

# Introduction to Philosophy – An Online, Small-Group, Discussion-Based Philosophy Course

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## **The Instructors:**

***Dr. Abigail Bruxvoort*** (She/Her)

I have a BA in philosophy from Houghton University and a PhD in philosophy from Northwestern University. My favorite questions in philosophy concern the ways in which humans both are and aren't rational, how it is that tempting desires make it difficult to act without determining us to act, what it means to be responsible for mental states, the ways in which we are similar to non-human animals, and the kind of influence it's permissible to exercise on other people. I was formerly a professor of philosophy and department chair at Tyler Junior College. At the moment, I am an adjunct professor by night and a mom by day.

***Dr. Joshua Kissel*** (He/They)

[Joshua.paul.kissel@gmail.com](mailto:Joshua.paul.kissel@gmail.com)

I am a Post-Doctoral Scholar in Writing and Rhetoric at The University of Central Florida's College of Arts and Humanities. Before coming to UCF, I taught for two years in the department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Phillips Academy – Andover. I earned my PhD in Philosophy at Northwestern University in October 2021. My own research expertise is in political theory and ethics. When I'm not teaching philosophy, I enjoy eating vegan food (especially of the deep-fried variety), traveling, learning new things, weightlifting, riding bikes and snowboards, and playing games! Finally, I'm keen on making this place a little nicer for all of us. This motivates my participation in the Effective Altruism movement and political organizing. More information available here: [www.joshuakissel.com](http://www.joshuakissel.com).

***Dr. Preston Stovall*** (He/His)

I am an assistant professor in philosophy at the University of Hradec Králové in the Czech Republic. I work in the philosophy of language, the philosophy of mind, and metaphysics, informed by a reading of German and American philosophy in the 19th and 20th centuries. I am currently the principal investigator in a Czech Science Foundation ([GAČR](#)) Social Sciences and Humanities project "Adopting the

Perspectives of Others: Empathy and Shared Intentionality in Human Social Life". I published a monograph in 2022, [\*The Single-Minded Animal: Shared Intentionality, Normativity, and the Foundations of Discursive Cognition\*](#). In addition to university teaching, I have designed and participated in a number of programs to bring philosophy to populations outside the university. This includes: programs for middle school and high school students in Pennsylvania, Montana, and the Czech Republic (ongoing); as the program manager and instructor for [\*Critical Thinking about Social Media\*](#), a project to bring media literacy into middle school and high school classrooms in Montana, supported by Humanities Montana and hosted by the [Center for Science, Technology, Ethics, and Society](#) at Montana State University, from October of 2021 to December of 2022; and a course on Aristotelian virtue, Kantian autonomy, and cognitive behavioral therapy at the Allegheny County Jail in Pittsburgh, 2016-17. Here is [a short interview](#) (and [for download](#)). Here is [a longer interview](#), concerning an essay I wrote for *Civil American* on education as a resource for addressing political polarization in the U.S.

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## **Course Model:**

Discussion Based Philosophy:

This is a discussion-based philosophy course. That means that while there will be lectures and slides shared with students, the primary goal is to develop your capacities to participate effectively in philosophical discussion. I will be asking you questions that depend on you having completed your homework and coming to class with questions, comments, and critiques. You will need to learn from and interact with myself and your peers in this class. I will be giving feedback several times throughout the course so as to help you understand what you're doing well and what still needs work.

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## **Course Description:**

This course is an introduction to philosophy. Logical argument is the philosopher's tool, and the truth is its intended product. This course trains students to use this tool themselves. We'll focus on the skills necessary to evaluate the arguments of others as well as to produce effective and logically structured arguments ourselves. We'll do this through an exploration of some of the most important discussions of philosophy.

Our first unit centers explores some key themes from the philosophy of mind and language led by Dr. Stovall. In our second unit we'll delve into some key ideas in epistemology and social epistemology led by Dr. Kissel. Dr. Bruxvoort will teach a

transition course between epistemology and ethics in the philosophy of religion before her and Dr. Kissel offer some key perspectives in ethics in our third unit. Finally, in our fourth unit Dr. Kissel introduces us to some work at the margins of political theory and ethics ending with an interactive thought-game in our final class.

