Concepts and Vocabulary

Section 1 Class Introduction:
What is Philosophy?

From the reading: Introduction to PHL 111

- **Philosophy**
  *The argumentative-based inquiry into the most fundamental and most abstract questions facing human beings; the quest for truth regarding ultimate matters, including the meaning of existence and how best to live a human life.*

  Philosophy can best be thought of as a unique “style of consciousness” that is distinct from ordinary or everyday consciousness, insofar as a philosophical consciousness is skeptical of the basic traditions and arrangements and values that tend to be taken for granted as normal and legitimate by “ordinary (or everyday) consciousness.”

- **God**
  *The supreme being who is “maximally great”*

  In many theological and religious traditions, God is often conceived as the “maximally great being” and this definition applies to the three major monotheistic religions. Theologians largely agree that a maximally great being would be:
  1. **Omnipresent**: being present everywhere at the same time;
  2. **Omnipotent**: having infinite or unlimited power;
  3. **Omniscient**: having complete or unlimited knowledge, perceiving all things;

- **Faith**
  *A feeling of trust or belief that is not based on proof, especially in religious or spiritual matters, where a higher power is understood to be in control.*

  Through faith, one might trust that God exists, even if his existence cannot be proven. Or through faith one might claim to have “special knowledge” of specific truths, revealed by God. Philosophers and theologians debate the question of how reliable knowledge is if it is derived through faith.

- **Knowledge**
  *The state of knowing or perceiving or believing what is true; it is often argued by philosophers that beliefs become “knowledge” if two requirements are met:*
  1. **The belief is true and;**
  2. **One is justified (has reliable evidence) for that belief.**

  Many philosophers distinguish between three types of knowledge:
1. **Knowledge-how**: the knowledge of how to do something, like knowing how to ride a bicycle.

2. **Knowledge-of**: the knowledge of knowing (or being acquainted with) someone or something. For ex. “I know who that student is.”

3. **Knowledge-that**: the knowledge of knowing that some fact or piece of information is true, like knowing that the Red Sox won the 2004 World Series.

- **Being**
  The fact or nature of existence as opposed to non-existence; the “process” of existing as opposed to the thing which exists (i.e., what is denoted by the verb “being” as opposed to what is denoted by the noun “being, when referring to a particular being (thing).

Being can be distinguished from “beings.” In other words, beings (like a person, a rock, an idea, or an animal) are things which exist, in distinction to *existence itself*, which is neither just another “being” (a thing) nor nothing.

- **Reality**
  A most abstract concept generally referring to the totality of whatever exists, independently of our experience or perception of what exists.

  “Reality” is often contrasted with “appearance,” because what appears or what is experienced is shaped by (perhaps even distorted by) the faculties and sense organs that are used to perceiv it. This introduces the highly philosophical question: what is reality like independent of or before it gets perceived.

- **Sense-experience**
  1. The experience had (for human) through the use of our senses and the knowledge gained from it, as opposed to knowledge gained purely from reasoning (like mathematical knowledge);
  2. The “data” (or information) that is presented to our 5 senses, as opposed to the object of perception as it exists in itself, prior to or independent of its being perceived.
  3. The objects of our sensual perceptions sometimes referred to as “sense-data.”

  There is a distinction between things as they are perceived and things as they exist on themselves. Philosophers will interrogate how reliable our perceptions are when it comes to describing reality.

- **Objective knowledge**
  Knowledge can be considered “objective” if it is not simply a matter of opinion or personal belief or subjective bias.

  Some “knowledge” is based on private, mental (i.e., subjective) perspectives, which are limited to that one individual (the “subject) who experiences them, and what is subjective differs among people. For example, the dumbbell that weighs 35 pounds will feel *subjectively light* to a body builder, but feel *subjectively heavy* to someone who doesn’t work out. A type of knowledge that can be known or accessed independent of subjective
feelings, can be described as “objective” insofar as that knowledge would not vary from one person to another.

- **Souls**
  
  *The part of a human being (or other creatures) that is distinct and separate from the body and is often thought to be capable of existing apart from the body and continuing to exist after the death of the body.*

  The soul has often been used to refer to the principle of life, feeling, thought, and action in humans.

