

Syllabus

Self, Freedom, and Morality: Core Questions in Philosophy

Summer 2026

Class schedule: TBD

Venue: TBD

Office Hours: TBD

Instructor: Seyoung Kang

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Course Description

This course explores four core questions in philosophy: What can we know? What is the self? Are we free? And how should we live? We begin with skepticism and the problem of knowledge, turn to questions about the nature of mind and personal identity, examine debates about free will and moral responsibility, and conclude with competing views in ethics and the search for meaning in life. A central aim of the course is to introduce not only philosophical topics but also philosophical thinking. You will learn to analyze arguments, assess the strength of reasons, and articulate your own views with clarity and rigor. The course presumes no prior experience with philosophy—only curiosity and a willingness to question familiar assumptions.

Course Objectives

In completing this course students should be able to:

1. **Reflect critically** on their own assumptions about knowledge, the self, freedom, and morality, recognizing how personal experience and cultural background shape what they take to be true, real, or valuable.
 2. **Articulate and defend** philosophical positions on skepticism, personal identity, free will, moral responsibility, and ethical reasoning, both in writing and in discussion.
 3. **Engage** in reasoned dialogue with others—listening carefully, responding thoughtfully, and navigating disagreement with clarity, intellectual humility, and respect.
 4. **Analyze** philosophical texts and arguments by identifying central claims, reconstructing lines of reasoning, and evaluating objections with precision.
 5. **Develop the capacity to think philosophically** about broad questions concerning truth, the mind, agency, and the good life, and to connect these abstract debates to their own perspectives and lived experience.
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Requirements

In order to earn credit, students must *attend and actively participate* in class, submit *Discussion Items* (DI), complete *weekly Take-Homes* and *two oral exams*, and write one *Final Paper*.

Assignments and Grading

Your final grade for this course will be based on the following:

- Syllabus Quiz: 1 point
- Attendance and Participation: 20 points
- Discussion Items: 15 points
- Weekly Take-Homes: 24.8 points
- Oral Exams: 20 points
- Final Paper: 15 points

1. Syllabus Quiz. You will complete a syllabus quiz to ensure that you are familiar with the contents of the syllabus, which, among other things, addresses common questions and outlines course expectations. The quiz is available on Canvas and is due by the end of Week 2. It must be completed with 100% accuracy, and you may retake it as many times as needed. The quiz is worth 1 point.

2. Attendance and Participation. This course is discussion-based, and your presence and engagement are essential to the learning community we build together. Regular attendance and thoughtful participation are therefore expected. However, please do not attend class or office hours if you are sick—take care of your health and the health of those around you. You have two excused absences for any reason—no explanation needed. This includes late course adds or other scheduling conflicts.

Attendance is worth a total of 10 points. Your final attendance score will be adjusted based on the total number of absences, whether excused or unexcused, as follows:

- 2 absences or fewer: no penalty (eligible for the full 10 points)
- 3 absences: 9 points
- 4 absences: 8 points
- 5 absences: 7 points
- and so on.

Participation is also worth a total of 10 points. A guide to how participation will be assessed will be added.

3. Discussion Items (DI). For each class meeting with an assigned reading, you are required to submit either a question about the reading or an objection to an argument or position presented in it. Your submission should raise an issue that you think would be worthwhile to discuss in class. The

purpose of these discussion items is to prepare each student for active participation and critical reflection. Discussion items (DIs) must be submitted on Canvas at least two hours before class.

The total number of discussion items (DIs) will be 15 (two per week, except for the first class). Each DI will earn either 0 or 1 point, for a possible *total of 15 points*.

4. Weekly Take-Homes. Each week, you will write a short essay (approximately 300–750 words) in response to a prompt. These take-home assignments are due by the end of the day on Friday and are graded based on good-faith effort. Each take-home will earn 0–3 points.

If your instructor determines that a take-home essay falls below the standard of a good-faith effort, 1 or 2 points may be deducted from that week's score. Conversely, if your response and reaction in a given week are particularly exceptional, the instructor may award an additional 0.1 point for that week, for a *maximum possible total of 24.8 points (A+/A)* for the take-home component.

4. Oral Examinations. The oral exams are designed to help you think and speak philosophically about the topics we explore in this course—to articulate your own views as philosophers while engaging closely with the course material. Their purpose is twofold:

- (1) To articulate your reasoning clearly and reflectively in response to philosophical questions about knowledge, truth, self, mind, and morality.
- (2) To practice raising your own questions, exploring ideas in dialogue, and defending your views in conversation.

Each exam will take the form of a 15-minute, open-ended philosophical discussion. You will prepare two questions of your own based on the assigned material. You will also be asked one of the take-home prompts and will be expected to present a clear line of argumentation, accurately explain the author's position, and articulate your own critical response. The goal is not to recite information, but to think critically, speak clearly, and respond thoughtfully—and to ensure that your take-home assignments reflect your own understanding and engagement rather than the use of AI.

