

Introduction to Philosophy: PHIL 100 (GEN ED)  
Scientific Thinking RAP  
Syllabus

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Office Hours: M/W 1:30-2:30

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T/TH 1-2:15  
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## Description

Scientific practice is aimed at expanding our understanding of the world, both of what is actual and what is possible. It is also aimed at expanding our control over the natural world, over ourselves, and over each other. In this class we will try to get a better grip on what scientific thinking is and what it should be by exploring some of the following questions:

- Do we have free will?
- What is the human mind and how does it work?
- What is science?
- What can we do with science?
- What should we do with science?
- What is a good life?
- What is the meaning of life?

We'll get at these kinds of questions by means of philosophical writings, science fiction literature, and film, allowing both rigorous argumentation and written and visual storytelling to provide the fuel for a discussion-based community-learning environment where together we discover the philosophical foundations for scientific knowledge.

As a 4-credit course, the expected amount of work outside of classroom time by university standards is 8-12 hours per week (which includes reading, taking notes, preparing for class, and working on essays and your project).

## Objectives

The goals of this course are to empower you to:

- Identify, properly interpret, and evaluate the philosophical views and arguments of a variety of philosophers and writers on the topics of the course.
- Engage in reflective and respectful discussion with your peers, especially in situations in which you may disagree.
- Reflect meaningfully on the relevance of what you've read and discussed for living a fruitful and happy life.
- Develop your own answers to the questions we discuss, as well as an increased ability to communicate them and argue for them by written means.

I'll measure your progress in these objectives by recording your performance on the assignments mentioned below.

## RAP Components

Since this course is part of the Residential Academic Program (RAP), there are some unique goals that we will pursue as part of the course.

1. I will support you in your transition to college life by being available to talk about your undergraduate career, our class, or life in general.
2. I will introduce you to resources like the [Writing Center](#) and [Library Databases](#).
3. You will improve in inquiry and analysis, problem solving, and critical and creative thinking, skills that are prioritized in all Gen Ed courses and that form the valuable core of a liberal arts education.
4. We'll practice making connections between the class topics and life experience in order to deepen your understanding and the value of your education.
5. I will provide you with structured guidance in developing the skills you need to be successful in college and beyond.

Also, as part of the RAP you will attend a general well-being event (with details and date options to be provided).

## Communication

I will be available to contact via email every weekday before 5pm and will endeavor to respond to an email within 48 hours. To make sure your email is responded to in a timely manner, please put "PHIL 100" in the subject line.

If I email you, the email will be sent to your UMass email, so you should check that once per day on weekdays. If my email requires a response, please respond within 48 hours.

Communication in class and via email must always be respectful; I won't tolerate rude behavior, unnecessary vulgarity, or abuse of any kind (towards myself or any others). If you aren't sure what counts as any of those things, you should read the [UMass Guidelines for Classroom Civility and Respect](#). Students who engage in rude, vulgar, or abusive forms of communication in the classroom are subject to being asked to leave immediately, at my discretion.

Also if you're contacting me to ask a question about the course, an assignment, or something related, make sure to check the syllabus, Moodle, or the assignment instructions first! Communication doesn't just need to be about assignments, though. If you want to email me or come to office hours to talk about life or how your semester is going, you're welcome to.

## Texts

The following text is required.

*Exhalation*, Ted Chiang. Knopf, 2019. ISBN: 1101947888.

All other required readings will be made available via Moodle. All required readings must be brought to class on the day they are to be discussed so that class discussion can easily refer back to them.

## Assignments and Grading

Your grade for this course will be determined by your performance on a few short essays, a group presentation, a personal project, and regular reading responses. All assignments are to be double-spaced, with 12-pt font and 1-inch margins. Cite your sources, including class lectures or handouts. It doesn't matter to me what system of citation you use as long as it is clear and consistent. The reader must be able to tell the name of the cited author or speaker, the date of the publication or lecture, and the relevant page numbers (when applicable). This information could be in footnotes. It could be in a works cited section (say if you're using inline citations and don't want them to take up much space). If you are unsure how or whether to cite something, please ask me. Turn in all assignments as .pdf files on Moodle by 1:00pm (the start of class) on the due date. Grading rubrics for all assignments are available on Moodle, under "Instructions and Rubrics".

