

PHI 1500: Major Issues in Philosophy

Session 1

August 31st, 2015



Introduction to the course

Professor Earle is on medical leave this semester.

My name is Lauren Alpert, and I'm happy to be your instructor!

- .I don't yet have access to the course roster via CUNYfirst.
- Please write your email addresses clearly on the sheet being passed around, so I can add them to my mailing list for the class.

➤ *Please introduce yourself to the class by sharing your:*

- **name, year, major** (or what interests you, if undeclared)
- **what you think of when you hear the word 'philosophy'**



A Demographics Poll

- How many freshmen? sophomores? juniors? seniors?
- How many transfer students?
- How many international students?
- How many first-generation college students?
- How many different boroughs of residence?
- How many different home states?
- How many different home countries?
- How many students are encountering philosophy for the first time in this class?
- How many students took extra time between high school and college?
- How many students work in addition to going to school (including fulfilling obligations to family)?

What is Philosophy?

- It is a **method of investigating the world**.
- It can take *anything* as its subject matter.
- Doing philosophy involves:
 - *posing and answering questions*
 - *analyzing our assumptions* (e.g., about what things are, how they work, and how they should be)
 - *engaging in critical thinking*
 - *evaluating various viewpoints on an issue*
 - *making **arguments** to defend one's views;*
for example:

1. If you study philosophy, then your critical thinking skills will improve.
 2. If your critical thinking skills improve, then you're more likely to get a high score on the LSAT, GMAT, GRE, etc.
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3. Therefore, if you study philosophy, you're more likely to get a high score on the LSAT etc.

What's this class about?

- There's no consensus on what the "*Major Issues in Philosophy*" are: that's a matter of opinion.
- But in this class, we will cover questions like:
 - **What do we know for sure?**
(*epistemology*)
 - **What governs our behavior?**
(*metaphysics*)
 - **What is human nature?**
(*social/political philosophy*)
 - **How does the body relate to the mind?**
(*phil. of mind*)
 - **How should we handle our emotions?**
(*phil. of action*)
 - **How should we treat each other?**
(*ethics*)
 - **How do gender and race affect our lives?**
(*feminist phil., phil. of race*)
- Other topics covered in depth in upper-division courses: art, science, law, technology, non-Western ideologies, etc.

Course Structure

- **Website:**
 - bit.ly/phi1500f15
- All readings and assignments are posted on the website as PDFs.
- Class sessions will involve lecturing & discussion based on the readings.
 - I will post my Powerpoint slides on the website before each class.

PHI 1500: Major Issues in Philosophy

Syllabus

[updated 8/25/15]

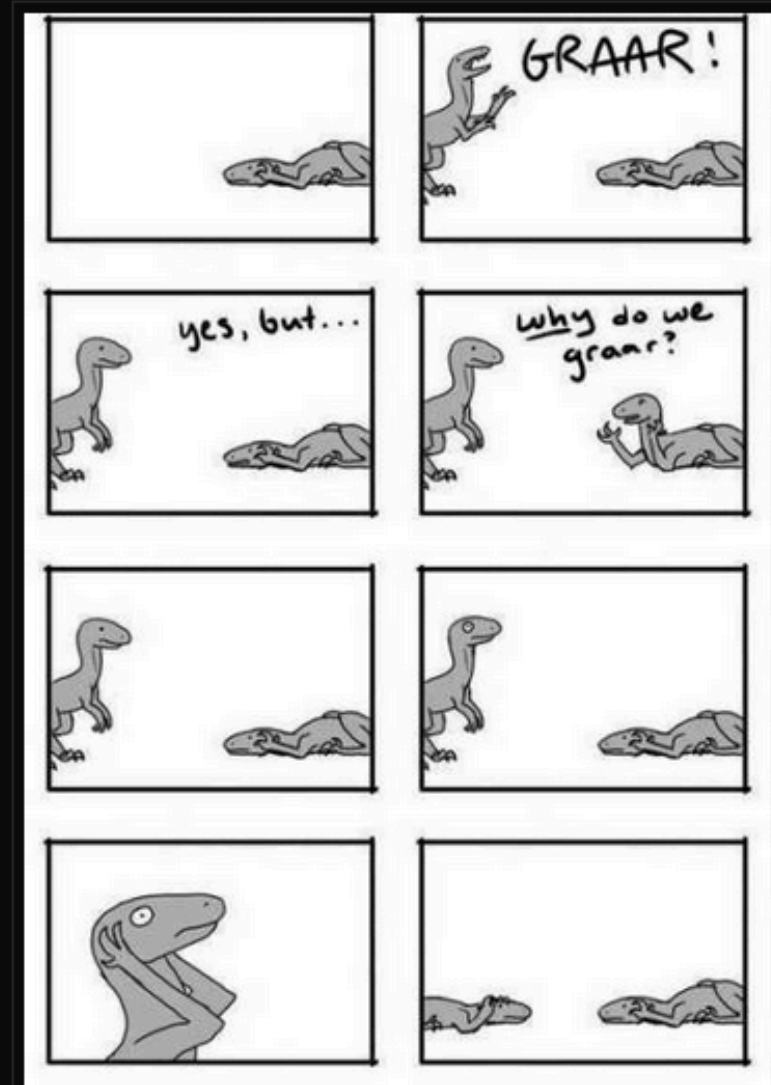
Readings, Lecture Slides, & Discussion Forum