- **Mind**
  
  *That part of the human being that is often considered to be distinct from the body, the part that reasons, thinks, feels, wills, judges, desires; the totality of consciousness.*

  Sometimes the concept of the “mind” is thought to be identical to that of the “soul,” with the exception that “mind” doesn’t carry the same spiritual or religious connotations. “Mind,” unlike “soul,” is not usually used to refer to that part of the human being that might continue to exist after the death of the body (though “mind” and “soul” are synonymous in other respects).

- **Freewill**
  
  *The capability of human beings to act on the basis of personal choice, such that our decisions and choices are not determined in advance by physical or divine forces; the philosophical doctrine that such a capability exists.*

  If physical matter (down to the level of atoms) behaves according to natural laws, and if human beings are made entirely of matter, then the feeling of free will may be just an illusion—meaning that every human choice or human action has been determined by physical or mechanical processes governed by natural laws. The doctrine that denies freewill is called determinism.

- **Morality**
  
  *The universal and most inviolable rules which govern and limit our behavior, especially the fundamental rules like the prohibition against killing and the commandment that we respect the rights of others.*

  Unlike the social customs that vary from society to society, the concept of “morality” is often used to refer to those principles of conduct that we apply to all people everywhere and expect them to obey. So a basic question of moral philosophy is: are morality principles nothing more than the socially accepted customs and norms of one particular society or are they “universal”? That is, does morality apply to all people in all places?

- **Relative**
  
  *Something which must considered or understood in relation to something else, not absolute or independent.*
With regard to truth, if it is “relative” then it is true only with regard to some particular perspective or position. For instance, the statement “the door is on the left side of the room” is only true relative to the direction one is facing in the classroom.

- **State**
  A political organization with a centralized government that maintains a monopoly on the legitimate use of force or violence within a certain geographical territory. General categories of state institutions include administrative bureaucracies, legal-penal codes, and military or religious organizations.

  Like most of the concepts here, there is no single or neutral definition of “the State.” The main difference between the concept of “State” and that of “government” is that “government” refers to a particular group of people who control the State at a given time, whereas the State is an organized political community. State power is employed through the government. Although States are immaterial and nonphysical social objects, the State is permanent, and this is different than governments which are temporary constructions and may be replaced through a political revolution.

- **Etymology**
  The study of the birth and development of a particular word, often delineating how the word’s meaning and form evolves and changes over time.

  Studying the etymology of a word is helpful in understanding its history, its important denotations and connotations, as well as the range of applicable meanings attached to it.

- **Nihilism**
  An extreme form of skepticism, regarding truth, meaning, and morality: the denial of an objective basis for these things, be them founded in science, religion, or concepts of human nature.

- **Buddhist philosophy**
  Having many variations, the religion and philosophy of Buddhism (the world’s 4th largest religion) takes as its goal the overcoming of suffering and the cycle of death and rebirth.

  Buddhist philosophy emphasizes that the desires to cling to impermanent states and impermanent things ultimately cause dukkha (suffering and pain) and keeps us caught in samsāra, the endless cycle of repeated rebirth, dukkha, and dying again. The way to liberation from this endless cycle is to achieve the state of nirvana.

- **Existential**
  An attitude or orientation to existence based on a sense of disorientation, confusion, or dread in the face of an apparently meaningless or absurd world.

  Many existential philosophers recognize in this attitude an honesty or “authenticity,” provided that one takes responsibility for their freedom and acts in accordance with it, being
capable of acting on their own terms in order to develop and realize their own values and desires—giving meaning to an otherwise meaningless existence.

- **Cynic philosophy**
  A school of thought originating in Ancient Greece, emphasizing that true happiness and virtue can be gained through rigorous training and by living in accordance with nature, rejecting all conventional desires for wealth, power, sex, and instead leading a simple life free from all possessions.
  The ancient philosopher Diogenes is the archetypal Cynic philosopher. He dedicated his life to self-sufficiency, austerity, and shamelessness. The name Cynic derives from Ancient Greek word kynikosm, meaning “dog-like.” There are a few reasons why the Cynics are so named:
  1. Because the cynics, like dogs, make a virtue of indifference to conventional behavior and forms of life; for instance, some cynics (like dogs) ate and make love in public, went barefoot, and sleep in tubs and at crossroads;
  2. The dog is a shameless animal, and likewise the cynic is without shame, not because he or she is beneath modesty, but superior to it;
  3. Just as the dog is a discriminating animal which can distinguish between its friends and enemies, so do the cynics recognize as friends those who are suited to philosophy, and treat them kindly, while those unfitted they drive away by barking at them.

