

PHILOSOPHY

Core Philosophical Problems

Logic and critical thinking, epistemology, metaphysics (free will, personal identity, philosophy of mind), ethics, political philosophy, philosophy of religion, and aesthetics — a thematic companion to the two-course History of Philosophy project, drawing on its full cast of thinkers, closing with a capstone applying the entire toolkit to a genuinely live, unresolved contemporary question.

10 Chapters

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CHAPTER 1: WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY? BRANCHES & METHODS

Core Philosophical Problems

Course 3 · Chapter 1 · What Is Philosophy? Branches & Methods

Courses 1 and 2 told philosophy's own story chronologically — one era, one tradition, one thinker at a time. This course does something different: it takes the full cast those twenty chapters already introduced and organizes them by question instead of by century, cutting straight across two and a half thousand years in a single chapter whenever the topic calls for it.

What "Philosophy" Actually Means

The word comes from the Greek *philosophia* — *philos* ("loving" or "friend of") plus *sophia* ("wisdom"): love of wisdom. A popular story credits Pythagoras with coining the term himself, deliberately choosing to call himself a "lover of wisdom" rather than claiming the grander title of *sophos*, "wise man" outright.

An Honest Uncertainty — that Pythagoras story is genuinely unconfirmed, not a settled fact. It's a real, old, widely repeated tradition, but the historical record simply doesn't establish it with confidence. Fitting, for a course opening on the discipline that spends most of its time asking "how do you actually know that?"

The Major Branches

Philosophy is standardly organized into four core branches, each asking a genuinely different kind of question:

Metaphysics

What is there, and what is it really like? Reality's most general features —

Epistemology

What can we know, and how do we know it? The nature, sources, and limits of knowledge itself.

Ethics

What ought we to do? Right and wrong conduct, and what makes an action or a life good.

existence, objects,
causation, space and time.

Logic

What makes an argument
good? The formal study of
correct reasoning itself.

Several further, more specialized subfields build directly on these four: **aesthetics** (beauty and art, extending value theory the way ethics extends it to action), **political philosophy** (justice and the state, largely applied ethics at the level of a whole society), **philosophy of mind** (a genuinely specialized corner of metaphysics, focused specifically on consciousness and mental states), and **philosophy of religion** (arguments for and against religious claims, drawing on both metaphysics and epistemology at once). This course devotes a chapter to each.

Philosophical Method: Argument and Thought Experiment

Philosophy's own core tool is the **argument** — a set of premises offered in support of a conclusion, built to be evaluated on whether the premises are actually true and whether the conclusion genuinely follows from them (Chapter 2 covers this properly). Its second major tool is the **thought experiment**: a carefully constructed hypothetical scenario designed to isolate one specific intuition and test it directly, stripped of the noise of a real, messy situation.

THE TROLLEY PROBLEM

Philosophy's own most famous modern thought experiment began with Philippa Foot's real 1967 paper, built originally to examine the doctrine of double effect in the abortion debate — a pilot deciding whether to divert a crashing plane toward a more or less populated area, or a tram driver choosing which track to steer onto. Judith Jarvis Thomson's own 1976 article gave the scenario its now-famous name and developed it into the many variations (including the well-known "Fat Man" case) that fill philosophy

classrooms today. The method's real value: when two scenarios with functionally identical outcomes produce genuinely different moral verdicts, that gap reveals something real about the actual structure of moral reasoning — something a bare statement of principle alone would never expose.

A Preview of What's Ahead

The trolley problem is, in effect, a direct live test of the exact disagreement Course 2 already introduced: does only the aggregate outcome matter, as Bentham and Mill's utilitarianism (Course 2, Ch.6) would suggest, or does the type of action matter independently of outcome, as Kant's categorical imperative (Course 2, Ch.4) would insist? Chapters 5 and 6 of this course pick that live disagreement up directly.

How This Course Uses Its Own Cast

Rather than introducing an entirely new set of thinkers, this course draws repeatedly on the cast Courses 1 and 2 already built — organized here by the question each branch asks, not by when each thinker lived.

