

PHIL 1204: KNOWLEDGE & REALITY

Virginia Tech. Spring 2018. CRN: 16986.

Goodwin Hall 155. **Tue-Thu 8:00-9:15.**

Course website on [Canvas](#)  (click link)

Dr. Claudio D'Amato

office hours: **Tue-Thu 9:30-12** at the *Next Door Bake Shop* (behind Surge)

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OVERVIEW

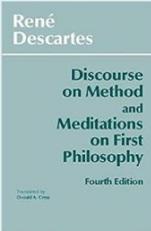
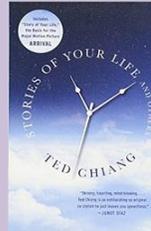
This course surveys two areas of philosophy: **metaphysics** (the study of reality) and **epistemology** (the study of knowledge). We will read ancient, medieval, and contemporary texts in the Western European, American, and Eastern Asian philosophical traditions. Topics will include:

- What is knowledge? How do I know *that* I know? How do I know that I am not being deceived?
- What is a person? Are all humans persons? Are some animals persons? What is identity?
- What is a mind? Why do we have conscious experiences? Do computers think? Should they?
- Does God exist? How do we know? Is faith a reliable practice? How are faith and reason related?
- Do we have free will? If so, is it compatible with a deterministic world and/or an omniscient God?

PHIL 1204 is a CLE **Area 2** class. It teaches analytical argumentation and it demands meticulous work. As such, the critical thinking skills that you learn here are highly transferable to all other fields.

READINGS	1-2 readings are assigned for each class day. You must finish each reading before coming to class on the day it is assigned for. Readings include articles for general audiences as well as scholarly papers written for philosophers. Most readings are about 5-10 pages long .	MATERIALS
MOVIES	You will watch five movies at home on your own and discuss them in class. You may rent some from Newman Library circulation desk or stream them online from paid services. They will also stream for free on our Canvas site, but only on weekends before they are due. Read the movie guides on Canvas before watching. Movies are included on exams .	
BOOKS	Alternative editions and electronic versions of the required books are acceptable. Whatever you buy, you must have the book with you whenever we discuss it in class. I will check.	

REQUIRED TEXTBOOKS

	<p>René Descartes</p> <p><i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i></p> <p>ISBN: 0872204200</p>		<p>David Hume</p> <p><i>An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding</i></p> <p>ISBN: 0872202291</p>		<p>Ted Chiang</p> <p><i>Story of Your Life and Others</i></p> <p>ISBN: 1101972122</p>
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ASSIGNMENTS	TESTS: 40%	Three, online, multiple-choice. The first test is worth 10%; the other two 15% each.
	RESPONSES: 20%	For each class day you must turn in <u>either</u> a half-page bulleted outline of the assigned reading <u>or</u> two discussion questions that relate the reading to previous material.
	FINAL EXAM: 30%	In class. Multiple choice and essay. You may use one letter-sized "cheat sheet." You may also opt for a 15-minute oral defense based on a study guide.
	DISCUSSION: 10%	Both frequency and quality count. Your attendance is factored in as well.

OUTLINES

Each class day you will turn in a reading response. This may be either a half-page outline or instead two discussion questions (50+ words each). Read the Response Guide on Canvas under “Files.”

Each response is due on Canvas under “Assignments” before class on the day that the reading is due.

You will turn in a total of 22 responses from **January 30 to April 19**. On days with more than one assigned reading, you may pick which reading to do. You may not do more than one reading per class day.

Book chapters may be used for responses, but movies and videos cannot.

No late submissions accepted: the goals of this assignment are timeliness and regularity.

Each response is graded as “Complete” or “Incomplete.” Bad, late, or missed responses are Incomplete. You are allowed 2 “free” Incompletes out of 22 responses. After that: 20-19 = **A**. 18 = **A-**. 17 = **B+**. etc.

I don’t curve grades. “B” is often the mean and mode in my classes and also my go-to grade. Don’t expect to receive an “A” just because you did everything right: doing everything right is a minimum requirement.

A = exceptional, above and beyond the requirements: this is reserved only for top students and is **rare**
B = standard, meeting all requirements satisfactorily but not exceptionally: this is the **most common**
C = substandard, meeting some requirements but not others: this is for passable to mediocre work
D = unsatisfactory, meeting few requirements, and poorly: this is for all-around bad assignments
F = failure to meet most requirements in most assignments: I have not failed anyone in this class so far

All grades are final. I reject all grade change requests based on your opinion without some evidence of a demonstrable mistake of mine. I will, however, always answer your questions and explain my reasons.