Strategies for Success

Resources

comic via jimpryor.net

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Course Requirements & Grading

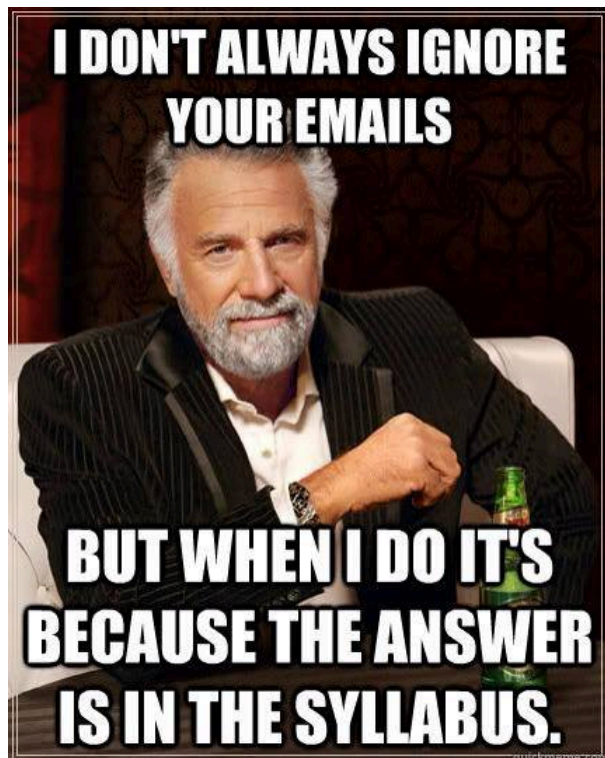
- **attend** each class session and **participate** in discussions (15%)
- **read** the article(s) or chapter(s) assigned for each session
 - please bring the text to class (printed or on a screen)
- **share** your thoughts about the readings on the discussion forum (10%)
 - 8 paragraph-length posts are required
 - additional posts will count for extra credit (!)
 - If you don't want to post publicly, you can post anonymously (use your student ID #), or submit your posts privately via email.
 - I recommend planning to post on class days on which a quiz isn't due
- **complete** 6 take-home quizzes (15% each x5 = 75%)
 - think of these as problem sets designed to help you master the material
 - you'll use the readings and lecture materials to complete matching, fill-in-the-blank, short-answer, and essay questions
 - either print the quiz out and submit a hard copy to me in class, or edit your answers into the PDF and email it by the beginning of class
 - » only 5 quizzes will count toward your final grade:
 - » your lowest quiz score will be dropped.