	SHORT ESSAY 1	15%
	SHORT ESSAY 2	20%
	SHORT ESSAY 3	25%
SHORT ESSAYS		
GROUP PRESENTATION		15%
WAY OF LIFE PROJECT		15%
SNT RESPONSES		10%

## Short Essays

There will be three short writing assignments in this class, which will grow progressively in both length and total worth to your final grade. The first assignment will summarize an argument and an objection to that argument. The second will summarize an argument, an objection to the argument, and a reply to the objection. The third will be a full paper, incorporating everything you did in the second essay but including an introduction and conclusion and allowing you to weigh in with your own appraisal of the topic. The first two papers will be produced in partnership with another student. The last paper will be produced on your own.

### Short Essay 1

**Length:** 500 words maximum (just under 2 pages double-spaced)

**Instructions:** Form student groups of two for this assignment. If there is an odd number of students in the class, one group may be given dispensation for a group of three, but will be given an extra portion of writing for their prompt. Summarize Mary Midgley’s argument against moral isolationism, from her paper “Trying Out One’s New Sword”, then give an objection to her argument.

**First part:** Start by stating Midgley’s conclusion, and then explain how she establishes it.<sup>1</sup> Present her argument in the most charitable way you can, even if you disagree with her conclusion. (“charitable” means presenting the argument in the best, most convincing light you can.) You need to explain the rationale behind each of the premises in Midgley’s argument, as well as how the conclusion is supposed to follow from the premises. Midgley’s article contains many small arguments. You do not need to explain them all. Just focus on the one that you think is the most powerful.

**Second part:** Give the best objection to Midgley’s argument that you can think of on behalf of the moral isolationist. Once again, present the objection in the most compelling way you can think of. You needn’t actually agree with the objection you present on behalf of the moral isolationist. Nothing in this short essay requires you to give your own view. It requires you to practice rehearsing what others who have certain points of view would likely say.

Include a short report at the end of the paper that clarifies which student did what work.

### Short Essay 2

**Length:** 750 words maximum (just under 3 pages double-spaced).

**Instructions:** Form student groups of two. If there is an odd number of students in the class, one group may be given dispensation for a group of three, but will be given an extra portion of writing for their prompt. Summarize Antony’s explanatory gap argument against physicalism. Give a compelling objection to her argument and discuss how Antony should best reply to the objection. Just focus on

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<sup>1</sup>You may use the argument we reconstructed together in class. (If you do, cite my handout or our class session.) If you don’t want to use it, you can either explain the argument in paragraphs or else create your own reconstruction. Only create your own reconstruction if you find a way to make ours better (more accurate, more precise, more charitable. . .); don’t just change it for the sake of changing it.

one argument, one objection, and one reply – the best or most compelling you can come up with.

**First part:** Start by summarizing and explaining Antony's conclusion and the argument she gives for it. You might want to use a reconstruction from class.

**Second part:** Discuss what you take to be the best objection to the argument you discussed above, either from the readings, class discussion, or your own thoughts. (Note: something can be the best response, but still turn out to fail.)

**Third part:** Discuss how Antony should reply to the objection, either from the readings, class discussion, or your own thoughts.

Include a short report at the end of the paper that clarifies which student did what work.

### Short Essay 3

**Length:** 1,000 words maximum (about 3.5 pages). This will be a complete, short philosophy paper.

**Instructions:** Choose one philosophical article from the syllabus that was not already summarized in a short essay. Summarize the author's main argument in the article. Provide an objection to the argument and discuss how the author should best reply to the argument. Just focus on one argument, one objection, and one reply – the best or most compelling you can come up with. Include an introduction and conclusion.

**First part:** Start by summarizing and explaining the thesis from your chosen article and the argument for it. (About 1 page)

**Second part:** Discuss what you take to be the best objection to the argument you discussed above, either from the readings, class discussion, or your own thoughts. (about 1 page)

**Third part:** Discuss how the author should reply to the objection, either from the readings, class discussion, or your own thoughts. (about  $\frac{1}{2}$  page)

**Fourth Part:** Assess for yourself: who is right? Does the objection succeed, or is the author's reply good? Write this up as a conclusion to the paper. After you have written up parts 1-4 and figured out what you will argue for, add an introduction to the beginning of your paper, setting out what will be discussed and what conclusion you will draw (i.e. your thesis).

