

Knowledge and Reality



Winter 2026

Section AB1

Wednesdays and Fridays, 10:00 am–11:20 pm, D 134

Section AB2

Wednesdays and Fridays, 1:00 pm–2:20 pm, K 155

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The University of the Fraser Valley is located on the unceded territory of the Stó:lō peoples. We gratefully acknowledge our ability to live and work on the traditional territory.

PHIL 120: Knowledge and Reality

Course Description

This course is an introduction to metaphysics and epistemology, two core branches of philosophy that tackle some of life's biggest and trickiest questions about the fundamental nature of existence and how we know what exists. Where did the universe come from? How do you distinguish truth from error? Does life have meaning? We will trace how influential philosophers have grappled with questions like these, tracing the shifts and turns in their answers across historical eras. Our journey starts in Ancient Greece, spans the Middle Ages through the Scientific Revolution, and comes to a close at the turn of the twentieth century, following the history of great ideas in the Western tradition from Hesiod to Nietzsche. We will cover a wide range of topics, including the following: mythology and reason, the distinction between appearance and reality, the two-worlds theory, essences and essentialism, arguments for and against the existence of God, skepticism about the external world and other minds, the limits of human understanding, and the question of whether objectivity exists.

Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of the course, students will be able to:

- Describe central metaphysical concepts (e.g., monism and dualism).
- Describe central epistemological concepts (e.g., belief and warrant).
- Explain how central metaphysical and epistemological concepts have developed in the history of philosophy.
- Assess competing metaphysical and epistemological theories (e.g., idealism vs. materialism and realism vs. anti-realism).
- Provide close readings of important philosophical arguments.
- Apply key philosophical concepts, theories, and arguments in conversation and writing.

Texts

All required readings will be made available free of charge on Brightspace.

Background Reading

If you are seeking supplementary texts to help you navigate the world of philosophy, there are many excellent resources available. Both the [Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) and the [Stanford Encyclopedia](#)

[of Philosophy](#) are free and reputable. Another valuable resource is the [Very Short Introductions](#) book series published by Oxford University Press. All three are written by experts for a general audience, making them ideal for students. They are a great place to get your bearings in philosophy.

Assessment	Attendance	10%
	Tests	90%

Attendance

Philosophy is best understood as a conversation with ideas past and present. In this class, we will join that conversation together. By attending, you will contribute to the exchange of ideas that will bring our exploration of knowledge, reality, and matters connected therewith to life. If you have perfect attendance, you will earn bonus points in recognition of your dedication to *philosophia*, the Greek term for the love of wisdom.

Tests

There will be four tests, one of which will be scheduled during the exam period. Your final grade will be calculated using your best three scores. This means that if your work has improved throughout the term, this will be reflected in your mark—or if you happen to have a bad day, you can rest assured that your mark can recover. The tests are non-cumulative.

Course Schedule

Unit	Date	Topic
	Jan. 7	Introduction to Metaphysics and Epistemology

Unit 1: The Ancient World		
1.1	Jan. 9	Of Gods and First Principles - Hesiod, <i>Theogony</i>, excerpt - Fragments of Thales
1.2	Jan 14	Heraclitus' Doctrine of Flux - Fragments of Heraclitus #1-44
1.3	Jan. 16	Heraclitus' Cosmology - Fragments of Heraclitus #45-113
1.4	Jan. 21	Plato and the Problem of Universals - Plato, <i>The Republic</i> - Book I, 327a-331d - Book V, 476a-480a - Book VI, 506d-511e
1.5	Jan. 23	Plato's Theory of Forms - Plato, <i>The Republic</i> - Book VII, 514a-519a
	Jan. 28	Test 1
1.6	Jan. 30	Aristotle's Theory of Substance - Aristotle, <i>Categories</i> - Aristotle, <i>Metaphysics</i> - Book IV, Sections 1-3

		○ Book VII, Sections 1-3
1.7	Feb. 4	Aristotle's Conception of Nature • Aristotle, <i>Physics</i> ○ Book I, Section 7 ○ Book II, Sections 1-3 ○ Book II, Sections 7-8 ○ Book III, Section 1 • Aristotle, <i>De Anima</i> ○ Book II, Sections 1-3

Unit 2: The Medieval World		
2.1	Feb. 6	Reason Meets Faith • Genesis 1-2
2.2	Feb. 11	Why Is There Something Rather Than Nothing? • Genesis 1-2 • Aristotle, <i>Physics</i> ○ Book VIII, Section 1 • Gaon, <i>Book of Doctrines and Beliefs</i>, excerpt
2.3	Feb. 13	The Divine Attributes • Aquinas, <i>Summa Theologica</i>, Part I, Question 25, Article 3, "The Power of God" • Avicenna, <i>On the Nature of God</i>, "God's Knowledge" • Julian of Norwich, <i>The Revelations of Divine Love</i>, excerpt
	Feb. 18	Reading Week
	Feb. 20	Reading Week
2.4	Feb. 25	God's Necessity, Eternity, and the Foreknowledge • Aquinas, <i>Summa Theologica</i>, Part I, Question 2, Article 3, "The Existence of God" • Avicenna, <i>On the Nature of God</i>, "The Necessity of God" • Boethius, <i>The Consolation of Philosophy</i>, excerpt

