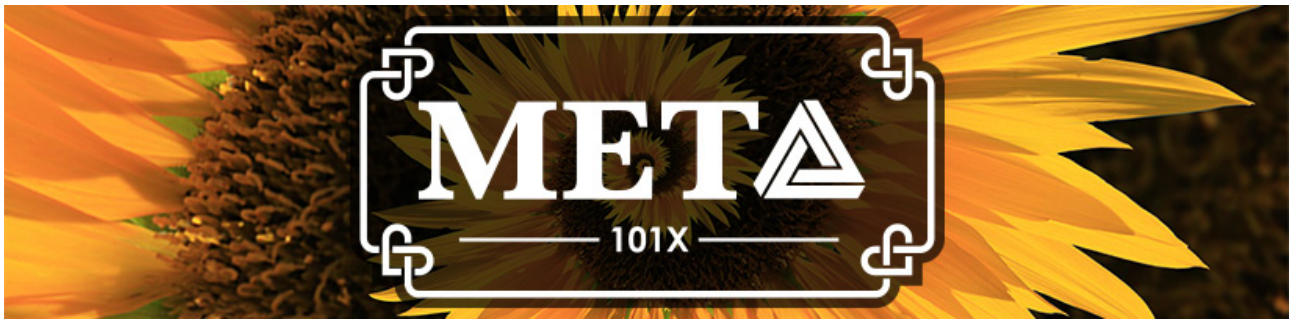

META101x: Philosophy and Critical Thinking

Welcome to META101x
META101x is a free online introductory course about Philosophical and Critical Thinking.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, you will be able to:

- think with clarity and rigour
- identify, analyse and construct cogent arguments
- think of solutions to the central problems of philosophy
- engage in philosophical conversations with others about topics that matter
-

Videos

Each module contains a number of short videos that illustrate and explore key ideas in philosophy. You can speed them up or slow them down as you prefer - our favourite is x3.5 chipmunk speed!

You can also view the videos in full screen or in high definition depending on the speed of your Internet connection. If you'd like to download videos to watch later on your mobile device, share with your friends, or present to your class, go right ahead! All of our content is available for use under a Creative Commons Attribution–ShareAlike License.

Text

Distilling complex ideas into 3 minutes is hard! That's why you'll find the concepts covered in each video are also explained in a lot more detail in the surrounding text. We'll cover how philosophers have addressed these big ideas throughout history and where the current 'state of the art' is at.

Don't worry if everything doesn't make sense first go - philosophical thinking is hard work! While the text is designed to be supplementary to the videos, it's very common to have to re-read and re-watch things before the concepts begin to sink in.

Discussion Forum

Philosophy isn't just a bunch of facts you can learn about passively - it's also a skill that requires active development. So you need to practise by thinking, analysing, and making your own arguments. This is what we'll be using the discussion forums for.

Each module will have a number of discussion threads on the key issues covered where you can join in, reflect on what's been covered, and challenge the ideas presented. These forums will be moderated to point you in the right direction (assuming there is a right direction) but a lot of learning comes simply from responding to others.

There are a few important ground rules you need to be aware of however.

- Challenge ideas, not people. It might seem like philosophers are a critical bunch - probably because they are. But philosophers challenge ideas, not the people holding those ideas.
- Keep an open mind. Philosophy questions assumptions, and sometimes these assumptions can be deeply held. Having your strongest held views challenged can be uncomfortable so it's important be open to new ideas.
- Give the benefit of doubt. Online discussions aren't as information rich as in-person ones because they lack many visual and aural clues like body language and tone. It's important therefore, to interpret others in the best light possible - philosophers call this the 'Principle of Charity'.

Assessment

You'll notice as you work your way through the course that you will be presented with a series of questions, polls and opportunities to discuss the issues in the course. The questions throughout the module are formative ones, which means they are not graded and you are allowed multiple attempts. Questions in quizzes at the end are graded and will count towards the final mark. Each of these quiz questions allows only one attempt, so read them well! There is no time limit so feel free to review the course material as you consider each question. The pass mark for the course is 65%.

For details of how you can earn a Verified Certificate, click here.

The Schedule

Module 1 - What part of "know" don't you understand?

We'll look at the intellectual tools we need to analyse the big issues in philosophy – understanding the nature and structure of arguments. We'll learn what makes an argument compelling, and how you can evaluate arguments to see if they are put together in a convincing way. We will develop this skill all through the course, by applying it across a range of philosophical topics with increasing sophistication. In each module we will be analysing and evaluating arguments.

We'll also look at the topic of knowledge through an examination of radical doubt. What *is* knowledge and how can we ever be free of doubt? We'll look at some of the ideas and arguments used to try and answer these questions, as well as understanding why this is important.

Module 2 - Self Knowledge

Here we learn about a logical structure called the conditional. We'll see how this is linked to the very important ideas of necessary and sufficient conditions. We'll also see how mistakes in using the conditional give rise to some very common logical errors of reasoning.

We'll then apply the distinction between necessary and sufficient conditions in thinking about the mind-body problem and the problem of identity. Is the body or brain necessary for the existence of the mind or to defining what makes someone the same person over time?

Module 3 - Is there any body out there?

We look here at the two main types of inductive reasoning - generalisations and analogies, and we'll see what can go wrong when we use these poorly.

Induction is the bread and butter of scientific inquiry. But there's a problem justifying inductive inferences. And because induction is hard to justify, it's unclear whether what we discover in science counts as knowledge. Induction is also intrinsic to the process of drawing causal connections on the basis of observations. What happens to causal reasoning if induction is problematic?

Module 4 – What should I believe?

We'll explore how we socially construct and verify knowledge. We'll see how working collectively and collaboratively can improve the confidence we have in knowledge claims, including overcoming our cognitive biases, and we'll look at how these social processes can be mapped onto the methodologies of science. We'll also explore what we mean by pseudoscience, developing some key characteristics we can use to spot flawed reasoning and practice. There is often a close connection between fallacious and biased reasoning and a failure to adhere to ethical norms. Bad ethics often leads to bad science, for example. Being an effective knowledge-making society depends on mutual trust and violating that trust puts at risk the validity of science.

A striking fact about human nature is that our behaviour is governed by norms and rules of our own making – norms about what words mean, norms of inference, norms of action or ethical norms. It's because of these norms that we can make mistakes – when, for example, we commit fallacies. But herein lies another philosophical puzzle. How, on any given occasion when you are trying to follow a rule, can you know which rule you are following? This question is harder than it looks, and it may be that no one person in isolation from everyone else could possibly answer it.