

Class Discussions (Community of Inquiry)

In this activity, we will engage in class discussion on philosophical topics decided upon by the students on the day of class. These topics can be anything whatsoever, so long as they have some connection to the course material. However, students should consider carefully when suggesting and voting on questions whether the questions will be productive in a class context.

Questions that rest on empirical matters – facts and evidence that can be tested and verified through observation and experimentation – can be difficult to make progress on in a class context, because there may be disagreement about the empirical evidence itself, or about how to interpret that evidence. In order to make progress on these questions, it is often necessary to have access to more information or to conduct further experimentation, which is generally not possible in a class setting.

On the other hand, if the question is a philosophical one, which involves the examination of abstract concepts and arguments rather than empirical facts, it is often possible to make progress in a class setting by using the tools of philosophy: critical thinking, logical reasoning, and argument analysis.

Participation in these discussions is central to the course and to student success.

The discussion will be student-led, with the professor participating as a member of the class. The professor will not intervene in the class's choice of question: it is wholly a matter for the students to decide. We will typically do two questions, one in the first half of class and one in the second.

Community Rules

To facilitate the discussion, we will use a method that emphasises critical thinking, collaborative inquiry, and the development of reasoning skills. This method involves posing open-ended questions, encouraging students to reflect on their own and others' ideas, and exploring multiple perspectives. It also involves helping students to express their ideas clearly and to listen carefully to the ideas of others.

During the discussion, it is important to remember that the purpose of debate and discussion in philosophy is not to win an argument, but to explore and examine different ideas in a respectful and open-minded way. Effective philosophical discussion requires that participants come prepared with their own views and ideas and are willing to listen to and consider the ideas of others. It also requires that participants be respectful of different perspectives and willing to engage in constructive dialogue.

Through these discussions we will develop a community of inquiry: a group of people who come together with the aim of engaging in critical and reflective thinking about a particular topic or issue. This type of community is characterised by a shared commitment to exploring and examining ideas, arguments, and perspectives in a collaborative and open-minded way.

To foster this environment, we need to abide by the following rules:

1. **The Right to Speak and Be Heard:** The “community ball” is a token that we will create in the first class. It is used to signal who has the right to speak and be heard during the class discussion. When a student holds the community ball, it is their turn to speak and share their thoughts and ideas. It is expected that other students will listen attentively to what the student has to say and give them the opportunity to be heard.
2. **The Right to Choose the Next Speaker:** The student who holds the community ball also has the right – and duty – to choose the next speaker. When they finish speaking, they must pass the community ball to someone else. If no one has indicated that they would like to speak, the current speaker must choose someone to pass the community ball to.
3. **The Right to Pass:** All students have the right to pass if they receive the community ball. This means they can choose to pass the community ball to someone else without speaking themselves. However, they must pass the community ball to someone else. This rule allows students who may not feel comfortable speaking in front of the class to still participate in the discussion in their own way.

Habits of Thought and Communication

To facilitate effective philosophical discussion, we also need to adopt certain habits of thought and communication that help to clarify and deepen the discussion. These habits include:

1. **Asking for clarification:** Asking questions like “What do you mean by...?” or “Can you provide more detail on this point?” in order to better understand the ideas being presented.
2. **Seeking supporting reasons:** Asking questions like “What’s the supporting reason for this claim?” or “Can you provide evidence for this point?” in order to better understand the reasoning behind an argument.
3. **Considering assumptions:** Asking questions like “What assumptions are being made here?” or “Are there any underlying assumptions that we should be aware of?” to identify and examine the assumptions being made.
4. **Examining inferences and implications:** Asking questions like “If I do this, then what follows?” or “What are the implications of this idea?” to explore the logical consequences of an argument.
5. **Evaluating the truth of statements:** Asking questions like “Is it true?” or “Can you provide evidence to support this claim?” to assess the veracity of an argument.
6. **Requesting examples and evidence:** Asking for concrete examples or evidence to support a claim.
7. **Considering counter-examples:** Thinking about potential examples that might challenge or contradict an argument, to evaluate its robustness and generalisability.

By engaging in these habits, students can better understand and evaluate the ideas being discussed and contribute more effectively to the discussion. These habits can also help to foster a more productive and respectful dialogue, as they encourage careful listening and respectful consideration of different perspectives.