GRADES

POLICIES	HONOR SYSTEM	Students enrolled in this course are responsible for abiding by the Honor Code. Students who have doubts about how the Honor Code applies to any assignment are responsible for obtaining specific guidance from the course instructor before submitting the assignment for evaluation. Ignorance of the rules does not exclude any member of the University community from the requirements and expectations of the Honor Code. For additional information, please visit: https://www.honorsystem.vt.edu/ 📄
	COMMUNITY	Be punctual, articulate, and polite. Abide by the VT Principles of Community! 📄
	SSD	Present your SSD documentation 📄 by Jan. 29 for me to sign. Let’s talk in person and figure out the best arrangements for tests and exams. Note-takers are welcome! SSD accommodations are not valid until your accommodation letter is signed. I must be able to sign it with “reasonable notice,” so please bring it up by Jan. 29.
	TIMELINESS	I don’t take attendance, but if you are absent often I will notice. Late assignments incur a one-letter grade penalty per day, unless you can prove a debilitating illness.

FORMAT	A typical class is half lecture and half discussion . I call on 2-3 students to summarize the day’s readings. During lecture, write down questions to ask during discussion.	HOW TO DO WELL
DIFFICULTY	This course demands engagement, patience, and nuanced understanding . Skimming, guessing, and ballpark answers are insufficient. Be dedicated or drop the class.	
DISCUSSION	You earn credit by attending regularly, looking attentive and engaged, asking questions, giving your opinion, and posting to the forums on Canvas. Failure to be prepared when called upon affects your participation grade negatively.	
THE FIRST RULE	Keep an open mind, but not so open that your brain falls out!	

LINKS	Why study philosophy? 📄	To be successful and make \$\$\$\$. Surprised? Read this article.
	How to e-mail a professor 📄	So you don’t sound rude by starting your emails with “hey” or “hello.”
	Claudio’s website 📄	More links to music, videos, and readings of interest for this class.
	Philosophy experiments 📄	Some thought experiments to test your philosophical intuitions.

READING SCHEDULE AND DUE DATES

(D) = reading is in Descartes book **(H)** = reading is in Hume book **(C)** = reading is in Chiang book
 Other readings are on Canvas under "Files." If a reading is on the internet, click the [link](#)  to open it.

Movie viewing options are represented by clickable logos next to each title. For example,  indicates that the movie is available for rental at VT's Newman Library or may be streamed from Netflix or Amazon.

All required movies may be watched for free on Canvas under "Files"  the weekend before they are due.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Introduction	Syllabus day		T 1/16
	Plato: Republic (514a-520a)		R 1/18
Rationalism	Descartes: Meditations one and two (D)		T 1/23
	Descartes: Meditations three and four (D)		R 1/25
	Descartes: Meditations five and six (D)	FIRST RESPONSE DUE	T 1/30
	Chiang: Tower of Babylon (C)		R 2/1
Empiricism	Hume: An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, §2-3-4 (H)		T 2/6
	Hume: An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, §5-6 (H)		R 2/8
	Test #1 due under "Quizzes" on Canvas  by midnight		F 2/9
	Hume: An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, §7 (H)		T 2/13
	Hume: An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, §12 (H)		R 2/15
Skepticism	Pollock: A brain in a vat Bostrom: Are you living in a computer simulation?	The Matrix     	T 2/20
	Gettier: Is justified true belief knowledge?		R 2/22
Value	Goldman: Foundations of social epistemics (read only parts §1-3)		T 2/27
	Chiang: Liking what you see: a documentary (C)		R 3/1
Test #2 due under "Quizzes" on Canvas  by midnight			F 3/2

Spring Break (March 3-11)

METAPHYSICS

Existence	Nelson: Existence  (read introduction only)	T 3/13
	Mermin: Is the moon there when nobody looks? Reality and the quantum theory	R 3/15