Passing the oral exam requires active and sincere engagement with the readings and ideas. You may be asked to explain or expand upon your weekly discussion posts. While discussion with the instructor is encouraged, asking what the instructor personally thinks about the material does not count as one of your prepared questions.

You must complete the first oral exam between Weeks 1–4 and the second oral exam between Week 5 and Finals Week. Both exams *will be graded Pass/Fail based on the depth of reflection (a pass on each exam earns 10 points; a fail earns 0 points)*, clarity of reasoning, and quality of engagement in conversation.

5. Final Paper. You will write a short paper (approximately 1,200-1500 words) defending an original philosophical thesis related to the course material. By default, this paper should develop and expand one of your take-home assignments into a full-length essay. The assignment also

requires you to complete a scaffolding exercise and to meet with the instructor to discuss your plan for the paper. This assignment is worth a total of 15 points.

Honor code

The Stanford Honor Code was composed by students in 1921, and expresses the university's expectations for academic integrity. Please read it [here](#). Together with the Fundamental Standard, these documents lay out the rights and responsibilities of Stanford students, in particular with regard to their academic behavior. Some key points:

- Students cannot submit the same written work for different classes.
- Plagiarism (copying passages from other people's work without attribution) is prohibited.
- Having someone else complete an assignment for you is prohibited.

Course privacy statement

As noted in the University's recording and broadcasting courses policy, students may not audio or video record class meetings without permission from the instructor (and guest speakers, when applicable). These policies protect the privacy rights of instructors and students, and the intellectual property and other rights of the university. Students who need further accommodations should contact the [Office of Accessible Education](#) (OAE).

Students with Documented Disabilities

If you have an OAE accommodation, please email your TA and CC me. If you need accommodations for any of your assignments, let your TA know since they are grading your material. Students who may need academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the OAE. Professional staff will evaluate the request, review appropriate medical documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. The letter will indicate how long it is to be in effect. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk.

Confidential Support Team (CST)

The CST offers free, confidential support to students impacted by sexual assault, relationship violence, and sexual or gender-based harassment and discrimination. Book an appointment online through the Vaden portal, or call (650) 736-6933. For non-life-threatening assistance, their 24/7 hotline is available at (650) 725 9955. Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS): CAPS provides counseling and psychological services to students. You can make an appointment online, or call (650) 723-3785.

Hume Center for Writing and Speaking

The Hume Center provides one-on-one writing help, including tutoring tailored to writing in philosophy. Email: humecenter@stanford.edu.

The Summer Academic Resource Center

The Summer Academic Resource Center offers academic support services to visiting and matriculated Stanford students enrolled in Stanford's Summer Quarter. The Summer Tutor Program offers free tutoring and academic skills coaching, and Academic Advising offers free assistance with course selection and requirements, etc. Visit:

<https://summer.stanford.edu/courses/academic-support>

Course Schedule [some readings are subject to change]

Part I: Knowledge and Truth

Week 1

1. Descartes, *Meditation I*
De Cruz, "That Sudden Surprise of the Soul"
2. David Hume: excerpt from *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Part I of section IV and Part II).
Nelson Goodman, "The New Riddle of Induction"

Week 2

1. Frankfurt, "On Bullshit"
Philosophy Bites, "Jonathan Webber on Deceiving with Words"
2. Rachel Fraser, "Epistemic FOMO" (<https://cambridgereview.cargo.site/Dr-Rachel-Fraser>)

Part II: The Mind and Self

Week 3

1. Descartes, *Meditation, II*
Bertrand Russell, "The Argument from Analogy for Other Minds"
2. Nick Bostrom, "The Simulation Argument"
Robert Nozick, "The Experience Machine"

Week 4

1. Thomas Nagel, "Brain Bisection and the Unity of Consciousness"
Egan, "Learning to Be Me" (short story)
Watch Black Mirror episode "San Junipero"
2. John Locke, "Of Identity and Diversity";

Thomas Reid, "Of Mr. Locke's Account of Our Personal Identity"
 Bernard Williams, "The Self and the Future"

Part III: Free Will and Moral Responsibility

Week 5

1. Michael McKenna and Derk Pereboom, "Free Will, Moral Responsibility, and Determinism"
2. Holbach, "The Illusion of Free Will"
 Watch "Arrival"

Week 6

1. van Inwagen, "The Powers of Rational Beings: Freedom of the Will"
2. Frankfurt, 'Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility'
 Thomas Nagel, "Moral Luck"

Part IV: Morality and Meaning in Life

Week 7

1. Julia Driver, "The History of Utilitarianism" (Intro and Sect. 2)
 John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism (Chapter 2 and Chapter 5)
 Ursula K. LeGuin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (short story)
2. Bernard Williams, "Against Utilitarianism"
 Onora O'Neill, "Kant: Rationality as Practical Reason"
 Onora O'Neil, "A Simplified Account of Kant's Ethics"

Week 8

1. Kurt Baier, "Egoism"
 Joel Feinberg, "Psychological Egoism"
2. David Benatar, "Meaning"
 Charlie Jane Anders, "As Good As New" (short story)