Belief and Reality: Syllabus

Philosophy 240
TR 2:00-3:15
Spring 2012

Professor:
Michael O’Rourke, Morrill 411, 885-5997 or 885-7107, morourke@uidaho.edu,
http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/~morourke
Office hours: 12:30-1:30 W and R, or by appointment

Teaching Assistant:
Susan Thomas, susanethomas@juno.com

Class Meetings:
We will meet in Nicolls 301

Texts:
All of the texts will be available either on-line or through e-reserve, located here:
http://db.lib.uidaho.edu/ereserve/show_course.php?pointer=3371. I will occasionally make
recommendations for further reading that could be helpful for paper research.
Lecture notes, handouts, and sample essays will be available at the course website, which can
be accessed from my homepage. This website also contains links to philosophy resources and
other philosophical sites of interest located on the web.

Whose Belief? What Reality?

In a typical introductory course to philosophy, you spend time poring over works in three
areas: ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics. At the UI, we’ve split this course into two, one
devoted to ethics (and aptly called “Ethics”), and the other devoted to epistemology and
metaphysics. The “other” course is the one you are now in, and you will be studying both
epistemology and metaphysics in here. We didn’t call it “Epistemology and Metaphysics”
because we didn’t think that any undergraduate in their right mind would take a class by that
name, but we believe that the name we’ve given it is apt nevertheless. After all, epistemology
is the study of knowledge and belief—hence “Belief”—and metaphysics is the study of
existence and reality—hence “Reality.”

A course in epistemology and metaphysics can go off in a large number of different directions.
Classic topics in epistemology include the nature of knowledge, the difference between belief
and knowledge, decision making under uncertainty, and skepticism; classic topics in metaphysics include the nature of deity (or the supernatural), the nature of causation and natural law, and the identity of the fundamental building blocks—or “furniture”—of the universe. We will focus our attention on several epistemological and metaphysical questions. Within epistemology, we will be primarily concerned with three questions about knowledge: What is it? Where does it come from? Do we have any? However, we will launch into this first by considering the topic of belief, and in particular, how our beliefs serve as a source of meaning in our lives.

Within metaphysics, we will concern ourselves with one topic: the self. Who are we? Can we know who we are? Am I in a better position than you are to know who I am? How are our minds related to our bodies? Do our souls live on beyond our bodies? Do we even have souls? When we act, do we act freely or are we constrained? Perhaps we aren’t the autonomous, creative, eternal creatures we’d like to think we are, but simply soft machines that will run until our batteries wind down. We look back at our high school yearbooks and point out ourselves to our friends, but how can we be sure that we are identical with the person in the picture? There is, after all, good reason to think that the body is different, so why believe that the person is the same? Conversely, is it ever possible for the same body to house more than one person? Just what do we mean by “same” anyway? These questions concern three general problems within the philosophy of the self: the mind/body problem, the problem of free will, and the problem of personal identity. Attention to these problems should provide us with a framework for thinking about who we are—a framework for thinking about the person you call “I”.

Finally, to answer the questions in the title of this section in another equally important way: your beliefs and our reality. I don’t want this class to be simply a study in what other people think or what I think. To be sure, I want you to be guided by what others have thought, but I want you to concentrate on developing your own thoughts about these issues. To this end, you will examine a variety of claims about the self, critically analyze them, and then select and defend those that seem correct to you. The currency of philosophical exchange is the argument, and I expect you to be contributing participants in the economy of ideas that we build and maintain in this classroom. Secondly, while it is true that each one of us will look inward this semester, we’ll begin with the assumption that the reality we’re exploring is an objective one. (This assumption is certainly open to debate, and I expect you to engage in that debate at various points.) That is, while you may be the principal investigator into who you are, the investigation is not limited to you alone. Philosophical discourse is a communal discourse, and we should make every effort to work together to investigate what each of us is as an individual.

