Semester: FALL 2017
Class code: PHIL-UA9010 – 001, class number 15438
Instructor Details: Peter Cave

Class Details: Central Problems of Philosophy
Location to be confirmed.

Prerequisites: None

Class Description: This is an introduction to some central problems – questions, perplexities and concepts – within the central areas of philosophy, introducing themes from metaphysics, epistemology and ethics (including political philosophy). Some extracts from classic texts will be engaged – for example, Descartes, John Stuart Mill and Jean-Paul Sartre – and contemporary approaches will be addressed. Questions include: What am I? Is free will an illusion? What is knowledge? Is belief in God rational? What determines right and wrong? Whom ought I to save – morally? In discussing these questions, important distinctions will be introduced with attention to careful argument, including the nature of deductively sound argument, of necessity and contingency, of the a priori and a posteriori.

The classes will involve informal instruction, presentations and discussion, with a focus upon clarity and argument over a range of topics, though also, it is hoped, with a lightness of touch.

Desired Outcomes: An appreciation of some central philosophical problems and how the problems may sensibly be approached – so the learning outcomes include awareness of (1) valid and invalid deductive arguments (2) key philosophical concepts (3) key philosophical problems in metaphysics, epistemology and ethics and (4) some influential attempted solutions to those problems.
There are three required components: (i) a test of one hour under examination conditions (part of Session 5) that requires some one-sentence answers and a short essay of around 500 words; (ii) an essay of not more than 1,500 words (to be submitted by Session 11) on a topic chosen from at least three given; (iii) a one-hour examination in Session 15, when one essay will need to be written of around 750 to 1,000 words, the paper will offer at least three questions and the topic areas will be provided beforehand though not the questions.

The final grade will be determined by the test (20%), the essay (40%), and the examination (40%). Each student will receive a grade no lower than that determined by those inputs and in that proportion; but in some cases a higher grade may be awarded to take into account such factors as improvement and contributions in class.

Failure to submit or fulfill any required course component results in failure of the class.

**Grade A:** Mastery of the problems, approaches and relevant literature, and an ability to fashion the material in one’s own way or to make some original contribution.

**Grade B:** Good grasp of the problems, approaches and relevant literature, but little or no attempt at own contribution or organization.

**Grade C:** A grasp of the problems, but an uncertain grasp of the approaches and/or relevant literature.

**Grade D:** Failure to grasp the problems properly, but some attempt made at understanding them.

**Grade F:** Not even trying.

**Required Text(s)**

*Peter Cave, Philosophy: A Beginner’s Guide*  

*John Cottingham (ed.), Western Philosophy: an Anthology, 2nd edition*  

The readings suggested for each session below, *some of which are ideally to be read before the session*, are indeed just suggestions. Focus for each subsequent class will be provided from Session 1. Students are not required to read all the extracts suggested for each class.
The work which in addition would be helpful, regarding the sessions on ethics, political philosophy and religion, is the Instructor’s work recently published:


Some students may prefer the lighter approach to the topics found in the Instructor’s recent collection:

**The Big Think Book: Discover Philosophy Through 99 Perplexing Puzzles**

A good brief and basic introduction to philosophy is:


The Cottingham anthology above contains the relevant extracts for the course, but students who would like to read the whole of some important philosophical texts could try:


**Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (http://plato.stanford.edu)**

It provides a good source for topics, though it can sometimes be quite advanced reading.

On writing a philosophy essay, see [www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html](http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html)

Thinking, reflecting, arguing for a position.
THE SESSIONS

(A few of the relevant readings should ideally be looked at before each class.)

**Session 1**

‘I think, therefore I am’: thought-experiments, distinctions and arguments

Suggested readings: Phil. 1; Anth. 1:4.

NB: ‘Anth’ denotes section/chapters in Cottingham’s *Anthology*; ‘Phil’ denotes chapters in Cave’s *Philosophy*.

**Session 2**

Are you just a brain? — dualisms and materialisms

Suggested readings: Phil. 6; Anth. IV: 4, 10, 12.

**Session 3**

Can you ever act freely? — determinism and free will

Suggested readings: Phil. 2; Anth. V: 8, 9, 10, 11.

**Session 4**

Can you survive bodily death? — personal identity

Suggested readings: Phil. 3; Anth. V: 1, 2, 3, 5.

**Session 5**

A one-hour test – then: God: should we have sympathy for the Devil?

Suggested readings: Phil. 9; Anth. VI: 5, 4.

**Session 6**

Some arguments for the existence of God

Suggested readings: Phil 9; Anth. VI : 1, 6, 10.

**Session 7**

Ought we to maximize happiness? — approaches to ethics
Suggested readings: Phil. 4; Anth. VIII: 5, 6.