### Way of Life Project

During week 9 of the semester, you'll be required to participate in a "Way of Life" project. During this week-long project, you'll take on some practices common to those for whom philosophy was a way of life (Stoics, Confucianists, Sceptics, and Existentialists are some examples). There will be some temporary changes in diet, sleep, and how you spend your waking hours, including an increased amount of time each day spent in meditative reflection.

During morning reflections, you will first practice breathing and reflecting on any fears, anxieties, and distractions you carry with you from the previous day. Next, you will respond to the given prompt of the morning (on Moodle), which will ask you to read something or watch something and reflect on a relevant philosophical issue. During evening reflections, you will first reflect on your day, the ups and downs, the emotions and thoughts it prompted, and where you struggled to follow the rules of the Way of Life project.

These reflection entries will be made each morning and evening on Moodle during the seven days of the project. Your entries should be the culmination of time spent thoughtfully considering and reflecting on passages from various videos and philosophical writings that emphasize important themes in the course. As such, for each prompt, you should spend significant time in silent reflection on the meaning of the prompt, how it applies to your own life, how it challenges you, and what ideas it brings up. During your reflection, you should not have any distracting media in view.

It will be hard at first to just sit and reflect. You should do this, though. First, because it is good for you. Second, because it will help you better internalize the themes of the course, which include humanity, thought, knowledge, emotion, meaningfulness, faith, wisdom, and philosophy (of course!). Once you are done with your reflection, you'll write a summary of your thoughts during your reflection time. These entries will require you to integrate the ideas of the course in a meaningful way with your own conception of yourself and your life. They will measure your commitment to this kind of integrative reflection.

In addition to the reflection journal you will keep, you will be required to follow these Way of Life rules during the seven days of the project:

### **Food plan**

This is a strictly vegetarian diet, so no meat is allowed. I strongly encourage you to also eliminate most sugar, fried foods, added salt, additives (including artificial sweeteners). This plan also eliminates soda and alcohol. Focus on drinking pure water, fruit juices, vegetable juices, or milk. You may drink coffee or tea if necessary. Focus on eating fruits, vegetables, legumes, whole grains and cereals, and nuts (peanuts, almonds, etc.). You may eat eggs and dairy products. You may also eat fish. NOTE: Vegetarian eating does *not* equal eating only salads. Since you need protein to supplement not eating meat, here are some ideas of good sources of protein: peanut butter, almond butter, various nuts (almonds, peanuts [non-salted of course], cashews, etc.), kefir, cheese, protein bars/shakes, cottage cheese, eggs, etc. Use Google if you need to get ideas for protein snacks or vegetarian meals (if you cook your own meals). Also, eating smaller meals throughout the day or snacking on nuts every two hours will help with the cravings. Drinking lots of water and staying hydrated will also help with food cravings. To give you some examples and ideas: a lunch might be 10-15 baby carrots with some crunchy peanut butter, a serving of fruit, and a hard-boiled egg. You can snack on almonds and peanuts throughout the day. I have a few scrambled eggs with cheese in the morning for breakfast. I drink a protein shake after I exercise at the gym.

### **Mealtime requirements**

You may talk while you eat, but do nothing else (e.g., don't watch TV, read, use your phone). In fact, when eating with friends, encourage them to all put their phones away. Or encourage them to join you

in the project in terms of rule-following!

### **Tobacco/Drugs**

Use of tobacco, marijuana, or other drugs is not allowed. However, if cutting out tobacco use is a hindrance to fully participating in this experience, then please speak to me about this privately and we can alter the rules of the project for you.

### **Modified silence**

On Thursday, November 07, observe modified silence. That is, speak only when necessary and when you speak be aware that you are speaking and that it is necessary to speak.

### **Truth telling**

Tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, all the time. This certainly includes being straight with me about how your experience is going. This does not mean, however, that I am asking you for full disclosure in your nightly reflections. For example, if you had a romantic encounter before your nightly reflection, there's no need to tell me about it. I have no interest!