CHAPTER	BRANCH	DRAWS HEAVILY ON
Ch.2	Logic & Critical Thinking	Aristotle (C1.4), Frege & Russell (C2.7)
Ch.3	Epistemology	Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume (C2.2-3), Kant (C2.4)
Ch.4	Metaphysics: Free Will, Personal Identity & Mind	Aristotle, Descartes, Hume (C2.3), Chalmers (C2.9)
Ch.5-6	Ethics	Aristotle (C1.4), Kant (C2.4), Bentham & Mill (C2.6)
Ch.7	Political Philosophy	Locke (C2.3), Mill (C2.6), Rawls (C2.9)
Ch.8	Philosophy of Religion	Aquinas (C1.10), Hume (C2.3)

	COURSES 1 & 2	COURSE 3 (THIS COURSE)
Organized by	Chronology — one era at a time	Theme — one branch at a time
A single chapter might span	A century or two	Two and a half thousand years
Best for	Seeing how one idea led to the next	Seeing how a single question has been answered differently across all of history at once

Where This Goes Next — Chapter 2 covers logic properly: the structure of a good argument, validity and soundness, and the common fallacies that make a bad argument look convincing anyway — the toolkit every later chapter in this course will lean on directly.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Does organizing philosophy by branch (this course) or by chronology (Courses 1 and 2) change what you actually take away from it? Which structure do you expect to find more useful, and why?

REFLECTION 2

The trolley problem strips away real-world complexity to isolate one moral intuition at a time. Is that simplification a genuine strength of the method, or does it risk testing intuitions about a situation too artificial to tell us much about real moral life?

REFLECTION 3

Metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and logic are presented here as the four core branches, with everything else built on top of them. Can you think of a genuine philosophical question that doesn't fit cleanly into any of the four?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 1

- **Etymology** — *philosophia*, "love of wisdom"; the Pythagoras coinage story is real but genuinely unconfirmed
- **Four core branches** — metaphysics (what is there?), epistemology (what can we know?), ethics (what ought we to do?), logic (what makes an argument good?)
- **Extended subfields** — aesthetics, political philosophy, philosophy of mind, philosophy of religion
- **Method** — the argument (premises → conclusion) and the thought experiment
- **The trolley problem** — real origin in Philippa Foot's 1967 paper, named by Judith Jarvis Thomson's 1976 article
- This course organizes by branch, drawing repeatedly on the full cast already introduced in Courses 1 and 2

CHAPTER 2: LOGIC & CRITICAL THINKING

Core Philosophical Problems

Course 3 · Chapter 2 · Logic & Critical Thinking

Chapter 1 named the argument as philosophy's own core tool. This chapter opens it up properly — what makes an argument actually good, and what makes a bad one merely look convincing.

Deductive vs. Inductive Reasoning

A **deductive** argument aims for certainty: if the premises are true, the conclusion *must* be true — there's no logical room for the premises to hold while the conclusion fails. An **inductive** argument aims lower but covers more ground: the premises make the conclusion probable or likely, without guaranteeing it. "Every swan I've ever seen is white, so the next one probably will be too" is inductive; it can be strong evidence without being airtight.

Validity and Soundness

These two words get used loosely in everyday speech but mean something precise in logic. An argument is **valid** if its conclusion would have to be true whenever its premises are true — purely a matter of logical structure, regardless of whether the premises are actually true in reality. An argument is **sound** only if it's valid *and* its premises are actually true. A perfectly valid argument can still be worthless if it starts from a false premise; soundness is the stronger, real-world-anchored standard.

The Categorical Syllogism

Aristotle's own real contribution to formal logic, laid out in the *Prior Analytics* (circa 350 BCE), was the **categorical syllogism** — a structured argument with two premises and a conclusion, each a general statement about categories of things. Aristotle's own real definition:

"a discourse in which certain things having been supposed, something different from the things supposed results of necessity because these things are so." When it was rediscovered and studied by later logicians, it was regarded as such a complete, closed system that it stood essentially unchallenged for roughly two thousand years.

A Genuine Correction — the syllogism everyone learns first, "All men are mortal; Socrates is a man; therefore Socrates is mortal," is not actually confirmed to be an example Aristotle himself ever used. It functions as the standard modern teaching illustration, but the real record traces it more directly to John Stuart Mill's own 1843 *A System of Logic* — the same Mill covered in Course 2, Chapter 6, for utilitarianism — rather than to Aristotle's own original text.