Course Conduct

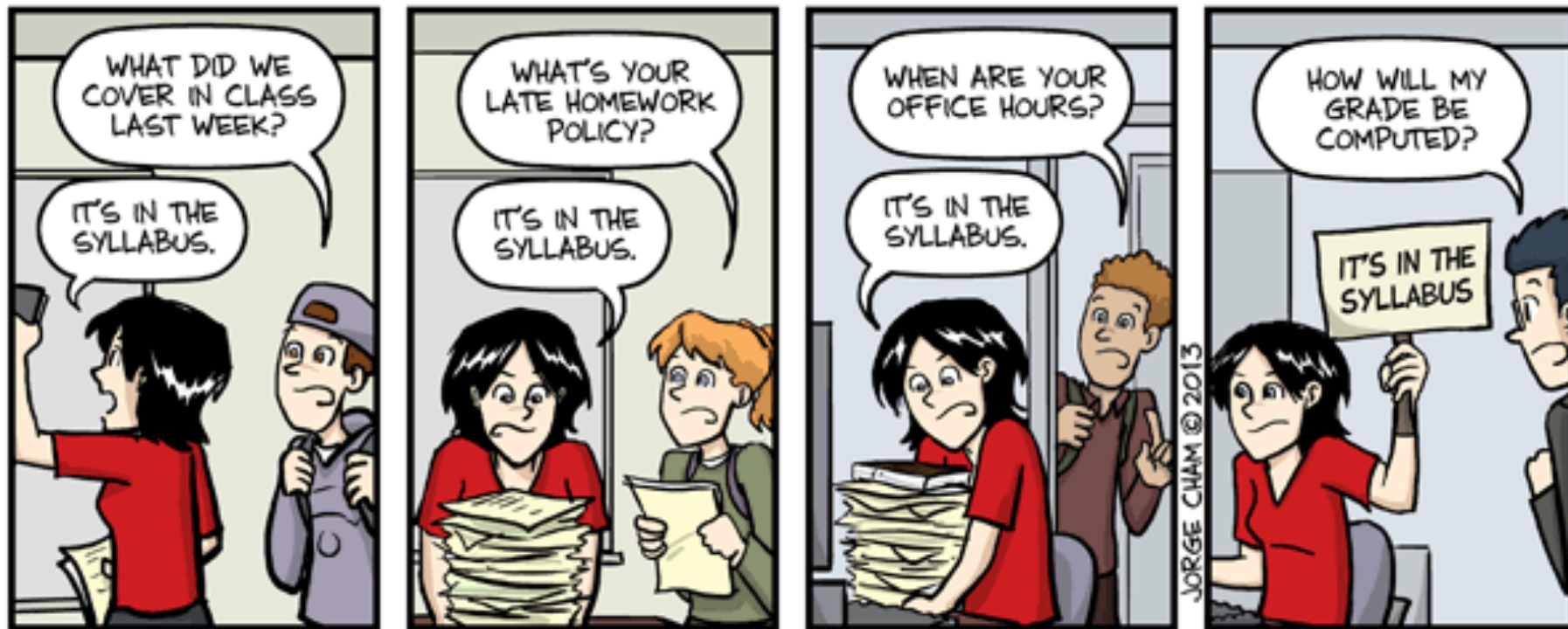
- Rule #1 is ***Don't Be a Jerk!***
 - Respect for one another's voices and viewpoints is indispensable.
 - Each of us brings to this class a unique background and perspective..
 - Discussions may get heated when we discuss controversial issues.
 - *Each person in this room is responsible for ensuring that their speech and behavior allows anyone to feel comfortable speaking up if they wish to do so.*
- We should aim to follow ***The Principle of Charity:***
 - We want to develop a comprehensive understanding of an idea *before* we call it into question or criticize it.
 - Listen to each other's ideas with an *open mind* and with *compassion* for the individual who shares them.
 - If someone says something that seems wrong to you, try asking them to clarify what they mean before dismissing their view.

Course Policies

- Please try to **arrive on time and ready** to take notes
- Laptops are tablets are permitted *only if* they are not distracting to you, me, or your classmates
 - likewise with food & drinks
- Please **silence cell phones** during class and **keep them out of sight/reach.**
- Please **notify me in advance if you will miss class.**



- If you miss class, you are still responsible for the material covered that day.
- Identify at least one classmate you trust to take good notes, and get their contact info.
- **When in doubt, consult the syllabus,** and *then* email me (lauren.r.alpert@gmail.com) *if* your question/concern has not been addressed.
 - *Please use 'PHI 1500' in the subject line!*
 - I will do my best to respond to emails promptly.