### **Sleep**

You must get at least 6 hours of sleep every night.

### **TV and Video/Computer Games**

Avoid TV and Video/Computer Games. If you cannot eliminate them entirely, you must limit non-necessary screen time to 1 hour each day maximum. Don't be a pedantic philosopher about what counts as "necessary". You know. You cannot save up unused time for use another day. No "roll-over" minutes!

### **Social Media**

No social media use (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, Snapchat, Tinder, dating apps, etc.) whatsoever. Log out from all your accounts. Further, you must delete all social media-related apps off your phone for the course of the project. Pay particular attention to how many times you find yourself grabbing your phone to open an app that no longer exists. You can only check email on your computer.

### **Internet**

Use the internet for non-academic/non-employment related purposes no more than 1/2 hour per day. You cannot build up unused hours.

### **Cell phones**

Use cell phones only for necessary purposes. For example, almost all instances of texting are unnecessary. I would encourage you to shut down your phone or leave your phone back in your room as often as possible to minimize temptation.

## **Group Presentation**

You'll complete a group project by the end of the semester, in groups of 3-4. This will require you to assemble a group, find a question in philosophy that interests you, compile some relevant background on the question, and survey some of the philosophical arguments that attempt to answer the question.

Group members will then prepare a 10-12 minute presentation on the topic explaining the question and analyzing one compelling argument on each side. Groups will present during finals week during a pre-scheduled time.

**First Part:** Get together in groups of 3-4. Choose a topic or question in philosophy that is not directly covered in this class. Some example questions include:

- “What is the difference between science and pseudoscience?”
- “What is objectivity?” or “Can objectivity be achieved in science?”
- “Can I know I’m not a brain in a vat?”
- “Is there a God?”
- “Is the physical world all there is?”

You might look at the online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy or use the library databases Philpapers or Philosopher’s Index to find ideas for topics. You could also look up syllabi for Introduction to Philosophy courses at other schools. (Make sure they are taught in a philosophy department.) Your topic must be one that has been discussed by philosophers in order to complete the assignment, so you may want to look in some philosophy journals before settling on a topic.

**Second Part:** Talk to me to discuss your plans once you have some ideas. We will set aside some time in class to think about topics and discuss them together, but you’ll also need to spend time together outside of class working on your topic and your research and presentation of the material. After you have formed your groups, you’ll have two weeks to settle on a topic and begin your research.

**Third Part:** Together with your group, produce a twelve-minute presentation on your topic. This should include:

- Some background information on the issue (e.g. the philosophical history, relevant empirical or legal information, or any other non-philosophical material that would help the audience’s facility with the topic). This should be drawn from reputable sources (i.e. not tabloids), and you should provide the citations on your handout or powerpoint slides. (1-2 mins). (If you have questions about whether your sources are appropriate, ask me.)
- Some philosophical discussion of the arguments on each side. Find at least two compelling philosophical arguments, one on each side of the issue, and summarize them. Present them in the most charitable way you can. (4-5 mins per argument)
- Make sure the articles you are researching make arguments. You should be discussing at least one compelling argument on each side — you do not need to summarize the entire article.
- Mention and respond to any obvious objections. Since you only have a few minutes, this does not need to be absolutely comprehensive if time doesn’t permit.
- A final conclusion: which argument is the best? Which side is right? (final 2-3 min) If not all group members agree on the right conclusion to draw, the presentation can make note of that – so don’t let disagreement hold you back in choosing a topic.

**Fourth Part:** For your presentation, make either a handout or a powerpoint summarizing your main points and citing your sources. This will be the only written documentation required for this project. Your classmates should be able to use it to find the articles you read and any other sources you relied on. Imagine that you are compiling this research for a newspaper article or radio report. Your goal is to introduce a contemporary question – and the case for each side – to a general audience, perhaps consisting of college students like yourselves. You can even involve them in the presentation, say by asking questions of the audience. You want to present the arguments on both sides so that your audience can make up their own minds. But at the end, you will also tell them what conclusion you have come to. All group members will receive the same grade. When submitting your powerpoint or handout for evaluation, include a statement about which group members did what work.