A Direct Echo of Both Earlier Courses

This chapter closes a loop Course 2, Chapter 7 already opened: Frege's *Begriffsschrift* (1879) finally superseded Aristotle's own syllogistic system after roughly two millennia of dominance, since predicate logic could express relationships syllogistic logic structurally couldn't. The two-thousand-year reign this section just described is exactly what Course 2 covered ending.

Formal vs. Informal Fallacies

A **formal fallacy** is a flaw in an argument's own logical structure — it's invalid no matter what the premises actually say. An **informal fallacy** can have a perfectly valid structure, but goes wrong somewhere else — a false premise, an irrelevant point, a manipulative framing.

Affirming the Consequent (Formal)

"If P then Q; Q is true; therefore P is true." Invalid — Q could easily be true for some other reason entirely.

Denying the Antecedent (Formal)

"If P then Q; P is false; therefore Q is false." Invalid — Q might still hold true through a completely different path.

Ad Hominem (Informal)

Attacking the arguer's character instead of the actual argument they made.

Straw Man (Informal)

Misrepresenting an opponent's position as a weaker version, then refuting that weaker version instead of the real one.

False Dilemma (Informal)

Presenting only two options as though they were the only possibilities, when genuine alternatives exist.

Appeal to Authority (Informal)

Treating a claim as true simply because an authority figure said it, without regard to whether that figure is actually a relevant expert.

A WORKED EXAMPLE

"If the theory were correct, we'd expect to see X. We do see X. So the theory is correct." This is a textbook case of affirming the consequent — X being observed doesn't rule out every other possible explanation for X. A genuinely valid version would need to establish that X could *only* be explained by the theory being true, a much harder thing to actually show.

Where This Goes Next — this toolkit isn't academic for its own sake; every later chapter of this course leans on it directly. Chapter 3 turns it toward epistemology's own central question: what can we actually know, and how do we know it?

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

An argument can be perfectly valid while still being unsound, if a premise is false. Can you think of a real, everyday argument that's logically valid but relies on a premise you'd actually reject?

REFLECTION 2

The famous "All men are mortal" syllogism isn't confirmed as Aristotle's own example. Does that change how you think about how ideas get attached to famous names over time, even when the underlying concept genuinely is theirs?

REFLECTION 3

Informal fallacies like the straw man or false dilemma can be persuasive precisely because they don't look obviously wrong. Can you spot one you've encountered recently — in an ad, a debate, or your own reasoning?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 2

- **Deductive** — premises guarantee the conclusion; **inductive** — premises make the conclusion probable, not certain
- **Valid** — the conclusion follows from the premises structurally; **sound** — valid, and the premises are actually true
- **The categorical syllogism** — Aristotle's *Prior Analytics* (c. 350 BCE); the famous "All men are mortal" example isn't confirmed as his own, tracing more to J.S. Mill's *System of Logic* (1843)
- **Formal fallacies** — affirming the consequent, denying the antecedent; **informal fallacies** — ad hominem, straw man, false dilemma, appeal to authority

CHAPTER 3: EPISTEMOLOGY: WHAT CAN WE KNOW?

Core Philosophical Problems

Course 3 · Chapter 3 · Epistemology: What Can We Know?

Course 2 already spent four chapters (2 through 4, plus Moore in Chapter 7) working through epistemology's own major historical positions. This chapter organizes that same material by question rather than by century — and adds the one genuinely new centerpiece those chapters never covered: what "knowledge" itself actually means.

The Traditional Definition

For roughly two thousand years, philosophy's working definition of knowledge was **justified true belief (JTB)**: you know something if and only if (1) you believe it, (2) it's actually true, and (3) you have genuine justification for believing it.

A Genuine Correction — this definition is traditionally credited to Plato. The real irony: in his own dialogue *Theaetetus*, Plato actually **argues against** this very account of knowledge, not for it. The formula that carries his name is closer to something later philosophy extracted and formalized from the discussion he staged than a position he himself endorsed.

