

PHIL 1204

Knowledge & Reality

office hours: MWF 10-11 am
Zoom ID: 591 824 3118

Dr. Claudio D'Amato
claudio1@vt.edu



Spring 2021 Online Synchronous – CRN 18714 – MWF 1:25-2:15pm – [Canvas website](#)

FORMAT

- ❖ Zoom ID for all class meetings: **863 3112 1091**. There are no in-person meetings.
- ❖ Read this PDF file thoroughly before class begins: [PHIL 1204 Online Policies](#).
- ❖ Students must respect by the Honor System. If you have concerns, you must obtain specific guidance from me. Ignorance of the rules does not excuse plagiarism. Find out more at honorsystem.vt.edu.
- ❖ Please send me SSD accommodations to sign by Jan. 29, or one week before the test or assignment you want them applied to.

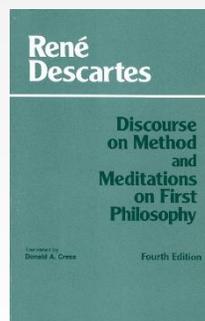
GOALS

This class surveys some essential topics in epistemology (the theory of knowledge) and in metaphysics (the philosophical study of nature).

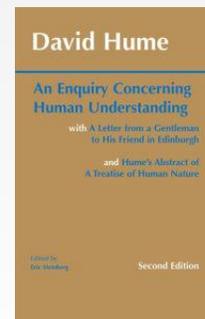
We will discuss questions like:

- What does it mean to “know” a thing, as opposed to not?
- How do we know for sure that the world exists as we see it?
- Why does anything exist at all?
- What is a mind? Can machines think? Can they feel?
- How do we know if gods exist?

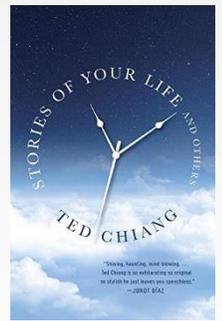
BOOKS



René Descartes
Meditations on First Philosophy



David Hume
An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding



Ted Chiang
Stories of Your Life and Others

All books are required. Any edition is fine, physical or electronic.

ASSIGNMENTS

Total possible points: 200. Grades are not curved. Late penalty: 10% a day.

Tests (40%)

Four, online, open-notes, timed: two hours for each.

Mostly multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, matching, and occasional short-answer or essay questions.

Outlines (25%)

Bullet-point summaries of all assigned readings, plus your own original question discussion. [Read this Outlines Guide](#).

Outlines must be turned in on Canvas on each day before class starts. Late outlines are not accepted.

Discussion (15%)

Participate regularly during Zoom meetings and/or post regularly to the Canvas forums.

Your regular attendance matters, too, as do both the quality and the quantity of your participation.

Project (20%)

Choose **one** among four possible options: a final exam, a 1,000-word position paper, an art portfolio, or some hours of community service.

Commit to your chosen option on Canvas under Quizzes by April 18.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS: READ BEFORE ASKING

I don't feel comfortable talking about some of these topics. What can I do?

Discuss it with me! Most of the times it is possible to make alternative arrangements. I'm pretty flexible.

When should I buy the books?

Immediately. They're \$10 each and we use them right away.

I can't get the books. Can you send me the readings?

No. Two of the books are in the public domain, and all three are easily found on online bookstores.

The reading is not in the book. Where is it?

See the instructions on p. 3 of this syllabus, just above the schedule of readings.

How do I submit the _____ ?

Check the instructions for each assignment, including the PDFs in *Canvas > Files*.

Can I submit a daily outline late?

No. The goal of the outlines is to be completed regularly to keep up with the readings.

Can I submit a test, paper, or project late?

Late assignments incur a 10% per day grade penalty. I may grant extensions for illness, VT-sponsored events, or other extenuating circumstances. E-mail me.

I missed class: can I get the notes?

Yes. The slides will be on *Canvas > Files*; the recordings will be on *Canvas > Media*.

I missed class: can I make up for lost credit?

No. The portion of your discussion grade that comes from attendance cannot be made up.

I don't speak up a lot in class. Can I earn participation credit in some other way?

Yes! You may post regularly to the forums under *Canvas > Discussions*. While not as valuable credit-wise as participating in class, it is a valid alternative for those who don't feel comfortable speaking up.

How quickly do you post grades?

For outlines: typically 4-5 days.
For tests: typically 10-14 days.
End of term: two days after final.

I don't like my grade. Can you change it?

Let's talk about it! If you can prove I made a mistake (e.g., a counting error), I'll fix it. If it's just your opinion, make your case, but you need to have evidence.

What grade do people usually get?

In past years, my students from PHIL 1204 have averaged around 85% (B).

Should my camera be on while in Zoom?

I recommend that it is: it's more rewarding and involving for all of us to see one another.