After a few intense weeks of study, students will leave this course with a better sense of what they believe, how to argue for it, and how to listen to and understand the views of their interlocutors. We're so glad to have you!

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### **Course Objectives:**

This course enables students to:

- (1) Evaluate the logical status of arguments.
- (2) Contrast competing solutions to philosophical problems.
- (3) Identify important claims underlying their own philosophical positions.
- (4) Assess the justifiability of these claims.

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### **Tutorial Method and Explanation:**

Students are required to do two core things in this course. First; complete all readings, videos, and podcasts before the class so they are prepared to ask questions and engage with the material of the course in a respectful manner (see below). Secondly, students are required to prepare for 3 one-hour private tutorials with one of the three instructors.

***The Tutorial:*** The one-hour tutorials will be scheduled individually with a relevant instructor. For these sessions students will be asked to prepare to discuss the material of the course and their thoughts with a relevant expert. Usually this involves preparing written work on some question(s) based on the relevant unit. Instructors might prepare their own list of study questions or students may be offered the opportunity to propose some study questions of their own. This preparation should include writing or recording their thoughts on relevant questions and reviewing and reflecting on their notes from our meetings as well as the recorded videos.

#### ***What is a tutorial and how does it work?***

A tutorial is a dialogue between students and the instructor that will involve the instructor asking various questions that the student will then answer in accord with the student's understanding of the material and their own positions on the relevant philosophical questions. Students may use some pre-prepared writing or notes to support and enrich the conversation, but the line of questioning will naturally move beyond such prepared material.

This method (aka the Socratic method) is designed to promote critical thinking and understanding in the student (and instructor!). In addition, this will be an opportunity for

instructors to better understand the perspective and approach of each student and serve as a means by which we can offer feedback to help students develop their philosophical capabilities.

### ***Why Use Tutorials Instead of Papers or Exams?***

We believe this method is especially well placed to enrich future philosophical discussion, deepen understanding of the material, and avoid some of the limitations of merely written work in the age of generative-AI because students will be assessed engaging in real-time philosophical thinking!

### ***Tutorial Requirements and Scheduling***

Students will be required to do a tutorial on the first unit to give instructors an opportunity to provide early feedback. They will then have a choice of 2 of the 3 later units.

The Units:

1. After Mind and Language (August) with Dr. Stovall
2. After Epistemology (September) with Dr. Kissel or Dr. Bruxvoort (if in the philosophy of religion)
3. After Ethics (September-October) with Dr. Kissel or Dr. Bruxvoort
4. After Political Theory (October) with Dr. Kissel

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## **Class Expectations – Fostering Productive and Effective Discussions**

### **Respect:**

This course is designed to help each of you meet each of our course objectives. A large part of achieving these goals is actively engaging with our course materials. Active participation in class, and on our assignments has been proven to boost retention, speed up the learning process, and facilitate creative thinking, among other things.

Most of all, the truths of the texts we are reading are not delivered from on high. We need to engage critically with our texts; in other words, *we need to practice doing philosophy as a collective discipline*. I strongly encourage you *to talk to one another and not just to me*. Here are some suggestions and guidelines to facilitate such collaborative philosophy:

- Practice being patient with others.
- Listen carefully and respectfully.
- Leave others room to speak; don't monopolize or dominate.
- When agreeing, explaining why you agree.
- Criticize ideas and arguments, not the people who offer them.

How do we criticize others and discuss controversial ethical views without attacking our peers? Endeavor to follow these guidelines:

- *Textual Evidence*: The best points bring us back to the text. Use quotes and page numbers to ground your questions or comments.
- *Prior Points*: Our discussions should lead somewhere. Try to build on what's been said, before offering a different point.
- *Eye Contact*: Look around the discussion circle and speak to everyone (not just me).
- *Assume the Best*: Treat those who disagree with you as if they, like you, have the best of intentions and assume that they too want to find the best answer to these questions. This goes for our authors too!

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## Course Schedule

[Here is a .zip file](#) with all the readings not already linked directly in the syllabus below.

**Course Meeting Time:** The course meets US-East Saturday 8-10pm or China Sunday 8-10am except for two sessions. On Sept 20/21 and October 11/12 we meet one hour later.