IT'S IN THE SYLLABUS

This message brought to you by every instructor that ever lived.

Academic Honesty

- There is **zero tolerance for academic dishonesty** in this course, and at Baruch College in general.
 - “Cheating, forgery, plagiarism and collusion in dishonest acts undermine the college's educational mission and the students' personal and intellectual growth.
 - Baruch students are expected to bear individual responsibility for their work, to learn the rules and definitions that underlie the practice of academic integrity, and to uphold its ideals.
 - **Ignorance of the rules is not an acceptable excuse for disobeying them.**
 - Any student who attempts to compromise or devalue the academic process will be sanctioned.”
 - See http://www.baruch.cuny.edu/academic/academic_honesty.html
- Confirmed instances of cheating/plagiarism will result in a zero for the essay/quiz in question – and possibly for the entire course.
- Suspected instances will result in a hold on your grade for the course until the issue is resolved with the Dean’s Office.

- **“Cheating** is the attempted or unauthorized use of materials, information, notes, study aids, devices or communication during an academic exercise. Examples include:
 - Copying from another student during an examination or allowing another to copy your work.
 - Unauthorized collaborating on a take home assignment or examination.
 - Using unauthorized notes during a closed book examination.
 - Taking an examination for another student.
 - Asking or allowing another student to take an examination for you.
 - Changing a corrected exam and returning it for more credit.
 - Submitting substantial portions of the same paper to two classes without consulting the second instructor.
 - Preparing answers or writing notes in a blue book (exam booklet) before an examination.
 - Allowing others to research and write assigned papers including the use of commercial term paper services.
- **Plagiarism** is the act of presenting another person's ideas, research or writing as your own. This includes, but is not limited to:
 - Copying another person's actual words without the use of quotation marks and footnotes.
 - Presenting another person's ideas or theories in your own words without acknowledging them.
 - Using information that is not considered common knowledge without acknowledging the source.
 - Failure to acknowledge collaborators on homework and laboratory assignments.
 - Purchase & submission of papers from "paper mills," internet vendor sites, and other sources.”

- **Obtaining an Unfair Advantage:**
 - Stealing, reproducing, circulating or otherwise gaining prior access to examination materials.
 - Depriving other students by stealing, destroying, defacing or concealing library materials.
 - Retaining, using or circulating examination materials that clearly indicate that they should be returned at the end of the exam.
 - Intentionally obstructing or interfering with another student's work.
 - Engaging in activities that intentionally create an unfair advantage over another student's academic work.
- **Collusion:**
 - lending assistance or failing to report witnessed acts of academic misconduct
- ***Please copy the following onto an index card:***


I, (print name) , understand that committing any act of academic dishonesty will deprive me of the best possible learning experience in this course, and will jeopardize my grade.

Signed, (your signature) Date: (today's date)

Philosophy's Demographic Problem

- Philosophers often aims to derive universal truths about humanity, which generalize across the experiences of people at all times and places.
 - **But though philosophy purports to be *for everyone*,**
 - **it historically has not been done *by everyone*.**

– Philosopher **Kristie Dotson** shares this story in “How is this Paper Philosophy?” (2009):



My younger sister, Alexis Ford, once had the following conversation with her Guidance Counselor, while she was a college student at a Historically Black College.

Counselor: Why don't you major in Social Work?

Alexis: Social Work sounds good, but I am interested in philosophy.

Counselor: (Snorts) Philosophy is not for black women. That's a white man's game.

Alexis: My older sister is a philosophy professor.

Counselor: Well, she's probably the only one and that should tell you something. (2009)

- This is a common message about philosophy – and a very harmful one.
 - It suggests that the voices of women & non-whites aren't welcome in philosophy, and are less valuable than those of white males.