- **Cosmopolitan**
  Etymologically, a “citizen of the world”; rejecting any state or national allegiance.
  The word was coined by Cynic philosopher Diogenes.

- **Polis**
  A Greek concept meaning “city,” the polis refers to the ancient Greek city-states which were sovereign and autonomous like states. But they were the size of cities, like classical Athens and its contemporaries.

- **Normality**
  The tendency of conforming to the norm; established sets of behaviors and ways of thinking, valuing, desiring, and judging, and living.
  “Normalization” then refers to social processes through which ideas and actions come to be seen as “normal” and become taken-for-granted or “natural” in everyday life.

- **Careerism**
  A 20th century expectation that freedom, happiness, and the ability to “make something of one’s self” depends primarily on whether they find a career.

- **Subjective**
  Refers to the perspectives or experiences which are limited to one individual (the “subject) who experiences them.
- **Hard Sciences**
  A colloquial term used to compare different scientific fields on the basis of their perceived methodological rigor, exactitude, and objectivity.

  Roughly speaking, the natural sciences (physics, astronomy, chemistry) are considered “hard,” whereas the social sciences (economics, political science, sociology, anthropology) are usually described as “soft.”

- **Argumentation**
  A process of reasoning involving a logically connected set of statements. These statements consist of premises (which function as evidence) and conclusions (which are statements derived from the premises).

  Philosophy proceeds through argumentation, which can be lengthy and complex. Arguments can be better or worse than other arguments; they can be valid or invalid, sound or unsound.

- **Premise**
  The statements in arguments that function as evidence for conclusions.

- **Conclusion**
  The statements in arguments that are derived from (logically based on) the premises in the arguments.

- **Syllogism**
  An argument-form consisting of only two premises and a conclusion.

- **Sound argument**
  An argument that is valid and has true premises.

- **Valid argument**
  An argument in which the conclusion necessarily follows from the premises.

  If an argument is valid, it would be impossible for the premises to be true and for the conclusion to be false at the same time.

- **Invalid argument**
  An argument in which the conclusion does not necessarily follow from the premises.

  An argument may be invalid even if the premises and conclusion are true statements. Validity and invalidity have to do with the structure of the reasoning exhibited by the argument, not the truth or falseness of the claims present in the arguments.

- **Logic**
  A sub-discipline of philosophy, which classifies different argument constructions, identifies common fallacies, and studies the logical forms that are common to all valid inferences.
Fallacies

Forms of reasoning that appear to be valid but are faulty.

For example, two common fallacy are the ad hominem fallacy and the straw man fallacy.
1. Ad hominem: a fallacy of discrediting an argument by attacking a person associated with the argument, instead of attacking the substance of the argument itself.
2. Straw man: a fallacy of an intentionally misrepresenting someone’s argument, because the misrepresentation is easier to defeat than an opponent's real argument.

Inference

The logical step of validly moving from a premise to a conclusion.

Opinion

A belief that is not backed up with evidence; an unsupported belief.

Personal defense mechanism

Regarding philosophy and argumentation, a psychological tactic used in order to insulate oneself from having to question their own beliefs (which can be unsettling) when one is confronted with evidence and arguments that contradict those beliefs.

Dismissing an argument that one disagrees with as “just someone’s opinion” is quite common in everyday discourse; because “an opinion” is just an unsupported belief, it doesn’t have to be thoughtfully considered, unlike an argument which has to be evaluated on the strength of its evidence and pattern of reasoning.

Critical thinking

The process of evaluating the “pattern of reasoning” exhibited by an argument and evaluating the reliability of evidence used in an argument.

An argument’s pattern of reasoning is the path it takes from its first premise to its conclusion. Critical thinking requires one that one:
1. Identify the reasons one has for believing what they do about some topic and;
2. Evaluate the reliability of the evidence one has for those reasons (are they good reasons or bad reasons?).

The human condition

The characteristics, key events and situations which compose the essence of human existence: such as birth, growth, emotionality, aspiration, conflict, and death.

The “human condition” is a very broad topic, analyzed from many perspectives, including those of religion, philosophy, history, art, literature, anthropology, and psychology. The philosophical investigation of the human condition often emphasizes two basic questions:
1. What is the meaning of human existence?
2. What is required for humans to live truly worthwhile lives?
• **The Divine Right of Kings**

_Sometimes referred to as “God’s Mandate,”_ divine right was a political and religious doctrine of governmental legitimacy, asserting that a monarch is subject to no earthly authority, deriving the right to rule directly from the will of God.