Goals & Objectives:

My primary goal in this course is to make you wonder about what kind of thing you are and how you could know anything about it. To this end, I plan to accompany you through a number of seminal philosophical discussions of epistemological and metaphysical issues that surround the self. By semester’s end, you should be able to:
1. Recognize improvement in your writing, speaking, and critical thinking
2. Read and comprehend abstract theoretical discussions of conceptual issues
3. Identify, analyze, and criticize complicated arguments
4. Understand the nature of belief in relation to meaning and knowledge
5. Individuate the three problems of the self and comment on the variety of possible solutions
6. Recognize the importance of these issues to an understanding of who we are
7. Construct, develop, and defend your own philosophical views of these issues
8. Look at the person in the mirror whose teeth you’re brushing in a slightly deeper and more informed way

Lectures:

Lectures serve a purpose: they give you an opportunity to find out what someone else thought about the readings, most of which are hard and many of which lapse into tedium from time to time. I will lecture in here, but I want there to be an ample amount of discussion. I will attempt to lay out the principal argument of a reading and then I will open the floor to discussion. My lectures are informal, and I hope you will interrupt me with questions, comments, criticisms, challenges, etc. I would prefer to have you set the agenda for the discussion, but I am happy to help with that. We will have occasion to work together in groups from time to time.

Readings:

You won’t be asked to read much in this class—a little over 450 pages altogether—but what you will read is difficult. I would recommend skimming the readings first to get a feel for the topic and the nature of the argument and then reading the piece more closely, pen in hand. Print off the readings and number the paragraphs so that you can refer to them in any notes you take. Try to summarize each reading after you finish it. Concentrate in your summary on the arguments in the piece, i.e., the principal claims advanced and the reasoning adduced in support of them. And talk with me at any time about any question you have concerning the reading.

We will take up seven problems in turn: Meaning and Belief, the Nature of Knowledge, the Sources of Knowledge, Skepticism, the Mind/Body Problem, the Free Will Problem, and the Problem of Personal Identity. The readings assigned on these topics will be available on e-reserve. In addition to the readings, I will be crafting chunks of text from time to time for your review.

Requirements:

Class Participation: You will not be required to contribute to the discussions, but you will be expected to prepare by doing the readings and then you will be expected to attend class, remaining attentive and engaged while there. Furthermore, you will be expected to turn your
assignments in regularly and on time.

**Writing**: Aside from assiduously studying and reflecting on philosophical approaches to the mind, the body, and everything in between, your principal responsibility in this class is to write, and write you will. All told, there are 12 different writing assignments due in this class during the semester. They are divided as follows: 6 reading essays, 4 drafts of papers 4 to 5 pages in length, a journal of your thoughts on the readings, and an e-mail message.

**Reading Essays.** You will produce 6 reading essays over the course of the semester. These essays will be no more than two pages in length, and they will concern some argument or issue in the assigned reading. You should devote the first half of the essay to reconstruction of the argument or issue that is your focus and the second half to your comment. This comment can be critical in nature, but it need not be. For example, if you have selected an argument that you support, you could devote the second half of the essay to consideration of the argument’s implications. Prior to the first reading essay, you will work through the Critical Thinking Worksite for Belief & Reality, located at [http://www.class.uidaho.edu/crit_think/ctw-br](http://www.class.uidaho.edu/crit_think/ctw-br). This is a self-guided module on critical thinking and philosophical analysis that prepares you to write these essays. It shouldn’t take you more than a few hours (at most) to work through this, at the end of which you will write your first reading essay. Everyone’s first essay will be on the same topic; I will provide sample topics for reading essays 2 and 3, but after that you will need to select the subject of each essay. I have posted a sample reading essay to the Handouts page of the website; in addition, I will post to the Handouts page pdf copies of student essays that can serve as models. Reading essays are due at the beginning of class, and late papers will not be accepted. When you submit these, use your ID number and not your name, please. You can send drafts of these to me via email, but I want you to submit your final versions as hard copies in class.