		Yahya ibn Adi, <i>Treatise on the Affirmation of the Nature of the Contingent</i>, excerpt
	Feb. 27	Test 2

Unit 3: The Early Modern World		
3.1	Mar. 4	The Scientific Revolution - Donne, Holy Sonnet XIV - Descartes, <i>Discourse on Method</i> - Part One
3.2	Mar. 6	Descartes' Skepticism - Descartes, <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i> - First Meditation
3.3	Mar. 11	Descartes' "I think; therefore, I am" - Descartes, <i>Discourse on Method</i> - Part Two - Descartes, <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i> - Second Meditation
3.4	Mar. 13	Descartes's Rationalism - Descartes, <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i> - Third Meditation - Fifth Meditation
3.5	Mar. 18	Locke's Empiricism - Locke, <i>An Essay Concerning Human Understanding</i> - The Epistle to the Reader - Book I, Chapter I - Book II, Chapter I, §§1-6 - Book II, Chapter II - Book II, Chapters VI-VII - Book II, Chapters IX-XII
3.6	Mar. 20	Locke on Primary and Secondary Qualities - Locke, <i>An Essay Concerning Human Understanding</i> - Book II, Chapter VIII

		○ Book II, Chapter XXIII, §§1-10
	Mar. 25	Test 3

Unit 4: The Modern World		
4.1	Mar. 27	The Death of God • Dostoyevsky, <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i>, "The Devil: Ivan Fyodorovich's Nightmare" • Nietzsche, <i>The Gay Science</i>, §§104 & 125
4.2	Apr. 1	Nietzsche's Overcoming of Nihilism • Nietzsche, <i>Thus Spoke Zarathustra</i> ○ Prologue
	Apr. 3	Good Friday
4.3	Apr. 8	Nietzsche and the Affirmation of Life • Nietzsche, <i>The Gay Science</i>, §§341 & 349 • Nietzsche, <i>Thus Spoke Zarathustra</i> ○ "The Three Metamorphoses" ○ "On the Teachers of Virtue" ○ "On the Hinterwordly" ○ "On the Despisers of the Body" ○ "On the Passions of Pleasure and Pain" ○ "On a Thousand and One Goals" ○ "On Self-Overcoming"
4.4	Apr. 10	Nietzsche's Perspectivism • Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense" • Nietzsche, <i>The Gay Science</i>, §354 • Nietzsche, <i>On the Genealogy of Morality</i>, §§11-12

Course Procedures and Policies

Professionalism

I require that students maintain a professional attitude. This entails completing all readings before each session, paying attention during lectures, participating in class discussions with meaningful interventions, completing in-class activities, arriving on time, not leaving early, and being respectful to the instructor and one's peers.

Email Communication

The subject line should include the course number and the nature of the inquiry. I do my best to respond within 2 workdays. If that timeframe has passed without a reply, feel free to reach out with a friendly reminder. Should it be an urgent matter, indicate so in the subject line. That way, I can prioritize getting back to you as soon as possible. Kindly note that UFV's Instructional Responsibilities Policy 46 states that "Instructors are not expected to respond to student emails on weekends or statutory holidays."

AI Use

In this course, students are strictly prohibited from using generative AI for any requirements. In alignment with UFV's Student Academic Misconduct Policy 70, it "shall be an offense knowingly to [...] submit academic work for assessment that was purchased or acquired from another source." This includes work created by generative AI tools.

Missed Tests

Should you miss a test, please contact me within 24 hours, if possible. If you are excused (for medical reasons, bereavement, etc., as determined on a case-by-case basis), you must reschedule through [Assessment Services](#).

Rewrites

While I admire the dedication to academic success that students show when they request a rewrite, I do not permit rewrites of any of the tests. It is inequitable to offer some students and not others the opportunity to improve their grades. The best way to succeed is to be engaged throughout the term. I encourage you to make use of my office hours throughout the term for any specific questions or concerns you may have regarding course material, learning outcomes, and requirements; I am here to help you! Just so you know, the [Academic Success Centre](#) and the [Library](#) also offer personalized support in the

form of [tutoring](#) and [consultation](#), [writing support tools](#), and [Citation Style Guides](#) to aid you in your studies. By taking advantage of all the resources available to you, you will be prepared for each requirement by its scheduled time.

Grade Grubbing

Grade grubbing is when a student requests, threatens, or pleads for a grade increase for no legitimate academic reason. Instances include asking or begging for a grade bump, seeking preferential treatment, disputing grades on subjective rather than objective criteria, and seeking to complete requirements long after they were scheduled or due. The course syllabus clearly articulates students' responsibilities in demonstrating learning outcomes through the listed requirements and policies regarding missed requirements. Furthermore, the grading scheme and rubrics will be made available on Brightspace. There will be no grade changes that are not rightfully earned.



"One might love both, but it is nevertheless a sacred duty to prefer the truth to one's friends."

— Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1096a