



# WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

(And why do I  
have to take it?)

what is  
philosophy?

nuts &  
bolts

valid  
or  
invalid?

What is philosophy?

And why do I have to  
take it?

Let's take the first question first.  
'Philosophy' comes from the ancient  
Greek 'φιλοσοφία' — philosophia.

philosophia = philo + sophia

philo = love

sophia = wisdom

So philosophers are lovers of wisdom.  
But what is that supposed to mean?

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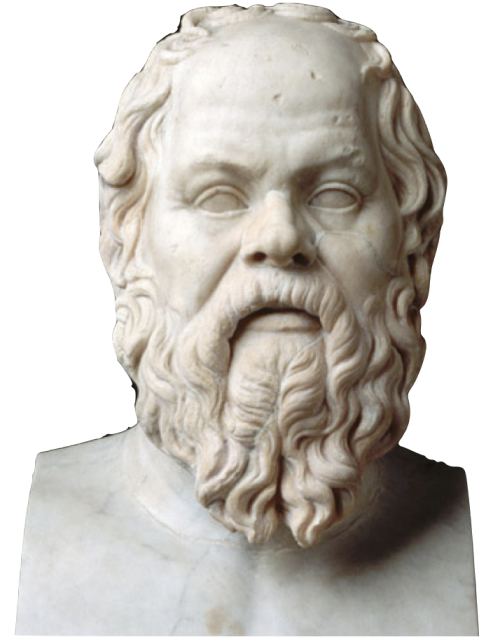
valid  
or  
invalid?

So philosophers are lovers of wisdom.  
But what is that supposed to mean?

Socrates, who was one of the first  
philosophers, contrasted lovers of  
wisdom with two other sorts of  
people.

The first were people who formed  
belief on the basis of **custom** or  
**tradition** rather than argument.

The second were **rhetoricians** and  
**sophists** who used arguments, not to  
form true beliefs, but to achieve some  
other end.



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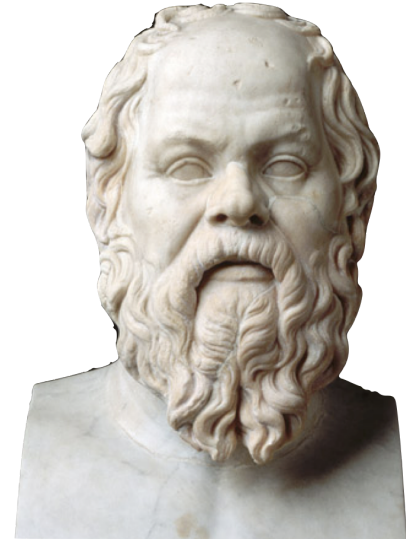
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Philosophy, by contrast, is the attempt to form true beliefs about the world on the basis of reason.

Can you think of any other academic departments at Notre Dame that might describe themselves in this way?

Yes, quite a few. Physics, economics, psychology, biology, sociology, political science (maybe) .... the list goes on and on.

This is no accident. All of these other fields — the natural sciences (like physics, chemistry, and biology), the social and human sciences (like economics, sociology, psychology, and political science), and others — were once part of philosophy. Isaac Newton was a philosopher; so was Charles Darwin; so was Adam Smith.







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These great philosophers went on to form systematic new ways of answering the questions in which they were interested. These ‘new ways of answering questions’ are just what we now call ‘sciences.’

This is all, we (current) philosophers think, excellent. But it doesn’t mean that we can just do science and forget about philosophy. There remain questions — fundamental, basic questions — which we have not been able to devise any science capable of answering. Those questions are the ones philosophers try to answer.

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This is all, we (current) philosophers think, excellent. But it doesn't mean that we can just do science and forget about philosophy. There remain questions — fundamental, basic questions — which we have not been able to devise any science capable of answering. Those questions are the ones philosophers try to answer.

Just which questions are we going to try to answer in this course?

This course is an introduction to **metaphysics** and **epistemology**. Both of these words also derive from ancient Greek words.

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'Metaphysics' is derived from the Greek prefix μετά (meta), which means after, and the Greek φύσις (physis), which means nature. This might encourage the view that metaphysics is the study of the supernatural. Fortunately, it isn't. Metaphysics is a name for the study of the ultimate nature of reality.

'Epistemology' is derived from the Greek word ἐπιστήμη (episteme), which was the word for knowledge or understanding. Epistemology is the study of what we can know about the world.

