

# PHIL120 001 - Introduction to Critical Thinking

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Tuesdays and Thursdays 10AM to 1PM, BUCH B304

Meeting hours: on request.

## Course Description

Critical thinking is the ability to analyze discourse, formulate arguments, assess their quality, and articulate objections. Such an ability is of extreme importance in a variety of contexts: writing a paper, reflecting about the efficacy of a policy, and discussing a new business proposal during a meeting with one's colleagues are all situations in which critical thinking is crucial. Moreover, critical thinking is neutral with respect to topics. While the ability to solve differential equations is useless when it comes to writing a history paper and the ability to make up good rhymes is useless in doing geometry, critical thinking can be applied wherever rationality is the way to go, be it reasoning about metaphysics, politics, religion, or organizing cleaning duties with your roommates.

The aim of this course is to improve your capacity to exercise critical thinking. This makes the present course very different from what we might call "content-based" courses. The main goal of a course about early modern philosophy, medieval Japanese history, or brain science is to give you *information* about these topics. However, when it comes to critical thinking there is no amount of abstract theory that, once memorized, will automatically make you good at exercising the skill. Like for any other ability, to get good at critical thinking you have to *practice* it. Accordingly, this course will take a practice-based approach. Each class will focus on the close reading of one or more papers that we will analyze in detail together in order to identify and assess their argumentative structure.

The structure and content of this course are flexible. The provisional schedule gives students (usually) two readings per class, but we might decide to focus on only one paper that requires more attention or protract the discussion about two papers into the next class. I am happy to take your suggestions and feedback about what kind of activities you find most useful, what kind of topics you like to explore in practicing your critical thinking, and the like. What is important is that during the time we spend in the classroom you think hard and feel intellectually challenged.

## Learning Objectives

At the end of this course, you will have improved:

- your ability to identify and evaluate the arguments you are confronted with, even when they are presented in an unclear or confused way.
- your ability to see and assess the possible moves you can make in the context of a debate, evaluating what counts as a good or bad move and why.
- your ability to appraise and articulate what counts as evidence for or against any particular claim and to weigh the proposed evidence.
- your ability to formulate your own view on a topic and to defend it through rational argumentation.
- your ability to change your mind, adopt a novel view, or suspend your judgment in response to evidence and arguments.

### **Prerequisites**

None.

### **Required Texts**

All the readings will be accessible online through UBC credentials.

### **Assessment**

Participation: 20%

Participation will be assessed on the basis of student's engagement in class discussion and class activities.

Midterm: 40%

The midterm will be an in-person hand written exam. Students will be asked to analyze arguments and articulate objections, skills that they will extensively practice during class time (more info will be given once the course will have started).

Final: 40%

Final paper to submit in canvas (max 1500 words). Students will be asked to write a paper with a precise argumentative structure, possibly on one of the themes discussed throughout the course (more info will be given once the course will have started).

### **Tentative Schedule**

#### Week 1

May 14: intro to the course.

Some general considerations about debating and argumentation, class activities involving argumentation and debating. Reading and analyzing Mackie's "Evil and Omnipotence" (available online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2251467>).

May 16: reasoning about God

Reading and analyzing Morris' "Perfect Being Theology" (available online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2215055>), and Zappulli's "Unlimited Nature: A Shaivist Model of Divine Greatness" (available online: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11841-024-01005-1>).

## Week 2

May 21: reasoning about consciousness

Reading and analyzing Jackson's "What Mary Didn't Know" (available online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2026143>) and Nishida's "The Unsolved Issue of Consciousness" (available online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41426830>).

May 23: reasoning about consciousness (cont.)

Reading and analyzing Frankish's "Illusionism as a Theory of Consciousness" (available online: <https://philpapers.org/rec/FRAIAA-4>) and Garfield's "Illusionism and Givenness" (available online: <https://philpapers.org/rec/GARIAG-4>).

## Week 3

May 28: reasoning about the mind.

Reading and analyzing Clark and Chalmers "The Extended Mind" (available online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3328150>). Class exercises in preparation for the midterm.

May 30: midterm.

## Week 4

June 4: reasoning about metaphysics.

Reading and analyzing Quine's "On What There Is" (available online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20123117>) and van Inwagen "Meta-Ontology" (available online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20012842>).

June 6: reasoning about metaphysics cont.

Reading and analyzing Carnap' "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology" (available online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23932367>) and Abe's "The logic of absolute nothingness" (available online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44362093>).

## Week 5

June 11: reasoning about free will and moral responsibility.

Reading and analyzing Strawson "The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility" (available online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4320507>) and Frankfurt "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility" (available online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2023833>).

June 13: reasoning about agency beyond free will.

Reading and analyzing Bruya "The Rehabilitation of Spontaneity" (available online: <https://philarchive.org/rec/BRUTRO>).

## Week 6

June 18: reasoning about language and meaning.

Reading and analyzing Frege's "Sense and Reference" (available online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2181485>) and Russell's "On Denoting" (available online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2248381>)

June 20: reasoning about language and meaning (cont.)

Reading and analyzing Searle's "Proper names" (available online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2251108>) and Putnam's "Meaning and Reference" (available online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2025079>).

## **Policies**

Statement of UBC values and policies: UBC provides resources to support student learning and to maintain healthy lifestyles but recognizes that sometimes crises arise and so there are additional resources to access including those for survivors of sexual violence. UBC values respect for the person and ideas of all members of the academic community. Harassment and discrimination are not tolerated nor is suppression of academic freedom. UBC provides appropriate accommodation for students with disabilities and for religious observances. UBC values academic honesty and students are expected to acknowledge the ideas generated by others and to uphold the highest academic standards in all of their

actions. Details of the policies and how to access support are available on the UBC Senate website.

Accommodation: UBC Centre for Accessibility works with instructors to provide appropriate accommodation for students with disabilities. Please notify them of any needs for accommodation well in advance of due dates, and please feel free to discuss with me any way in which I can be of assistance.

Academic Integrity: Plagiarism will not be tolerated and will result in an automatic failure of the course, as well as possible further disciplinary action by the University. See <http://artsone.arts.ubc.ca/resources/ubc-plagiarism-policy/>. For the purposes of this course, use of ChatGPT and similar programs counts as plagiarism.