➤ ***What is it about philosophy that makes people think that it's only "a white man's game"?***

– ***Is it because the vast majority of professional philosophers today are white men (and most famous philosophers from the past were, too)?***

➤ But the fact that something *has always been* a certain way is *no* reason to believe that it *must always be* that way.

➤ Also, there's no evidence that it is (and has always been) that way *for any good reason*.

– We *cannot* conclude that white men are more likely to be professional philosophers because they are any better at philosophy than women and non-whites.

» Instead, white men could be overrepresented in philosophy because other types of people are/were systematically excluded from institutions of professional philosophy.

➤ ***Is it because most of the works that appear on philosophy course syllabi are written by white men?***

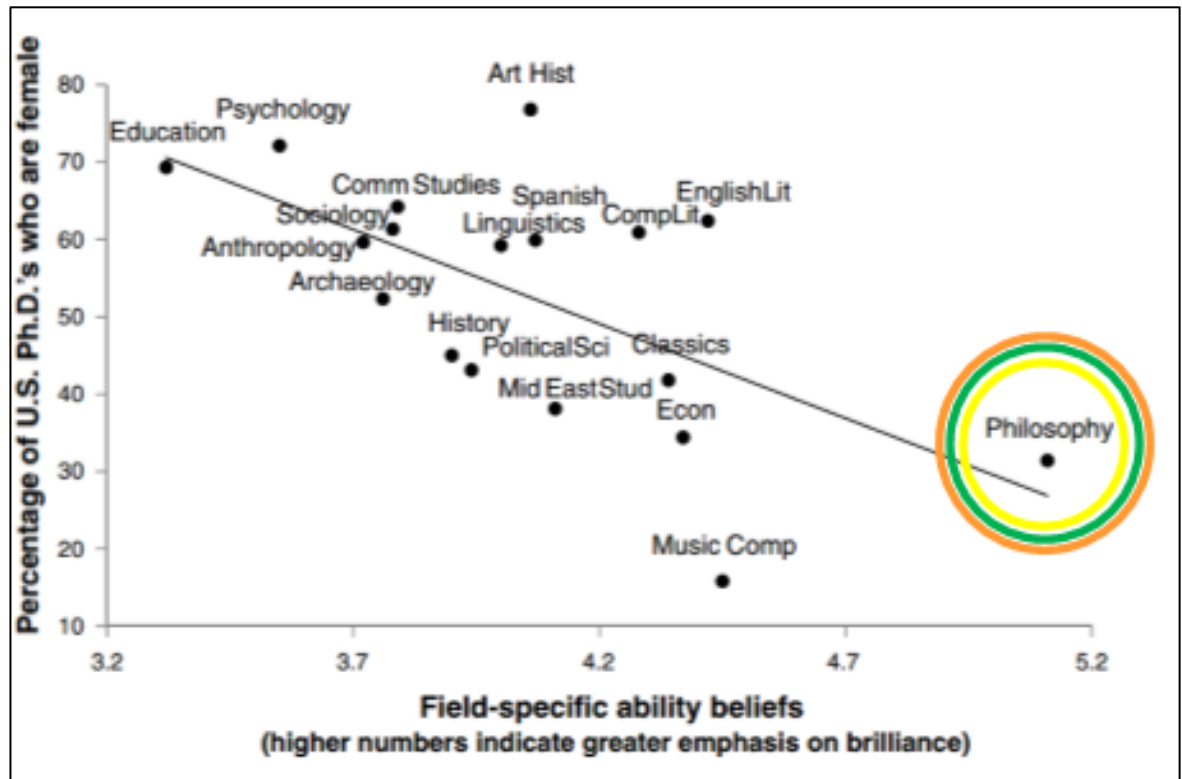
• That's no reason to conclude that white men write better philosophical works: it only goes to show that works by white men are more likely to be recognized in the philosophical 'canon'.

➤ *What is it about philosophy that makes people think that it's only “a white man's game”?*

– *Is it because doing philosophy requires certain traits that white men are more likely to have?*

• A common **stereotype** about philosophy is that you must have *innate talent* or ‘brilliance’ to do it (Leslie et al, 2015)

– But that's purely **a myth.**



➤ Philosophy involves a broad array of skills,
– all of which can and will be developed with time, practice, and hard work.