Dates	Course Topic	Course Media	Instructor
August 2/3	Logic and Argumentative Writing and an Introduction to Philosophical Questioning	A) Kwame Anthony Appiah "What Will Future Generations Condemn Us For?" (3 pgs.)	Dr. Joshua Kissel
August 9/10	Overview of Some Central Themes in the Philosophy of Language and the Philosophy of Mind	A) Speaks, "Theories of Meaning", Introduction and section 1  B) Lycan, <i>Philosophy of Language</i> , chapter 1 (pp.1-6)  <b>Recommended Background</b> c) Speaks, "Theories of Meaning" sections 2, 2.1, 2.1.4 – 2.1.7, 3, and 3.1 – 3.7	Dr. Preston Stovall
August 16/17	Shared Intentionality and Human Norm Psychology:	A) Schweikard and Schmid, "Collective Intentionality", Introduction and sections 1, 2, 2.1 – 2.3	Dr. Preston Stovall

	Philosophical and Scientific Perspectives	<p>B) Tomasello and Rakoczy, “What Makes Human Cognition Unique? From Individual to Shared to Collective Intentionality”, pp.121 – 127</p> <p><b><i>Recommended Background</i></b></p> <p>c) Schweikard and Schmid, “Collective Intentionality”, sections 3, 3.1 – 3.3</p> <p>d) Tomasello and Rakoczy, “What Makes Human Cognition Unique? From Individual to Shared to Collective Intentionality”, pp.127 – 147</p>	
August 23/24	The Psychology of Morality: Empirical and Conceptual Considerations	<p>A) Graham et al., “Moral Foundations Theory: The Pragmatic Validity of Moral Pluralism”, pp.56 – 71</p> <p><b><i>Recommended Background</i></b></p> <p>b) Graham, et al., “Moral Foundations Theory: On the Advantages of Moral Pluralism Over Moral Monism”</p> <p>c) Atari et al., “Sex Differences in Moral Judgements Across 67 Countries”</p> <p>d) Leung and Cohen, “Within- and Between-Culture Variation: Individual Differences and the Cultural Logics of Honor, Face, and Dignity Cultures”</p> <p>e) Aslani et al., “Dignity, Face, and Honor Cultures: A Study of Negotiation Strategy and Outcomes in Three Cultures”</p>	Dr. Preston Stovall
August 30/31	NO CLASS	NO CLASS	NO CLASS
Sept 6/7	An Introduction to Epistemology: Knowledge	<p>A) <a href="#">The Meaning of Knowledge: Crash Course Philosophy #7</a> - CrashCourse (Video: 10:11)</p> <p>B) Thomas Metcalf – <a href="#">Epistemology, or Theory of Knowledge</a> (~1k words)</p>	Dr. Joshua Kissel

		<p>C) Annaleigh Curtis – <a href="#">Moral Testimony</a> (~1k words)</p> <p>D) Spencer Case – <a href="#">Is it Wrong to Believe Without Sufficient Evidence? W.K. Clifford’s “The Ethics of Belief”</a> (~1k words)</p>	
Sep 13/14	Epistemology and Social World	<p>A) Huzeyfe Demirtas – <a href="#">Epistemic Injustice</a> (~1k words)</p> <p>B) <a href="#">Epistemic Injustice</a> - Edinburgh Law School (Video: 5:12)</p> <p>C) <a href="#">Miranda Fricker talking about Epistemic Injustice</a> on Philosophy Bites Podcast (13:47 minutes)</p> <p>D) C Thi Nguyen <a href="#">Escaping the Echo Chamber</a></p>	Dr. Joshua Kissel
Sep 20/21 <b>NOTE:</b> <b>Meets one hour later.</b> <b>9-11pm US-East</b> <b>9-11am China</b>	Philosophy of Religion and the Problem of Evil	<p>A) Susan Neiman - <a href="#">The Rationality of the World: A Philosophical Reading of the Book of Job</a></p> <p>B) David Hume - Excerpts</p>	Dr. Abigail Bruxvoort
September 27/28	Ethics: Part 1: Moral Relativism & Part 2: Utilitarianism	<p>A) Mary Midgley “Trying Out One’s New Sword” (7 pages)</p> <p>B) <a href="#">Utilitarianism</a> (Video: 10 Minutes)</p> <p>C) John Stuart Mill’s <i>Utilitarianism</i>; Excerpts of Chapter 2. Read pgs. 4-8, 11-13, 16-17 (9 pgs.)</p> <p><b>Recommended Reading</b></p> <p>d) Shantideva – Verses 90-103 (3 pgs.)</p>	Dr. Joshua Kissel
October 4/5	Virtue Ethics	<p>A) <a href="#">Aristotle and Virtue Theory</a> (Video 9:21 Minutes)</p> <p>B) Aristotle – <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> excerpts from Book 1 Read chapters 1-5 (pgs. 2-6), and chapters 7-8 (pgs. 8-13)</p>	Dr. Joshua Kissel