The principle of divine right was used to justify monarchical rule throughout the Middle Ages. Here, the king is not subject to the will of his people, nor the aristocracy, nor any other social force. Divine right implies that only God can judge an unjust king and that any attempt to depose, dethrone, or restrict his powers runs contrary to the will of God and may constitute a sacrilegious act.

• **Status quo**

_The existing state of affairs, especially regarding social or political arrangements; “the way things are.”_

Social and political movements are examples of times when the status quo might be challenged. Calling attention to the “status quo” is usually done from a position of critique, wherein the “normal state of affairs” is understood to be unjust.

• **(Existential) Contingency**

_The fact of something’s existence not being necessary; something not yet certain; a theme often taken up by existentialist philosophers, having to do with the enormous improbability of one’s own existence._

Some philosophers reflect on contingency like this: Given that a person’s non-existence was so much more likely than one’s existence, the very foundation of one’s existence is left as a needle-thin tower of improbability. One can begin by reflecting on the utter contingency of your being where you are _now_. Consider all the details which had to be just so simply in order for human beings to exist on this planet—the expansion rate of the universe, the balance of chemicals on the Earth, the cosmic rays penetrating the atmosphere to cause exactly the right mutations in earlier organisms, and so on. Then consider in addition all those precise coincidences needed for your parents to be born, to meet, to have children. Add to this all those improbable circumstances necessary for your being born—for exactly _that_ sperm cell to fertilize exactly _that_ egg, so that you and not one of your (countless) possible siblings were born. And, of course, pile on all the circumstances necessary for you to have come to where you are today, reading this—the influences of parents, friends, and teachers; the circumstances of education, employment, and affection.

How likely is that all of those factors came together in exactly the way they did? It is so absolutely and utterly unlikely, that our existence is placed on basis of utter improbability, of total contingency. And the extremes of this improbability are dizzying. There is absolutely no reason that there should have been such a ridiculous coincidence of events; but such a ridiculous coincidence is exactly what the existence of each of us rests upon.
• **Inexorable**  
*Impossible to stop or prevent, inescapable; unyielding, unalterable, not to be persuaded, moved, or affected by prayers or entreaties.*

One’s death, for instance, is inexorable.

• **Commodity (commodification)**  
*An economic good or service intended to be exchanged on a market, such that its value is determined to be nothing more and nothing less than its exchange value (the price to purchase it on a market).*

Commodification, then, refers to the process of transforming something not previously a commodity into one; the assignment of economic value to something not previously considered in economic terms. This includes things such as land, water, air, people.

• **Ordinary (everyday) consciousness**  
*The everyday attitude that takes for granted the acceptability and legitimacy of the world and the forms of life immediately in front of it.*

Ordinary consciousness accepts the existing social reality—the entirety of the world’s artificial arrangements—as normal, natural, valid, and preferable. Ordinary consciousness says: “this is just the way things are.” This very natural way of being adjusted to the world has to do with ready-made standing habits of mind: those mental predispositions and mental reflexes which carry you seamlessly, unquestioningly, through life.

• **Philosophical consciousness**  
*An attitude of radical questioning, which is quite skeptical of the supposed validity, naturalness, and acceptability of the immediate world on offer—the world in which one finds him or herself.*

At its best, this sort of consciousness desires an intervention into the world-inherited, in order for world-building. This requires that philosophical consciousness dismantle the resistance we all feel to making a personal and collective commitment to changing the world.

• **Mass extinction event**  
*A widespread and rapid decrease in the biodiversity on Earth, identified by sharp changes in the diversity and abundance of multicellular organisms.*

Mass extinction events occur when the rate of extinction increases with respect to the rate of speciation (formation of new species). Biologists are recognizing that we are now living through the sixth major mass extinction. Earth has witnessed five such events, when more than 75% of species disappeared from the planet. Paleontologists detect the occurrences of past mass extinctions events when species go missing from the global fossil record. Most of these events had something to do with rapid climate change
Studies have shown species are becoming extinct at a significantly faster rate than for millions of years before. The scientists found that a third of the thousands of species losing populations are not currently considered endangered and that up to 50% of all individual animals have been lost in recent decades. This major die-off in the biosphere is the consequences of habitat destruction, overhunting, toxic pollution, invasion by alien species and climate change.