- *My view is on the demographics problem is that:*
 - **There are *no* good reasons to believe that any group of people are more worthy of being philosophers than any other group of people.**



- Though many people have tried to explain philosophy's racial & gender imbalances by attributing greater ability to white men,
 - another viable explanation is that social & economic obstacles have made it difficult for women & non-whites to:
 - a) gain entry into philosophical institutions, and
 - b) get recognition for the great philosophical work they do.

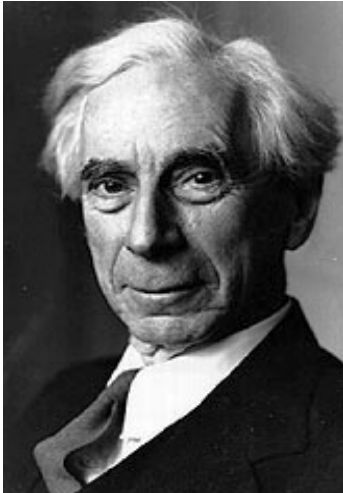
- **Philosophy should be *by & for* people of all genders, races, ethnicities, nationalities, religions, sexual orientations, etc.**
 - We can all combat philosophy's reputation as a "white man's game" by playing the game, changing its demographics, and welcoming *all* perspectives.

- **Philosophy is challenging, but anyone can do it well** – *as long as they put in the time and effort to develop their skills.*
 - It is absolutely normal, and absolutely ok to feel confused:
 - Studying philosophy is like learning *a whole new language* in which to think.
- Consult the “Strategies for Success” page on the course website for suggestions for how to approach the course material and assignments.
 - My **top recommendations** are to:
 - **make study guides** for yourself, which summarize the material in your own words
 - **start essays early** so you have plenty of time to think about your topic, discuss it with me if necessary, and make revisions
 - **test your understanding** by explaining what you have learned to a classmate, friend, parent, pet, etc.
- The Office of Services for Students with Disabilities may be able to offer reasonable accommodation to eligible students
- ***Email me and/or schedule a meeting if you are having trouble, or just want to talk about what you can do to improve.***

Why Should We Do Philosophy?

- One answer to this question is that **philosophy is a tool to free ourselves** from the limits of our ordinary perspective.

– **Bertrand Russell** (in “The Value of Philosophy”) writes:



- “The man who has no [exposure to] philosophy goes through life *imprisoned* in the prejudices derived from common sense,
- from the habitual beliefs of his age or his nation,
- and from convictions which have grown up in his mind without the cooperation or consent of his deliberate reason.”

– In other words:

- It is very easy to never bother second-guessing our beliefs, especially those beliefs that have been instilled in us from an early age by our families and culture.

- The ancient Greek philosopher **Plato** (428-348 BCE) illustrated this point through a story known as the “**Allegory of the Cave**” (*in The Republic*)
 - **videos:** bit.ly/1tk5AtZ, bit.ly/1rs4wSw



- **People who never question the world around them are like prisoners chained inside a cave**, who see nothing but shadows projected on the cave wall.
 - Since the shadows are all they’ve ever seen, they mistake the shadows for reality – and thus miss out on an informed perspective on the world.



- **Doing philosophy is like escaping the cave**, learning about the world, and trying to share one’s insight with those who are still imprisoned.
 - Plato says “it is the task of the enlightened” (i.e., students of philosophy) “not only to ascend to learning . . . but to be willing to descend again to those prisoners,” fulfilling a duty to help them understand.

Why Should We Do Philosophy?

- Plato & Russell both agree that philosophy **helps us to escape the imprisonment of our own ignorance.**
- As Russell says, philosophy:
 - “is able to suggest many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts and free them from the tyranny of custom,”
 - “removes the somewhat arrogant *dogmatism* of those who have never travelled into the region of liberating doubt,”
 - **dogmatism** = persistent and unwavering belief in an idea or set of ideas (a dogma)
 - “and it keeps alive our sense of wonder by showing familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect.”

