

## PHIL 130: Philosophy & Persons

This is the first course in the Philosophical Knowledge section of the Core Curriculum. It introduces students to the fundamental philosophical issues that bear on our understanding of persons. The unifying question is: What is a person? The course has three equally weighted components, each with its own unifying questions, namely:

1: *Persons & Knowledge*. What is it for persons to have knowledge, including knowledge in such areas as logic, science, morality, and religion?

2: *Persons & Values*. What is value? When does something have value for a person, for instance in ethics, aesthetics, education, the environment, bioethics, and religion? What is the ground of, or basis for, value in human life? Are values culturally relative?

3: *Persons & Reality*. What exactly are persons, and how are they related to the entities acknowledged in religion (e.g., God and souls), metaphysics (e.g., substances and abstract entities), and science (e.g., matter and causal relations)?

### Part 1: Persons & Knowledge

This part of the course focuses on the nature of knowledge in relation to persons. It focuses on four longstanding philosophical issues in the theory of knowledge:

1. What is the *nature* of human knowledge? In particular, what does such knowledge consist in? Does knowledge lead to objective truth, or is knowledge always relative to context or culture and thus only true-for-that-context-or-culture? More specifically, how exactly is human knowledge related to truth, belief, and justification (or evidence)? In addition, how do we understand the differences between propositional knowledge, skill knowledge, and interpersonal knowledge?

2. What are the *sources* of human knowledge? Does it originate in sensory experience or in human reason or in some combination of the two? In general, are perception, testimony, memory, consciousness, and reason sources of knowledge?

3. What is the *scope* of human knowledge? Does it extend beyond sensory experience to objects that transcend such experience (such as God and abstract entities)? Is accepting a variety of kinds of knowledge (commonsense, scientific, moral, religious, and self-knowledge, etc.) consistent with viewing truth as unified? Can we have a realistic aim of integrating human knowledge?

4. What is it to be a (responsible) *knower*? How can we be more attentive to experience, more imaginative in our seeking insight and understanding, and more critical (and self-critical) in our judging, so as to be better (or more virtuous) knowers? Can we promote the process of self-appropriation of truth and knowledge by becoming more self-aware of what is going on in us when we engage in what we call “knowing”?

**Representative Readings** (each reading is about 20 pages)

Plato, *Theaetetus*, selections on the difference between knowledge and mere opinion or belief  
Descartes, *Meditations*, selections on doubt and certainty  
Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, selections on how knowledge is based on evidence of the senses  
Selected contemporary readings

### **Learning Outcomes**

Students will be able to identify, illustrate, and explain key characteristics of

1. human knowledge in contrast with mere opinion,
2. a claim to truth in contrast with a claim to mere agreement or usefulness,
3. different kinds of reasons (prudential, moral, cognitive) and their relation to knowledge,
4. the character-traits of a good knower: self-reflectiveness and the other epistemic virtues treated by such philosophers as Aristotle and Aquinas.

### **Part 2: Persons & Values**

This part of the course focuses on values in relation to persons, where the term “values” is understood in the broad sense of that which is worthwhile (and worth choosing) in human life. It focuses on four topics:

1. *The difference between instrumental and intrinsic value* (what is worth choosing as a means to something else and what is worth choosing in itself, i.e., as an end) *and the question of whether there is inherent value* (value inherent in something, independent of our valuing it);
2. *The wide variety of contents addressed in value judgments* (virtues and skills, happiness, the moral life, beauty, pleasure, material success, love, godliness, self-actualization, health, knowledge, social status, and so on);
3. *The ultimate source(s) of value for human beings* (does our biological nature determine what is of value for us, is value socially determined or culturally relative, is it based on our feelings or on reason alone, does God determine what has value, or is there somehow a combination of the above?);
4. *The deliberative process in making value judgments* (analytic and intuitive evaluation, criteria for rank-ordering goals and means, contextual and rule-based reasoning, and so on).

### **Representative Readings**

1. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, Chapters 7-13; Book X, Chapters 6-9 (The basis for value is fulfillment of our human nature) (20 pages)
2. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, Questions 2 and 18 (on goodness and happiness)
3. Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Appendix I (The bases for moral value are feelings of approval and disapproval) (8 pages)
4. Kant, “Theory and Practice” Section I (The basis for moral value is our autonomous rational nature; the highest good would be to achieve happiness *and* deserve it by fulfilling laws of duty) (8 pages)
5. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Ch. IV (The ultimate bases for value are pleasure and pain) (8 pages)
6. Selected readings on other views about value or specific values such as beauty and altruism.

### **Learning Outcomes**

Students will be able to:

1. Provide reasons for regarding any given value as intrinsic or instrumental,
2. Identify and explain theories of value that ground the value in human life in human nature, in pleasure & pain, in moral feelings, in reason, and in our relation to God,
3. Provide reasons for and against different accounts of the basis of value in human life.

### **Part 3: Persons & Reality**

This portion of the course focuses on the nature of persons in relation to the basic entities of reality affirmed in religion (e.g., God), metaphysics (e.g., substances and abstract entities), and science (e.g., matter, purely causal relations). Accordingly, the course will introduce the following traditional metaphysical topics.

1. *Substance*. The first metaphysical topic concerns the nature of substance in relation to persons. It introduces substance dualism as found in Plato and Descartes and alternatives as found in Aristotle and in contemporary debates about materialism. It also discusses the kind of substance traditionally called "God."
2. *Causality, Free Will, and Determinism*. The second metaphysical topic concerns the nature of causality and its relation to free will. A key issue is whether human persons are free to choose their actions rather than being determined to conform to certain causal laws. This part of the course examines both sides of the debate.

**Representative Readings** (each reading is about 20 pages)

1. Plato, *Phaedo* (65a-88a)
2. Augustine, *On the Freedom of the Will*, Book One, chs. 12-14 and Book Three, ch.1
3. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, selections from First Part, Question 76 and related parts (on the human person as a union of body and subsistent form/soul)
4. Descartes, *Meditations*, selections on the nature of persons
5. Hume, *Enquiry con. Human Understanding*, secs. 7-8 (on causality, free will)
6. Other readings from classical, modern, and contemporary metaphysical texts.

### **Learning Outcomes**

By the end of the course, students should be able to

1. describe, and distinguish among, several important theories of the metaphysical nature of human persons,
2. offer reasons for and against these different views of human persons,
3. explain what the debate about free will and causal determinism consists in, and be able to formulate reasons to support their own views.