General Philosophy tutorials

General Philosophy introduces you to some central issues in epistemology, metaphysics, and philosophy of mind. Epistemology is the study of knowledge. Metaphysics discusses fundamental questions about the nature of the world and how we fit in it. Philosophy of mind is about what it is to have a mind, i.e. what it is to have consciousness and thoughts. It will also introduce you to key arguments and writings from philosophers from the ‘Early Modern’ period (16 & 17th Century), especially Descartes, Locke, and Hume.

There are General Philosophy lectures in this in both Michaelmas and Hilary terms, which approach the same topics through different routes. Route A, in Michaelmas, approaches the topics through their Early Modern history. Route B, in Hilary, focuses on contemporary discussion of these topics.

The role of the tutorials is to approach each topic through discussion. Therefore, while you must write an essay before each tutorial (as I’ll go into shortly), the primary role of these essays is to provide a springboard for discussion. Among other things, we’ll analyse and assess the arguments in the reading, we’ll discuss your responses to the arguments in the reading, we’ll think about further objections and counterexamples and how to respond to them, and we’ll discuss any technical or philosophical notions in the background.

In our tutorials we will be discussing essays that you have written in advance. The questions and readings are below. The essays should be around 1,000-1,500 words. Please email your essay to me and your tutorial partner(s) 24 hours in advance of your tutorial. I will read and comment on your essays, and please read your tutorial partner(s)’s essays before the tutorial. If you don’t send your essay by 24 hours in advance, you’ll need to read your essay out at the beginning of the tutorial (this is not a punishment; it’s just the tutorial group needs to know the content of your essay for the discussion). You should also feel free to come to the tutorial with questions to ask which you might not have covered in your essay or that came up when reading your tutorial partner’s essay.

Writing a philosophy essay can be difficult – and may be very different from essays you have written in the past. But if you find it difficult, don’t get down. Your essays aren’t supposed to be the last word. The point of writing, reading, and discussing philosophy essays in these tutorials is so that you can practice this again and again in a way that doesn’t count towards your grade. And after going through this process, you’ll find writing philosophy a lot easier.

In the interim, I’ve written some tips for writing a philosophy essay that you can find here.

You should also get into the habit of discussing the reading and your essays with each other, especially if there’s a part you find unclear, a counterargument you want to try out, etc. The main point of tutorials is to collaborate with each other to get better understanding of the issues. Collaboration needn’t mean agreement; it may often involve arguing against the position your tutor or tutorial partner puts forward. Hopefully, together you’ll end up having a better understanding of the issues, even if you don’t end up agreeing!
Questions and Readings: Michaelmas Term

B=Background Reading  E=Essential Reading  F=Further Reading

Week 1. Scepticism

**Question:** What, if anything, is wrong with Moore’s response to the sceptic?


Week 2. Mind and Body 1

**Question:** “It’s possible to conceive of my mind existing without my body.” Is this true? If so, what should we conclude from it?

E. Antoine Arnauld and René Descartes. 4th Objections and Replies to 6th Meditation.

*It can be tricky to find the relevant bit of this reading. There are various editions, but you can find it in the following two ones:*

a. *In the Cottingham edition referred to above:* The first section of the Objections to Meditation Six entitled ‘The real distinction between mind and body’. Arnauld’s objections are 107–110; Descartes’ reply is 110–112.

b. *Jonathan Bennett’s simplified translation on ‘Early Modern Texts’:* Arnauld’s objections are entitled ‘Objections concerning the human mind’ (54–59); Descartes’ responses are ‘Replies concerning the nature of the human mind’ (59–64).


Week 3. Personal Identity

**Question:** What, if anything, makes you the same person as you were last week?

Week 4. Free Will

Question: You put on your shoes this morning. Could you have done anything other than this? Do you need this ability in order to have put on your shoes freely?


Questions and Readings: Hilary Term

Week 1. Knowledge & The Gettier Problem

Question: What are Gettier cases? What should they lead us to conclude about knowledge?


Week 2. Mind and Body 2

Question: What, if anything, does Mary learn when she leaves her black and white room? What does the answer tell us about the relationship between the mental and the physical?

Week 3. Induction

*Question:* What is the problem of induction? Can it be solved?


Week 4. God

*Question:* “There is evil in the world, so there isn’t a God.” Discuss.