So our topic is a broad one: the nature of reality and what we can know about it.

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So our topic is a broad one: the nature of reality and what we can know about it.

We are going to focus on five big questions, or clusters of questions.

**Does God exist?**

**Do we have free  
will?**

**What am I?**

**What should I  
believe?**

**What is real?**

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Does God exist?

Do we have free  
will?

What am I?

What should I  
believe?

What is real?

The Catholic Church has always had an optimistic view of questions like these: it has always held that these sorts of questions are answerable by the exercise of reason.

It has also held that the exercise of reason is an essential part of a fully lived human life.

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It has also held that the exercise of reason is an essential part of a fully lived human life.

Here's how St. Augustine put it:

'No man has a right to lead such a life of contemplation as to forget in his own ease the service due to his neighbor; nor has any man a right to be so immersed in active life as to neglect the contemplation of God.'



This (in case you were wondering) is why Notre Dame (along with other Catholic institutions) has always required the study of philosophy as well as theology.



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The main aim of the course will not be for you to learn what other people have thought about these questions — though you will do that too. The main aim of the course will be for you to develop your own views on these questions. You will be evaluated mainly on the basis of your ability to defend those views by argument.

This makes philosophy different than lots of other classes you will take. Your physics professor does not ask you to come up with your own take on gravity; she'll ask you to learn and apply the theory of gravity on which physicists have agreed.

Why is philosophy like this? Part of the answer is that philosophers **don't agree** on the right answers to these questions.

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Why is philosophy like this? Part of the answer is that philosophers **don't agree** on the right answers to these questions.

This sometimes drives students crazy. I'll give the best arguments on both sides of an issue, and students will want to be told which argument is the winner. I won't do this — and this can lead to one of two frustrated responses.



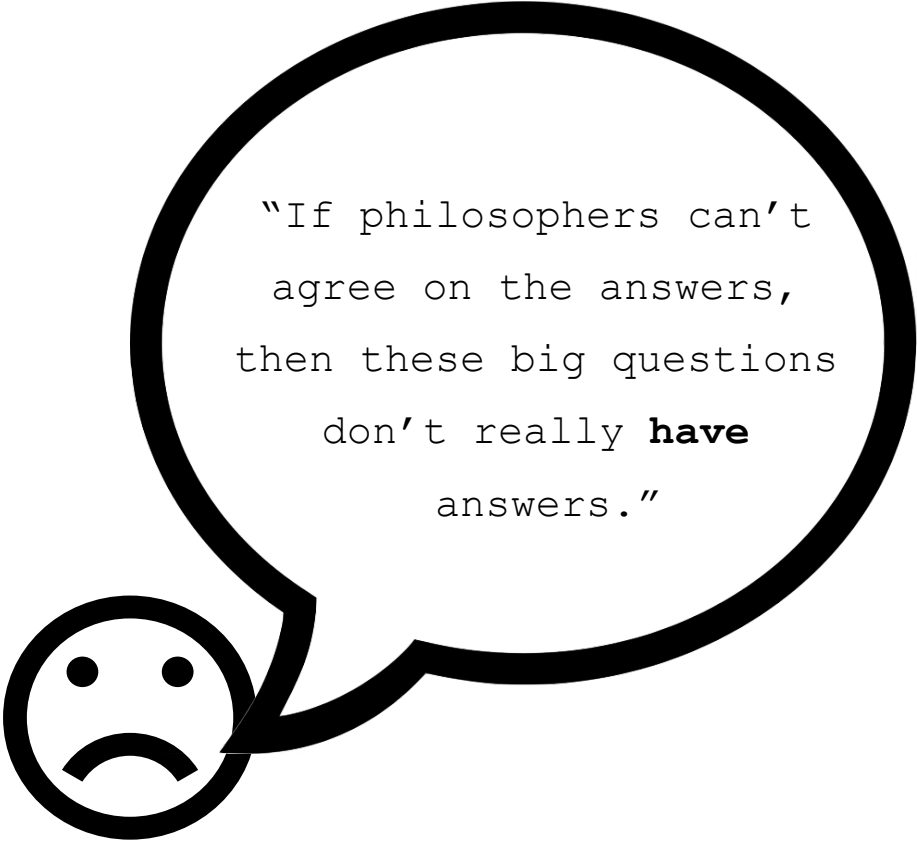
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This sometimes drives students crazy. I'll give the best arguments on both sides of an issue, and students will want to be told which argument is the winner. I won't do this — and this can lead to one of two frustrated responses.