READING SCHEDULE AND DUE DATES

HOW TO FIND THE READINGS

(D) = reading is in the Descartes book **(H)** = in the Hume book **(C)** = in the Chiang book
(W) = on external websites: click on [links](#)  to open **(F)** = on Canvas under *Files*

1. Epistemology

Introduction	Wed, Jan. 20		no reading: course presentation	
	Fri, Jan. 22	(F)	Plato: The allegory of the cave	
Rationalism	Mon, Jan. 25	(D)	Descartes: <i>Meditations</i> , One and Two	
	Wed, Jan. 27	(D)	Descartes: <i>Meditations</i> , Three and Four	
	Fri, Jan. 29	(D)	Descartes: <i>Meditations</i> , Five	
	Mon, Feb. 1	(D)	Descartes: <i>Meditations</i> , Six	
		(F)	Elisabeth of Bohemia: Correspondence with Descartes	
	Wed, Feb. 3	(C)	Chiang: Tower of Babylon	
	Fri, Feb. 5		No class. Spring "Break" Day.	
Empiricism	Mon, Feb. 8	(F)	Locke: <i>An Essay Concerning Human...</i>	§ii.1-12; extra credit: §iv.8-17
	Tue, Feb. 9		FIRST EXAM due on Canvas under <i>Quizzes</i> by 11:59 p.m.	
	Wed, Feb. 10	(H)	Hume: <i>An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding</i>	§2-3
	Fri, Feb. 12	(H)	Hume: <i>An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding</i>	§6
	Mon, Feb. 15		No class.	
	Wed, Feb. 17	(H)	No class, read Hume: <i>An Enquiry [...] Understanding</i>	§7
	Fri, Feb. 19	(H)	Hume: <i>An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding</i>	§12
		(F)	Hume: <i>A Treatise of Human Nature</i>	Book I, §7 on Canvas!
Skepticism	Mon, Feb. 22	(F)	watch movie: <i>The Matrix</i> 	
		(F)	Pollock: A brain in a vat	
	Wed, Feb. 24	(W)	No class, read Bostrom: <i>The simulation argument</i> 	
	Fri, Feb. 26	(F)	Gettier: Is justified true belief knowledge?	
		(F)	Nozick: Conditions for knowledge	
	Mon, Mar. 1	(W)	James: <i>Pragmatism, Lecture Two</i> 	
	Wed, Mar. 3	(F)	Nietzsche: We scholars + exam review	
	Fri, Mar. 5		No class. Spring "Break" Day.	
Sun, Mar. 7		SECOND EXAM due on Canvas under <i>Quizzes</i> by 11:59 p.m.		

2. Metaphysics

Ontology	Mon, Mar. 8	(W)	van Inwagen & Sullivan: <i>Metaphysics</i> 	§1, 2.1, 2.2
	Wed, Mar. 10	(F)	Mermin: Is the moon there when nobody looks?	
	Fri, Mar. 12	(W)	James: <i>Pragmatism, Lecture Three</i> 	

(schedule continues on next page)

Persons	Mon, Mar. 15	(F)	Hume: Of personal identity	<i>on Canvas, <u>not</u> in Hume book</i>
	Wed, Mar. 17		No class. Spring "Break" Day.	
	Fri, Mar. 19	(F)	Dennett: Where am I?	<i>or watch this video</i>
Minds	Mon, Mar. 22	(F)	Turing: Computing machinery and intelligence	§1-2-3-7
		(F)	Searle: Can computers think?	pp. 669-672
	Wed, Mar. 24	(F)	Nagel: What is it like to be a bat?	pp. 435-442
	Fri, Mar. 26	(F)	Watch episode: <i>Star Trek: "The Measure of a Man"</i>	
	Sun, Mar. 28		THIRD EXAM due on Canvas under Quizzes by 11:59 p.m.	
Religion	Mon, Mar. 29	(F)	Aquinas: <i>Summa Theologica</i>	pp. 163-168 <u>of the PDF file</u>
	Wed, Mar. 31	(F)	Paley: <i>Natural Theology</i>	ch. 1
	Fri, Apr. 2	(F)	Swinburne: Why God allows evil	
Free will	Mon, Apr. 5	(F)	Pike: God's knowledge and human free will are incompatible	§1
		(F)	Plantinga: God's knowledge and human free will are compatible	
	Wed, Apr. 7	(F)	Gholipour: A famous argument against free will is debunked	
	Fri, Apr. 9	(W)	McKay & Kennett: <i>My brain made me do it</i>	
		(W)	Ludden: <i>Can we have justice without free will?</i>	

3. Faith, Reason, and Meaning

Faith & Reason	Mon, Apr. 12	(F)	Watch movie: <i>Contact</i>	
		(W)	Shermer: <i>Shermer's Last Law</i>	
	Wed, Apr. 14	(W)	Bishop: <i>Faith</i>	
	Fri, Apr. 16		No class. Review for exam.	
	Sun, Apr. 18		FOURTH EXAM due on Canvas under Quizzes by 11:59 p.m. TERM PROJECT DECISION due under Quizzes by 11:59 p.m.	
Purpose	Mon, Apr. 19	(F)	Watch episode: <i>Star Trek: "The Inner Light"</i>	
		(F)	Taylor: The meaning of life	
	Wed, Apr. 21	(F)	Watch episode: <i>Star Trek: "Blink of an Eye"</i>	
		(F)	Asimov: Nightfall	
	Fri, Apr. 23	(W)	Zelazny: <i>A rose for Ecclesiastes</i>	
Meaning	Mon, Apr. 26		No class. Spring "Break" Day.	
	Wed, Apr. 28	(F)	Watch movie: <i>Arrival</i>	
		(C)	Chiang: Story of your life	
	Fri, Apr. 30	(F)	Watch episode: <i>Star Trek: "Darmok"</i>	
		(F)	Leinster: First contact	
Conclusion	Mon, May 3	(C)	Chiang: Liking what you see: a documentary	
	Wed, May 5	(F)	Le Guin: The ones who walk away from Omelas	
	Tue, May 11		TERM PROJECT due on Canvas under Quizzes by 11:59 p.m.	