Identity	Dennett: Where am I? (alternatively, watch this video 📺)	T 3/20
	Hume: Of personal identity (this is on Canvas and <u>not</u> in the Hume book!)	R 3/22
Mind	Turing: Computing machinery and intelligence (§1-2-3-7) Searle: Can computers think? (pp. 669-672 only)	Star Trek: TNG The Measure of a Man T 3/27
	Nagel: What is it like to be a bat? (pp. 435-442 only)	(S2 E9) N a 📺 R 3/29
Pragmatism	James: Some metaphysical problems pragmatically considered 📺	T 4/3
	Nietzsche: We scholars	R 4/5
Test #3 due under “Quizzes” on Canvas 📺 by midnight		F 4/7

THE MEANING OF LIFE

Destiny	Chiang: Story of your life (C)	Arrival	T 4/10
	Chiang: The evolution of human science (C)	VT 📺 a 📺	R 4/12
Purpose	Taylor: The meaning of life Watch episode: <i>Star Trek TNG: The Inner Light</i> (S5 E25) N a 📺		T 4/17
	Asimov: Nightfall Watch episode: <i>Star Trek VOY: Blink of an Eye</i> (S6 E12) N a 📺	LAST RESPONSE	R 4/19
Belief	Shermer: Shermer's last law 📺 (optional) S. Sagan: Lessons of immortality 📺 (optional) C. Sagan: Does truth matter? 📺	Contact	T 4/24
	Zelazny: A Rose for Ecclesiastes 📺	VT 📺 a 📺	R 4/26
	The Truth		T 5/1
Optional review session on Reading Day. Time and place TBA.			R 5/3
Final exam in class. 2:05-4:05 p.m. Write in pen. You may bring one cheat sheet.			M 5/7

MOVIES OF PHILOSOPHICAL INTEREST—FEEL FREE TO SUGGEST MORE!

MEANING OF LIFE

The Seventh Seal	Lord of the Rings saga
I Heart Huckabees	The Tree of Life
The Fountain	The Leftovers (TV)

NATURE OF REALITY

The Truman Show	Waking Life
Dark City	Inception
The Matrix trilogy	

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Metropolis	Boys Don't Cry
Fahrenheit 451	Crash
Gandhi	X-Men saga
American History X	Get Out
GATTACA	

POLITICAL JUSTICE

The Great Dictator	The Dark Knight
Rashomon	The Purge
The Laramie Project	13th
Hotel Rwanda	The West Wing (TV)
V for Vendetta	

VIOLENCE AND WAR

A Clockwork Orange	Crimson Tide
Dr. Strangelove	The Thin Red Line
Apocalypse Now	Lord of War
Grave of the Fireflies	Apocalypto
Starship Troopers	Ender's Game

MIND, MEMORY, AND MADNESS

THX 1138	Memento
Solaris (1972 and 2002)	Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind
Videodrome	A Scanner Darkly
The Naked Lunch	Enemy
Fight Club	

ALIEN CONTACT

2001: A Space Odyssey	District 9
2010	Interstellar
Contact	Arrival (2016)

LEGAL AND MEDIA ETHICS

Rope	Rollerball
12 Angry Men	Minority Report
The China Syndrome	Black Mirror (TV)

TIME TRAVEL

Groundhog Day	Donnie Darko
Terminator 2	Primer
Star Trek IV	Looper
12 Monkeys	

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Blade Runner	Battlestar Galactica (TV)
Ghost in the Shell	Rise of the Planet of the Apes
Bicentennial Man	Ex Machina
A.I. Artificial Intelligence	

VIDEO GAMES WITH VALUABLE PHILOSOPHICAL THEMES

Bioshock – consumerism, egoism, individualism, surveillance state, predestination, freedom
Braid – feminist ethics, free will, predestination, nature of reality, nature of time, individualism
Half-Life – fascism, oppression, liberation, surveillance state, nature of reality, individualism
Horizon Zero Dawn – predestination, individualism, collectivism, feminist ethics, family, power
Deus Ex – transhumanism, surveillance state, technological singularity, freedom and justice
Dishonored – class, labor and union solidarity, wealth and poverty, nonviolence, equality, family
Mass Effect – destiny, fate, artificial intelligence, transhumanism, genocide, genetic engineering
Portal – existentialism, consciousness, nature of reality, meaning of life, artificial intelligence
The Last of Us – human exceptionalism, feminist ethics, toxic masculinity, family, collectivism
The Stanley Parable – free will, determinism, business ethics, late-capitalism, individualism
The Vanishing of Ethan Carter – creativity, art, aesthetics, paranoia, homophobia, child abuse