Here's one:



"If philosophers can't agree on the answers, then these big questions don't really **have** answers."



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This first frustrated response does not make a lot of sense.

There are also topics about which scientists disagree. For example, biologists disagree widely about the origins of life on earth. Does that mean that there is no answer to the question of how life on earth really originated? Of course not.

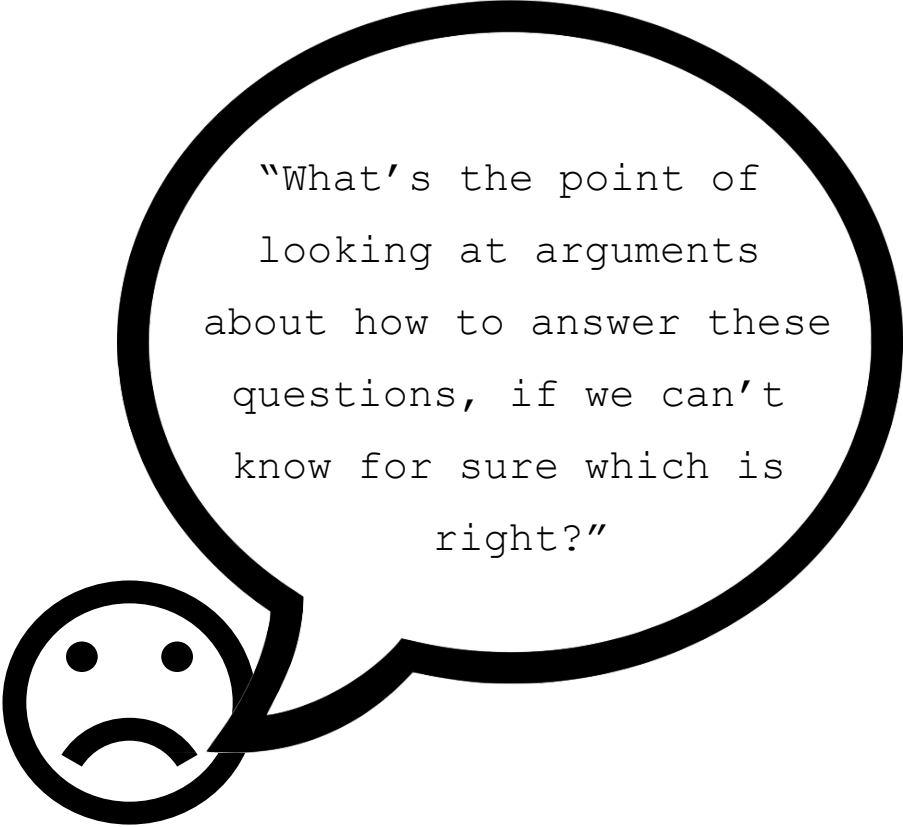
Similarly, whether or not we can figure out the answers to them for sure, questions like ‘Does God exist?’ clearly do have answers. What’s the alternative — that God sort of exists and sort of doesn’t?

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Lets have a look at the second possible frustrated  
response.



"What's the point of  
looking at arguments  
about how to answer these  
questions, if we can't  
know for sure which is  
right?"

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I have some sympathy with this response. I really want to know the answers to these questions too, and I get frustrated by how hard philosophy can be. But there are a few things to say in reply.



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First, consider an analogy. Suppose that you really care about the origins of life on earth. Does that fact that no biologist can tell you what the origins in fact were mean that you should not look at the arguments given for the competing theories? That does not seem reasonable.

If you embarked on a study of the origins of life, it is highly unlikely that you would end up with a proof that life originated in such-and-such way. But you would learn a lot about the pros and cons of various theories, and would be in a much better position to have an educated opinion on the matter.

That is what this class will give you. We are not going to come across an airtight mathematical proof that God does exist or that God does not exist. But you will learn **a lot** about the pros and cons of both positions, and will end up in a much better position to have an educated opinion on the matter.

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Or take a less intellectual example. In the recent past many of you spent some time thinking about where would be the best place for you to go to college. Was there a proof you could find, or some infallible authority you could consult?

No. But that didn't make it unreasonable for you to think long and hard about the arguments in favor of various options. Just the opposite — because you cared about this question and because there was no authority to consult, it was more important for you to think hard about the arguments.