Gettier's Real Counterexample

The JTB definition stood essentially unchallenged until Edmund Gettier's real, remarkably short 1963 paper, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" — just three pages long, and enough to permanently reopen a question philosophy had treated as settled for two millennia.

THE SMITH AND JONES CASE

Smith has strong evidence that Jones will get a job, and that Jones has ten coins in his pocket. Smith reasonably infers: "The man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket." As it turns out, *Smith himself* gets the job — and, by sheer coincidence, Smith

also happens to have ten coins in his own pocket, though he has no idea how many coins he's carrying. Smith's belief was justified, and it's true — but it isn't knowledge, because it's true for a reason entirely disconnected from the actual justification Smith had for believing it.

Gettier's real point: justified true belief can happen almost by accident, which means the traditional three conditions aren't actually sufficient for genuine knowledge — a fourth condition is needed, and philosophers still haven't fully agreed on what it should be.

Foundationalism vs. Coherentism

A separate question: what justifies a belief in the first place? Every justification seems to need its own further justification — and if that chain runs on forever, nothing ever actually gets justified. This is the real **regress problem**, and two theories offer competing solutions.

Foundationalism

Some beliefs are "basic" — justified in themselves, needing no further support — and everything else is justified by ultimately resting on them.

Coherentism

No belief needs a privileged foundation; justification comes from how well a belief fits into a whole, mutually-supporting web of other beliefs.

A Direct Echo of Course 2

Descartes's whole project in Course 2, Chapter 2 is a textbook real example of foundationalism in action — the cogito was built to be exactly the kind of basic, self-justifying belief foundationalism needs, with everything else meant to be rebuilt on top of it. Hume's own bundle theory, by contrast, fits more naturally with a coherentist picture — no single fixed anchor point, just perceptions connected to each other by habit and resemblance.

Rationalism, Empiricism & Skepticism, Revisited

Course 2 already covered the major historical answers to "how do we know anything at all?" in full depth. Placed side by side here, as one thematic table rather than three separate chapters:

	RATIONALISM (C2, CH.2)	EMPIRICISM (C2, CH.3)	KANT (C2, CH.4)
Primary source	Reason and deduction	Sense experience	The mind's own structuring categories
Certainty available?	Yes — for reason's own deductions	Only for immediate perception	Yes — for synthetic a priori truths
What ultimately survives	The cogito	A bundle of perceptions (Hume)	Phenomena, never noumena

Skepticism itself has a real, genuine split in how philosophy has tried to answer it. Descartes's own method (Course 2, Ch.2) tries to answer the skeptic on the skeptic's own terms — doubt everything, then rebuild from one indubitable foundation. G.E. Moore's real 1939 approach (Course 2, Ch.7) refuses to play that game at all — "Here is one hand" treats everyday certainty as more secure than any abstract skeptical premise, putting the burden back on the skeptic's own argument rather than on common sense.

Where This Goes Next — Chapter 4 turns from what we can know to what actually exists: free will, personal identity, and the mind itself, pulling together Aristotle, Descartes, Hume, and Chalmers's own hard problem from Course 2's closing chapters.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Smith's belief in the Gettier case is justified and true, yet doesn't feel like real knowledge. Can you put into words exactly what's missing, without just repeating "luck"?

REFLECTION 2

Foundationalism needs some belief that's justified without needing any further justification. Can you think of a genuine candidate for a truly "basic" belief — one that seems to need no further support at all?

REFLECTION 3

Descartes tries to answer skepticism on its own terms; Moore refuses to engage with it at all. Which strategy do you find more satisfying as an actual response to doubt?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 3

- **JTB** — belief + truth + justification; credited to Plato, who actually argued against it in the *Theaetetus*
- **Gettier's counterexample** — real 1963 three-page paper; the Smith/Jones case shows JTB isn't sufficient for knowledge
- **Foundationalism** (basic, self-justifying beliefs) vs. **coherentism** (justification via a coherent web) — two answers to the regress problem
- Course 2's rationalism, empiricism, and Kant recapped as three real historical answers to the same question
- Two real strategies against skepticism — Descartes answering it on its own terms vs. Moore refusing to engage it at all

CHAPTER 4: METAPHYSICS: FREE WILL, PERSONAL IDENTITY & THE PHILOSOPHY OF MIND

Core Philosophical Problems

Course 3 · Chapter 4 · Metaphysics: Free Will, Personal Identity & the Philosophy of Mind

Chapter 3 asked what we can know. This chapter asks a different kind of question: what actually exists, and what is it really like? Three genuinely distinct metaphysical puzzles — whether we're ever truly free, what makes you the same person over time, and what consciousness even is — each pulling on threads this course's own earlier chapters, and Courses 1 and 2, already laid down.