## Socratic Note Taking Responses

The purpose of these assignments is to help you read articles more effectively, and to provide accountability for completing the readings. “Socratic Note Taking” is named after the philosopher Socrates, who famously taught by asking questions.<sup>2</sup> In these notes you will write questions as you read. Think of it as a reading quiz that you create yourself, along with an answer key. These assignments will also help you create a detailed set of notes on the papers for which you complete them.

Instructions: SNT responses will follow a standard format. Create a page with three columns: a page number column, a question (that you write) column, and an answer (that you also write) column. You should record 2-3 questions for every 5 full pages of reading assigned, up to a maximum of 10 questions. So, for 1-9 pages of reading, 2-3 questions are required. For 10-14 pages, 4-6 questions are required. For 15-19, 6-9. For 20-25, 8-10. For anything above 25 pages, 10 full questions. Questions should be one sentence (or not much more), and answers should be 1-3 sentences. (Break it down into more than one question if you find you can’t answer in 3 sentences or so.) These are meant to be expository questions – questions about what the text is saying – rather than objections or comments. For a philosophical text, expository questions can be about the author’s thesis, about her argument(s) for it, about the reasons for premise(s) in an argument, or just about how to understand something that is said in some specific passage. For a fictional text, expository questions can be about how best to understand the events or states-of-affairs in the story, how to interpret their significance, or about the author’s goals in introducing certain themes or ideas. As with all other writing assignments, these should be your work only. Don’t consult other students or the internet for help. Upload your response on Moodle on the day that we discuss the relevant reading. Here is an example:

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<sup>2</sup>This assignment was inspired by Walker, Trafimow, and Bronstein [2017] “The Socratic Note Taking Technique”, *Teaching Philosophy* 40 (3):341-365.

Page number	Question	Answer
2	What are the three major conceptions of well-being?	The first is hedonism. The second is the desire-based theory. The third comes from objective list theory.
3	What are two examples of the conditions of human flourishing, from Nussbaum's "capabilities approach"?	One example is bodily health. Another is practical reason.
3	What does the author mean by an "objective" theory, as opposed to a "subjective" theory?	An objective theory is one on which the same factors count for well-being for all people. A subjective theory says that different things may contribute to well-being for different people.

## Attendance & Participation

Attendance for the course is mandatory. The well-functioning of our classroom environment depends on students studying the material, showing up, and being active and enthusiastic participants in class discussion. Your ideas, questions, and interactions with your classmates are crucial, both for your education and for theirs.

Every unexcused absence beyond the first two will reduce your overall grade by 2%. So, if you have 7 unexcused absences your maximum grade will be 90% in the course. Excuses will be granted for students who alert me ahead of time by email or word of mouth; only for health reasons, school functions, family emergencies, or religious reasons; and only with official documentation when appropriate. Exceptions may be made for last minute emergencies.

Participation involves not just showing up, but being a prepared and active member of class. That means studying the reading ahead of time, showing up on time, paying attention, answering and asking questions, and allowing for others to do the same. An ideal classroom has a balance between participants, so that voices are heard fairly equally. This means if you tend to be more quiet you need to endeavor to say more, and if you tend to be more of a talker you should probably try to listen more and ask questions of other students. Additionally, if you fail to be an active participant in your group papers and group project, this will be reported to me and your final grade will suffer as a result.

## Late Work

Turn things in on time. The penalty for late assignments is one third of a letter grade per day. For example, an assignment that would've been an A, if handed in one day late would instead be given an A-. If handed in two days late it would instead be given a B+. I will not accept late Group Presentations or SNT responses unless there is a verifiable emergency. Work is to be submitted on Moodle on the day it is due before the start of class. Work will be considered one day late if it is to me between any time in the 24 hours after the due date, two days late if to me between 24-48 hours of the due date, and so on.

## Extensions

I am happy to grant extensions on assignments for a variety of reasons if you communicate with me ahead of time. Think of your essays as projects, and of me as your project manager. I'm trying to help you manage your time and resources to do well on your projects, and the only way I can do that is if you are communicating with me.

## Technology

I have a Partial No-Screen Policy and a Full No-Cell-Phone Policy in class. That means (1) I never want to see a cell-phone out during class, and (2) sometimes I won't want to see any screens out, but other times it'll be fine (most often during discussions, if people are doing research, or if we're planning something).