That is a bit like the attitude I want you to take toward philosophy. Questions about whether God exists, whether you have free will, and what kind of life is best are questions which you should care about. So, just as you cared about the arguments for and against various options for college, you should care about the arguments for and against (for example) the existence of God.

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To make progress on these questions, you will have to learn a bit about what arguments are, and what makes arguments good or bad. I will come back to that in a bit. But first, some nuts and bolts about how the course will work.

Let's have a look at the [course web site](#).

# Philosophy 10106: Introduction to metaphysics & epistemology

## Schedule

Tuesday & Thursday, 12:45-2:00 in the Stepan Center

## Topic

Metaphysics is the study of the ultimate nature of reality. Epistemology is the study of what we can know about reality. This introduction to metaphysics and epistemology will focus on a few clusters of big questions:

- **Does God exist?** Can we prove that God exists? How could God exist in a world with the kind of evil we find in our world?
- **Do we have free will?** Is there such a thing as fate? Is free will compatible with the findings of science?
- **What kind of thing am I?** Could I survive death? Could I survive being uploaded into a computer?
- **What should I believe?** Should I only believe what I can prove? Should I trust science? What should I believe when people disagree with me?
- **What is real?** Is there a real difference between right and wrong? What is justice? What is race? What is gender?

The focus of the class will be on learning how to formulate, defend, and respond to objections to your own answers to these basic questions, rather than on learning how others have answered these questions (though of course we will do some of the latter as well).

The course is divided into five sections, with each section devoted to one of the big questions listed above. At the end of each section of the course, we'll meet for a discussion day, in which the class will break into small groups. Part of each discussion day will be devoted to discussion of a film or TV episode which addresses the topic of that section of the course.

Readings for the course are very short; often they are only 1 or 2 paragraphs. They are all available via links from the syllabus. You should do the readings before the lecture. Rather than spending a lot of time on readings before class, you should spend a lot of time thinking about the material after lecture.

After each lecture, one or more questions will be added to a web page on which you'll record your developing philosophical views over the course of the semester. You should update this "My Philosophy" page after every class meeting.

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8/11

## *What is philosophy?*

[\[reading\]](#) [\[lecture\]](#) [\[pdf\]](#)

### Does God exist?

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## *The first cause argument*

[\[reading\]](#) [\[lecture\]](#) [\[pdf\]](#) [\[my philosophy\]](#)

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## *The cosmological argument*

[\[reading\]](#) [\[lecture\]](#) [\[pdf\]](#) [\[my philosophy\]](#)

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## *The fine-tuning argument*

[\[reading\]](#) [\[lecture\]](#) [\[pdf\]](#) [\[my philosophy\]](#)

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## *The argument from evil*

[\[reading\]](#) [\[lecture\]](#) [\[pdf\]](#) [\[my philosophy\]](#)

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## *The free will defense*

[\[reading\]](#) [\[lecture\]](#) [\[pdf\]](#) [\[my philosophy\]](#)

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## *Evil and life after death*

[\[reading\]](#) [\[lecture\]](#) [\[pdf\]](#) [\[my philosophy\]](#)

9/3

## *Discussion day*

[\[reading\]](#) [\[lecture\]](#) [\[pdf\]](#) [\[my philosophy\]](#)

9/8

First paper due

### Are you free?

9/10

## *Free will vs. determinism*

## Contact information

You should feel free to get in touch with me or your designated teaching assistant if you have any questions about the course, or about how you're doing in the course, or if you just want to pursue some of the topics we're discussing further. You can always get in touch with me by email, and this often the easiest route if you just have a quick question about the readings or assignments. You can book a time to meet with me [here](#). If none of the listed times work for you, just let me know.

## Teaching assistants

There are three teaching assistants for the class, who do the grading for the course, hold office hours, and are in general available outside of class to help you with the material. While there are no discussion sections for the course, each student is assigned to a TA. (I'll distribute these assignments in the second week of class.)

Grace Hibshman  
office hours: TBA

Kayoung Kim  
office hours: TBA

Mack Sullivan  
office hours: TBA

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If the main thing you are going to be asked to do in this class is to argue for your views, and respond to arguments against your views, you need to know something about arguments.

The study of arguments is called **logic**.

A first step in grasping the basic principles of logic is the mastery of four (semi-)technical terms.