		(11 pgs. total)  C) Mencius (and Confucianism) excerpts Read Excerpts (1A1-1A4, 1A6, 1B9, 2A4, 2A6, 6A1, 6A2, 6A6, 6A8, 6A14, 6A15, 7B14) [Marked on PDF] (11 pgs.)	
October 11/12 <b>NOTE:</b> Meets one hour later. 9-11pm US-East 9-11am China	Kantian Ethics	A) Immanuel Kant – <i>Groundwork on the Metaphysics of Moral</i> – Excerpts  B) Karen Stohr – <i>Choosing Freedom</i> , Chapter 1 and 4	Dr. Abigail Bruxvoort
October 18/19	Political Theory: Ethics to Politics	A) Peter Singer – <i>Famine, Affluence, and Morality</i> (16 pgs.)  B) Onora O’Neill – <i>A Kantian Approach to Famine Relief</i> 294-300 (7 pgs.)	Dr. Joshua Kissel
October 25/26	Political Theory: Distributive Justice (Rawls game OR Socialism)	A) Dick Timmer and Tim Meijers – <a href="#">Distributive Justice</a> (1k words)  B) Ben Davies – John Rawls’ <a href="#">‘Theory of Justice’</a> (1k words)  <b>Activity:</b> We’ll play and discuss ‘Rawls’ game’.  <b>Recommended Background</b> c) David Antonini – <a href="#">Social Contract Theory</a> (~1000 Words) d) Thomas Metcalf – <a href="#">Defining Capitalism and Socialism</a> (999 words) e) Thomas Metcalf – <a href="#">Arguments for Capitalism and Socialism</a> (993 words)	Dr. Joshua Kissel

### **General Suggestions, Background, and Helpful Links:**

Some general info websites and YouTube channels for exploring philosophy that I recommend:

- <https://1000wordphilosophy.com/>



- Short essays on a range of topics in philosophy written at a fairly introductory level.
- <https://plato.stanford.edu/contents.html>
  - A compendium of essays covering key concepts and debates in philosophy written and peer-reviewed by experts in the field. This is a great place to start exploring in depth.

Several accessible and usually well-constructed philosophy YouTube channels:

- [CrashCourse Philosophy](#)
- [Wireless Philosophy](#)
- [The School of Life](#)
  - This is usually biographies of famous philosophers and some of their core ideas.

The 'A Very Short Introduction' Series is great. Two that might be helpful are [Knowledge](#) and [Ethics](#).

Finally, a nice podcast is [philosophybites](#).

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## **Private Essay Writing Options:**

Do you want to produce a well-argued and clearly defended philosophy paper? Consider adding private writing sessions complete with essay feedback to your course!

In these private sessions an instructor will work with students on their philosophical writing, logical argument construction and premise defense. Students will meet with the instructor to identify an area of philosophy that they find engaging with the aim of producing and polishing an original piece of philosophical writing. These sessions will help students to (i) identify key premises of their argument, (ii) put these premises together with others in a logically coherent manner, (iii) and offer the requisite support for the truth of said premises in order to produce original philosophical writing.

If you are a student who really wants to get their hands dirty in philosophy, then this is an option for you. Ideally, we'll have several sessions together to work up toward a polished paper draft using the same scaffolded writing methods Dr. Kissel has implemented while teaching at Northwestern University and Phillips Academy – Andover. However, we can be flexible with one-off sessions if that option better fits your needs.