Session 8
Why obey the law? Is life nasty, brutish and short without government?

Suggested readings: Phil. 5; Anth. X: 1, 3, 4, 5.

NB: No session on Wednesday, 1 November, 2017.

Session 9
What should we respect/tolerate? — the Liberty Principle and free expression

Suggested readings: Phil. 5; Anth. X: 9.

Session 10
Is there more to knowledge than reaching the truth?

Suggested readings: Phil. 7; Anth. I: 12.

NB: THIS IS A FRIDAY

Session 11
NB: The submission of the 1,500-word essay is hard copy by the end of Session 11 — and electronic submission to my email: pc@petercave.com

What can we know? — problems of induction, deduction and science

Suggested readings: Phil. 8; Anth. VII: 5, 8.

Session 12
Mortality and immortality

Suggested readings: Phil. Epilogue; Anth. XII: 1, 6, 7.

Session 13
What’s the point? — truth, beauty, ethics

Suggested readings: Phil. 10 and Epilogue; Anth. XII: 9, 10.

Session 14
Review for Session 15’s examination.
Overview of topic areas for the examination.

**Session 15**

**One-hour examination during this week: day and time to be decided.**

One hour of writing – then relaxation, relief, or even regrets (maybe).

**Classroom Etiquette**

Toilet breaks should be taken before or after class or during class breaks.

**Food & drink, including gum, are not to be consumed in class.**

**Mobile phones should be set on silent.**

**Texting, tweeting, emailing, googling and similar are not permitted.**

**Laptops and recordings are only to be used with the lecturer’s express permission.**

Please kindly dispose of rubbish in the bins provided.

**Required Co-curricular Activities**

None

**Suggested Co-curricular Activities**

London has a large variety of philosophical lectures, discussions and seminars. Information will be provided as available. See, e.g., [http://royalinstitutephilosophy.org](http://royalinstitutephilosophy.org)

**Your Instructor**

Peter Cave read philosophy at University College London and King’s College Cambridge. His philosophy lectureships over the years include ones at University College London, University of Khartoum, Sudan, and City University London. He has been attached for many years to The Open University, UK. He has given guest lectures at universities in Sweden, Denmark, The Netherlands as well as Romania and Italy.

Peter is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, sits on the Council of the Royal Institute of Philosophy, is Patron of Population Matters and chairs the Humanist Philosophers of Great Britain. He has scripted and presented BBC radio philosophy programmes – some too clever by one eighth – and often takes part in public debates.
He has published academic papers on paradoxes in the usual philosophy journals and has written many lighter pieces for philosophy magazines. His philosophy books include *This Sentence Is False: an introduction to philosophical paradoxes*, *How To Think Like a Bat* and most recently (2015), *The Big Think Book: Discover Philosophy Through 99 Perplexing Puzzles*.

Peter lives in Soho, central London, enjoys opera, lieder and chamber music (well, he thinks he knows what he likes), even delights in religious music, despite his atheism – and is irritated by the noises, the screeches and the drillings, from building works, as well as the seeming endless rings of mobile phones, faulty alarms sounding, and incessant loud beat music in cafes, restaurants, shops. He supports Pipedown for freedom from piped music.

He is often found with a glass of wine – or two…

**NYU GLOBAL ACADEMIC POLICIES**

Policies and procedures for Global Academic Centres, including policies on academic integrity and the Study Away Standard, can be found here: [https://www.nyu.edu/about/policies-guidelines-compliance/policies-and-guidelines/student-services.html](https://www.nyu.edu/about/policies-guidelines-compliance/policies-and-guidelines/student-services.html)

**Absences:** Key information on NYU London’s absence policy, how to report absences, and what kinds of absences can be excused can be found here: [http://www.nyu.edu/london/academics/attendance-policy.html](http://www.nyu.edu/london/academics/attendance-policy.html)

**NYU London work submission policies** can be found here: [http://www.nyu.edu/london/academics/academic-policies.html](http://www.nyu.edu/london/academics/academic-policies.html)

**Classroom conduct:** Academic communities exist to facilitate the process of acquiring and exchanging knowledge and understanding, to enhance the personal and intellectual development of its members, and to advance the interests of society. Essential to this mission is that all members of the University Community are safe and free to engage in a civil process of teaching and learning through their experiences both inside and outside the classroom. Accordingly, no student should engage in any form of behaviour that interferes with the academic or educational process, compromises the personal safety or well-being of another, or disrupts the administration of University programs or services.

Please refer to the **NYU London Disruptive Student Behaviour Policy** at [https://goo.gl/Nvt5Vu](https://goo.gl/Nvt5Vu) for examples of disruptive behaviour and guidelines for response and enforcement.