submit a response to that week’s material for discussion section. A response can be a question or comment about any of the readings, lectures, or quizzes. You will receive 1 point for submitting an acceptable response before the deadline, which is always Friday 8am of that week. For a response to count as acceptable, it must show you were actively engaging with the material. (A rough guide: a response is unacceptable if it could have been written without attending any of the lectures or doing any of the readings.) There is no word limit, but an acceptable response need not be longer than a sentence or two. You may earn up to 10 points for submitting responses for discussion section. You will have 12 opportunities to submit responses. No late responses will be accepted.

Exercise Sets
There will be three exercise sets assigned throughout the semester. They will be submitted online. The goal of the exercise set is just to check that you understand very basic technical concepts needed to understand the paradoxes discussed in each unit. See the schedule for due dates. No late exercise sets will be accepted.

Reading Quizzes
Two days before each lecture on a paradox, there will be a 5 minute reading quiz for you to take online about the reading for that lecture. The purpose of the quiz is to check that you have done the reading prior to the lecture. Each quiz is worth 2 points. You may earn up to 40 points for reading quizzes throughout the semester. There will be 24 reading quizzes overall.

Short Papers
There are three short paper assignments in this course, one for each major unit (Metaphysics, Epistemology, Decision and Value). Each paper must be between 900–1200 words and must be submitted online as a PDF. See the schedule for deadlines. Late papers will incur a penalty of 1/3 of a letter grade for each day after the deadline the paper is late. Papers submitted more than a week late will not be accepted without written permission from the instructor.

Peer Review
After the first two papers are submitted, you will be randomly assigned to two papers written by your peers to provide feedback online. The feedback will take the form of answering a few questions about the paper, as well as giving general comments and suggestions for future improvement. Peer review will be anonymous. You will receive full credit for the peer review so long as you provide timely and sincere feedback.

Participation
You may receive up to 3 bonus points throughout the semester for actively participating in the course. You can receive bonus points either by going to section regularly, creating/posting to discussions online, coming to office hours, or asking questions during lecture.
Schedule

PAZ = Paradoxes from A to Z
Readings listed in recommended order Optional readings available on Canvas

Week 1
01/22 introduction, no reading
01/24 “A Brief Guide to Logic and Argumentation”

Metaphysics

Week 2
01/29 PAZ: Achilles and the Tortoise, The Racecourse, The Arrow
01/31 McTaggart, “Time” (excerpt)
02/01 EXERCISE SET 1 DUE

Week 3
02/05 PAZ: Heraclitus’ Paradox
Sider, “Constitution”
02/07 PAZ: The Ship of Theseus
Parfit, Reasons and Persons (excerpt)

Week 4
02/12 Lewis, “The Paradoxes of Time Travel”
02/14 PAZ: The Heap

Week 5
02/19 PAZ: The Liar, Heterological, Curry’s Paradox
02/21 PAZ: Galileo’s Paradox, Hilbert’s Hotel, Russell’s Paradox, Cantor’s Paradox

Epistemology

Week 6
02/26 —— No class (February break) ——
02/27 ***PAPER 1 DUE***
02/28 Strevens, “Notes on Bayesian Confirmation Theory” (sections 1–3.3, 4.1–4.3, 5.1; all boxed paragraphs are optional)
PAZ: The Monty Hall Paradox

Week 7
03/05 Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (excerpt)
03/07 PAZ: Grue
Goodman, “The New Riddle of Induction” (excerpt)
03/08 EXERCISE SET 2 DUE
### Week 8
03/12  PAZ: The Paradox of the Ravens  
Sainsbury, “Paradoxes of Confirmation” (sections 5.1.1 and 5.1.2)
03/14  PAZ: The Preface, The Lottery
03/15  **PEER REVIEW 1 DUE**

### Week 9
03/19  Leslie, “Is the End of the World Nigh?”
03/21  Bostrom, “Are We Living in a Computer Simulation?”

### Week 10
03/26  PAZ: Sleeping Beauty  
Elga, “Self-Locating Belief and the Sleeping Beauty Problem”
03/28  PAZ: The Unexpected Examination, The Designated Student  
Sainsbury, “The Unexpected Examination” (sections 5.2 and 5.3)

### Week 11: Spring Break!

### Decision and Value

### Week 12
04/08  ***PAPER 2 DUE***
04/09  Schwarz, “Modelling Rational Agents” (Chp 1 of *Belief, Desire, and Rational Choice*)
04/11  PAZ: Prisoners’ Dilemma

### Week 13
04/16  PAZ: Newcomb’s Problem
04/18  Greene and Sullivan, “Against Time Bias”
04/19  **EXERCISE SET 3 DUE**

### Week 14
04/23  PAZ: Pascal’s Wager  
Hájek, “Pascal’s Ultimate Gamble”
04/24  **PEER REVIEW 2 DUE**
04/25  PAZ: The Two-Envelope Paradox, The St. Petersburg Paradox

### Week 15
04/30  PAZ: Moral Luck  
Nagel, “Moral Luck”
05/02  PAZ: The Trolley Problem  
Thomson, “The Trolley Problem”

### Week 16
05/07  Nagel, “Death”
05/14  ***PAPER 3 DUE***