Arguments consist of one or more **premises** and a **conclusion**.  
The conclusion is what you are arguing for; the premises are the (alleged) basis for that conclusion.

The two key terms used in the evaluation of an argument are **valid** and **sound**.

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The two key terms used in the evaluation of an argument are  
**valid** and **sound**.

An argument is **valid** when  
it is impossible for its  
premises to be true and its  
conclusion false.

An argument is  
**sound** when it is valid  
and all of its premises  
are true.

Validity and soundness are the two most fundamental  
concepts for you to grasp in this course. Let's illustrate them  
by considering some example arguments.

An argument is **valid** when it is impossible for its premises to be true and its conclusion false.

An argument is **sound** when it is valid and all of its premises are true.

1. All men are mortal.
  2. Brian Kelly is a man.
- 
- C. Brian Kelly is mortal.

An argument is **valid** when it is impossible for its premises to be true and its conclusion false.

An argument is **sound** when it is valid and all of its premises are true.

1. All men are mortal.
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- C. Brian Kelly is a man.

One way to show that this argument is invalid is to focus on its **form**.

1. All men are mortal.
  2. Brian Kelly is mortal.
- 
- C. Brian Kelly is a man.

One way to show that this argument is invalid is to  
focus on its **form**.

Certain words in the argument are repeated. To get the form  
of the argument, replace every repeated expression of this  
sort with a 'dummy letter' — sort of like a variable. That gives  
us the following form of the argument:

1. All F's are G.
  2. x is G.
- 
- C. x is F.

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1. All men are mortal.
  2. Brian Kelly is mortal.
- 

C. Brian Kelly is a man.

1. All F's are G.
  2. x is G.
- 

C. x is F.

Can you think of any argument of this form which has true premises and a false conclusion?

This shows that this form of argument is invalid — which in turn is good evidence that the argument we are considering is invalid.



An argument is **valid** when it is impossible for its premises to be true and its conclusion false.

An argument is **sound** when it is valid and all of its premises are true.

1. Either Notre Dame will win the National Title in 2021 or USC will.
  2. USC will not win the National Title in 2021.
- 
- C. Notre Dame will win the National Title in 2021.

What's the form of this argument? Is every argument of this form valid?

An argument is **valid** when it is impossible for its premises to be true and its conclusion false.

An argument is **sound** when it is valid and all of its premises are true.

Here's a slightly trickier one:

1. If the moon is made of cheese, then it will soon become moldy.
  2. The moon will not soon become moldy.
- 
- C. The moon is not made of cheese.

1. If **the moon is made of cheese**, then it will soon become moldy.
  2. **The moon will not soon become moldy.**
- 

C. **The moon is not made of cheese.**

Here's one way to represent the form of this argument:

1. If **P**, then **Q**.

2. Not **Q**.

---

C. Not **P**.

Is every argument of this form valid?

Mastering the concepts of validity and soundness gives you way to talk about, and criticize, arguments.

Suppose that you are presented with an argument for some conclusion that you think is false, and you want to criticize that argument. The most straightforward way to do that would be to show that the argument is unsound.

**Soundness = validity + true premises.** So to show that an argument is unsound, you can do one of two things: show that it is invalid, or show that it has a false premise.

But it is worth keeping in mind that there are other ways to criticize arguments as well. We'll come across some of these this semester. Here's an example:

1. The number of beer bottles on Notre Dame's campus right now is odd.

---

C. The number of beer bottles on Notre Dame's campus right now is not 496.

There's a pretty clear sense in which, if I gave this argument right now, it would be a bad argument. But it is valid; and you can hardly claim that it is unsound, since you do not know whether the premise is true or false.

The right criticism of this argument seems to be, not that it has a false premise, but that we have **no reason to believe that the premise is true** — and hence no reason to believe that the argument is sound.

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An important step in thinking clearly about arguments, and learning how to talk clearly about arguments, is distinguishing between things you can say about individual premises and conclusions, on the one hand, and whole arguments, on the other.

One can sensibly say that a premise or conclusion is true, or false, or unsupported by the evidence. But it makes no sense to say any of these things about arguments.

By contrast, one can sensibly say that an argument is sound or unsound, valid or invalid. But it makes no sense to say any of these things about individual premises or conclusions.

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Next time, we'll put these tools for evaluating arguments to work by discussing an important attempt to answer the first question which will occupy us in this class:

**Does God exist?**