- **Mass incarceration**
  *The rapid increase in the size of the United States’ prison population, which grew by an exorbitant 800% between 1970 and 2010, resulting in the U.S. having the largest prison population in the history of the world, and the highest per-capita incarceration rate among the world’s countries.*

  By disproportionately targeting black men through the War on Drugs and decimating communities of color, the U.S. criminal justice system functions as a contemporary system of racial control, even as it formally adheres to the principle of colorblindness.

- **Gilded Age**
  *The period in the late 19th century, from the 1870s to about 1900, which was an era of:*
  1. Rapid economic growth and industrialization and;
  2. Abject poverty and inequality, as the high concentration of wealth became more visible and contentious.

  Current economic realities in the United States are often compared with the level of wealth inequality during the gilded age. In 1897, the richest 4,000 families in the U.S. (representing less than 1% of the population) had about as much wealth as other 11.6 million families all together. By comparison, as of November 2017, the three richest individuals in the U.S. had as much wealth as the bottom half of the population. According to analyses of Federal Reserve data, by the end of 2017, the top 1% of Americans held 40% of the nation’s wealth.

- **Transnational Corporations**
  *Also known as a multinational corporations; corporate organizations which own or control production of goods or services in at least one country other than their home country; one proposed criteria for identifying a corporation as trans- or multinational is that it derives 25% or more of its revenue from out-of-home-country operations.*

  Most of the largest and most influential companies of the modern age are publicly traded multinational corporations. Often lacking ethical standards, these corporate entities tend to evade laws and leverage their own business agenda by funneling their capital into the political process, often as result of campaign contributions and other lobbying efforts. Thus, transitional corporations wield tremendous influence over the politics of otherwise sovereign nations. They are also associated with multinational tax havens and other tax avoidance activities.
• **Free Trade Agreements**

  *Economic agreements involving the cooperation between at least two countries to reduce trade barriers—import quotas and tariffs—and to increase trade of goods and services across national borders.*

Most Economists would probably agree on the benefits of free trade, which generate wealth by allowing the free flow of goods across international borders, without taxes and other such barriers. The pro-trade argument boasts that billions of people around the world have been lifted out of poverty by the combined power of capitalism and free trade. There are however many valid criticisms of free trade. Here are a few of those social, political, and economic critiques.

1. **Unemployment**: As corporations move their factories to other countries where labor is extremely cheap and unions non-existent, unemployment in the corporations home country sky-rockets. For instance, in 1993, President Clinton promised that NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) would create 200,000 American jobs in two years; instead, NAFTA has resulted in the loss of more than 680,000 jobs.

2. **Deindustrialization**: In the US, free trade is one of the primary reasons that the American economy has de-industrialized, resulting in the loss of almost 60,000 factories in our country and millions of good-paying jobs since 2001 (and far more since the 1970s, the height of American industry).

   The socially and economically decayed region in the U.S. that has been abandoned by corporate factory jobs is referred to as the “rustbelt.” Free trade incentivizes corporations (here in the US and elsewhere) to shut down operations and move work to low-wage countries where people are forced to work for pennies an hour.

3. **Mass Incarceration**: Free trade agreements and the resulting deindustrialization of the American economy increases “surplus labor” or “surplus populations” (populations of people who no longer have any productive role to play in the economy). In the US, we have seen that the solution to this problem has been to criminalize and incarcerate these populations: predominantly poor black men, former blue collar workers who were hit hardest by deindustrialization and subsequently trapped in an impoverished rustbelt. This criminalization has led to a massive increase in our prison population, which disproportionately incarcerates black males.

4. **Wealth inequality**: Free trade agreements are about much more than just buying and selling goods. These agreements boost the profits of large corporations and Wall Street. By threatening to offshore jobs, corporations are able to undercut worker rights and dismantle labor organizing as well as environmental, health, food, safety, and financial regulations.

5. **Corporate political power**: Free trade agreements threaten national sovereignty by giving foreign corporations the right to challenge, before international tribunals, any law that could reduce their “expected future profits.” These provisions allowed, as just one
example, Phillip Morris to sue Uruguay from its headquarters in Switzerland over the former’s laws designed to discourage children and pregnant women from smoking.