**Essays.** The 4 to 6-page essays will be more substantial discussions of the topics we address in class. These essays are divided into two groups of two, with the second essay in each group being a rewrite of the first. The rewrite will be based on comments you receive from me on your first essay. The first essay you submit should not be your first draft. I will distribute a list of topics at least two weeks before the first paper in each group is due, but you are encouraged to select your own topic. (If you select your own topic, please bounce it off me before you begin writing.) Please talk about these papers with one another—the more comments and criticisms you receive, the better your paper will be. These are also due in class, and late papers will be accepted only in the event of a legitimate emergency or if you have a conflict that you notify me of in advance. Again, please use your ID number and not your name on these essays. Versions of these papers that you wish comment on can be submitted via email, but again, graded versions are to be submitted as hard copies in class.

**Journal.** The reading journal is something you will keep on your own at home. In a notebook or on your computer, please record your thoughts about each of the readings I assign (as well as other things, if you’d like). Don’t worry about depth or detail in these entries—I want you to
write down what you think about these readings, as well as what these readings make you think. (Don’t feel bound to words—if you think visually, then use images as well.) These need not be lengthy entries—a paragraph would do—but they should be thoughtful. In these entries, you might try to summarize the article and then comment on it, for example, or you might explore an idea that you came up with in the course of your reading. I would recommend using the journal to explore ideas that you might want to pursue at greater length in your reading essays or longer papers. I will collect these journals a couple of times over the course of the semester, giving you about a week’s notice before collection. My purpose in reviewing your journal is not criticism; rather, I am interested in hearing what you think and in making sure that you are doing the readings. If you do the assigned reading and keep the journal, you should get full credit for this part of the course.

**E-mail message.** The first assignment, due by midnight next Thursday (1/19), is to send me an e-mail message from the account you check most regularly. In this message, I want you to tell me why you took this course, what your positive and negative expectations are, and what you hope to gain from it. Also, please tell me your major (or what you think your major might be) and what experience with philosophy you have had, if any. Please put “Phil 240” in the subject line.

There will also be some in-class writing that will not be graded. This writing will be done in advance of some discussions as well as after some discussions. You learn philosophy by thinking about it, and you learn to think about it through writing.

**Recitation Section:** There will be one recitation section a week, to be led by Susan Thomas. These sections will be optional. In them, Susan will lead discussion on issues that we have raised in class, as well as other issues that are related and are of interest to the students in attendance. In addition, Susan will help students prepare essays, leading workshops in which students share ideas, arguments, and drafts with a view to improving the quality of their written work.

**Grading:**

The papers will be assigned letter grades. You must submit the first draft in order to receive credit for the second. The reading essays will be evaluated on a scale of 0 to 3, with “0” indicating no credit, “1” adequacy, and “2” high quality, and “3” excellence. At the end of the semester, I will drop your lowest score, add the points you’ve received on the remaining five essays, and then curve these totals to determine what grade you will earn for the reading essay component of this course. You should expect an “A” to be around 12, a “B” around 10.5 to 11, a “C” around 9.5 to 10, etc. There is a “Grading Scale” handout available on the Handouts page of the web that describes my grading approach in more detail. The e-mail assignment due next week will be worth two points and will be considered a part of your reading essay grade. The journal will be worth one point for each reading assignment. If you turn a journal in with an entry for each reading assigned up to that date, you will receive full credit. (Word to the
wise: do the readings and the journal entries along the way—do not wait until the last minute.) Finally, while the recitation sections will be optional, students who attend them will earn $\frac{1}{2}$ point of extra credit per meeting attended per week. These points will be factored in after reading essay and journal curves have been set.

The final grade will be determined as follows:

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**Accommodation for the Disabled:**

If there is anyone who has a disability that might affect performance or participation in this class, please let me know. I’ll do everything I can to be of assistance.

**Academic Integrity:**

It is the policy of the Department of Philosophy to refer all instances of suspected academic dishonesty to the Student Judicial Council. For more about academic integrity, visit and review the University of Idaho Academic Integrity website, located at [http://www.students.uidaho.edu/default.aspx?pid=45708](http://www.students.uidaho.edu/default.aspx?pid=45708).

**Incompletes:**

I do not give out incompletes unless there is a significant emergency. You must discuss this with me in advance of finals week.

**Tentative Schedule**