During periods when the No-Screen Policy is active, notes should be taken by hand. If justification is wanted, laptops, phones, and tablets [distract people](#), they [detract from face-to-face connection and empathy](#), and they [worsen your retention of information compared to hand-writing notes](#). I personally find them distracting, and I like to look people in the face when I'm talking to them, so that's the main reason for these policies.

If any student has a disability that makes it such that the Partial No-Screen Policy or the Full No-Cell-Phone Policy are detrimental to their ability to function well in the classroom, please email me or come to me privately. I'll lift the ban for the whole class in that case.

## Academic Dishonesty

Don't plagiarize. I'll know if you do, and you will receive a 0 on the assignment (and possibly fail the course). It's also immoral and you'll be worse off as a person if you do it. You are responsible for knowing what plagiarism is. If you aren't sure whether something counts as plagiarism, ask me. Simple cases are things like copying words or ideas from others, using a paper (or section of a paper) you wrote for another class, or helping anyone else do any of those kinds of things. You can research our school's stance on plagiarism and related issues here:

<http://www.umass.edu/honesty/>

<http://www.umass.edu/writingprogram/geninfo/plagiarism.html>

## Students with Disabilities

If you desire accommodations for this class on the basis of physical, learning, psychological or emotional disability, you should contact Disability Services. Disability Services is located at:

161 Whitmore  
181 Presidents Drive  
University of Massachusetts  
Amherst, MA 01003-9313

It can be reached by calling 413.545.0892. Visit <https://www.umass.edu/disability/students> for more information. Make sure to plan ahead if you are going to ask for adjustments to assignment requirements.

## **Tentative Course Schedule**

Our course lasts for 26 days over 13 weeks (give or take). On the following page you will find a schedule of how—tentatively—the readings and assignments will break down over those weeks. All readings will be made available on Moodle and each one should be finished *before* attending the associated class that day.

Dates	Unit	Reading Due	Assignments Due
09/03	1—Philosophy		
09/05	2—Morality	“Trying Out One’s New Sword,” Midgley (1981);	SNT 1
09/10	3—Freedom	“What’s Expected of Us,” and “Story of Your Life,” Chiang	
09/12		“Actions, Predictions, and Books of Life,” Goldman (1968)	SNT 2 Form Essay 1 Groups
09/17		“Does Libertarian Freedom Require Alternate Possibilities?” Zagzebski (2000)	SNT 3
09/19			Form Presentation Groups
09/24	4—The Mind	“Exhalation,” Chiang	
09/26		“The Mental and the Physical,” Antony (2009)	Essay 1 SNT 4
10/01		“We are Living in a Material World (and I am a Material Girl),” Díaz-León (2008)	SNT 5
10/03			
10/08	5—Time Travel	“The Merchant and the Alchemist’s Gate,” Chiang	Form Essay 2 Groups Bring laptops for survey
10/10		“The Paradoxes of Time Travel,” Lewis (1976)	SNT 6
10/17		“Nowhere Man: Time Travel and Spatial Location”, Bernstein (2015)	SNT 7 Presentation Topics
10/22			
10/24	6—Technology	“The Truth of Fact, the Truth of Feeling”, Chiang	
10/29		“Too Much of a Good Thing? Enhancement and the Burden of Self-Determination,” Nagel (2010)	SNT 8 Essay 2
10/31		“ <i>Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind</i> and the Morality of Memory,” Grau (2006)	SNT 9 Presentation Sources
11/05			Begin Way of Life Project
11/07	7—God	“Omphalos,” Chiang	
11/12		“Skeptical Theism and the Paradox of Evil,” Oliveira (2019)	SNT 10 Finish Way of Life Project
11/14		“From a Cosmic Fine-Tuner to a Perfect Being,” Mooney (2019)	SNT 11
11/19			
11/21	8—Meaning	“Anxiety is the Dizziness of Freedom,” Chiang	
12/03		“Meaningfulness: A Third Dimension of the Good Life”, Wolf (2016)	SNT 12
12/05		“Living Life over Again”, Blumenfeld (2009)	SNT 13
12/10			
12/17			Essay 3