Free Will: Determinism, Libertarianism & Compatibilism

Hard Determinism

The universe is fully determined by prior causes, and this is genuinely incompatible with free will — so free will doesn't exist.

Libertarian Free Will

Free will is real, which means determinism must be false — genuine choice requires some real, causally undetermined gap.

Compatibilism

Free will and determinism can coexist — genuine freedom just means acting on your own desires without external constraint, regardless of whether those desires were themselves determined.

LAPLACE'S DEMON

Pierre-Simon Laplace's real 1814 thought experiment, from *A Philosophical Essay on Probabilities*: an intellect that knew every force in nature and the position of every particle at a single instant could, in principle, calculate the entire future and the entire past with perfect precision — the clearest possible statement of strict causal

determinism. Laplace himself never actually called this intellect a "demon"; that vivid label was added later by others describing his idea.

FRANKFURT CASES

Harry Frankfurt's real 1969 paper, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," challenges the assumption that moral responsibility requires being able to have done otherwise. His scenario: Jones is about to make a decision; an observer, Black, has secretly arranged to force Jones into a specific choice — but only if Jones shows signs of choosing differently. If Jones freely decides on that same choice anyway, Black never intervenes at all. Jones genuinely couldn't have done otherwise — Black's hidden mechanism guarantees the outcome — yet Jones still seems fully morally responsible for what he did, since he arrived at it entirely on his own.

A Direct Echo of Course 1

This tension isn't new to modern philosophy. Course 1's own Stoics (Ch.7) held a real, strict deterministic view of the universe — fate governing everything — while still insisting that genuine moral responsibility survived, located in "what is up to us": our own assent and judgment, even if the underlying causal chain was fixed. The compatibilist position in this chapter is, in real structural outline, the same move the Stoics were already making over two thousand years earlier.

Personal Identity

The Ship of Theseus is a real, genuinely ancient puzzle, recorded in Plutarch's *Life of Theseus*: Athenians preserved Theseus's ship for generations by replacing each decaying plank with new timber as it wore out. Once every original plank has eventually been replaced, is it still the same ship? Ancient philosophers themselves genuinely disagreed. Thomas Hobbes later deepened the puzzle further: what if all the discarded original planks were collected and reassembled into a second ship — which one, if either, is the "real" Ship of Theseus?

LOCKE'S PRINCE AND THE COBBLER

John Locke's own real thought experiment, from his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, imagines a prince's consciousness — his memories, his sense of self — transferred entirely into a cobbler's body, while the cobbler's own consciousness vanishes. Locke's real conclusion: everyone would say the prince, not the cobbler, now inhabits that body. Personal identity, on Locke's account, tracks psychological continuity — memory and consciousness — not the physical body or substance at all.

A Direct Echo Across the Full Project

This exact question — what makes something the same thing over time, despite constant change — has now run through this whole project three separate times. Course 1's Heraclitus argued no one steps in the same river twice (Ch.2), a tension echoed in the Atman/anatta debate over the self in Buddhism and Hindu philosophy (Ch.6). Course 2's Hume looked inward for a persisting self and found only a "bundle" of passing perceptions, no unified thing at all (Ch.3). The Ship of Theseus and Locke's prince and cobbler are the same question again, in a third genuinely different form.

The Philosophy of Mind

Course 2 already covered this puzzle's own two real anchor points in depth: Descartes's substance dualism (Ch.2), with Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia's real interaction-problem objection, and Chalmers's real hard problem of consciousness (Ch.9). Since Descartes, two further contemporary positions have developed directly in response: **physicalism** holds that mental states simply are physical brain states, nothing more, avoiding dualism's interaction problem entirely by denying there are two substances to begin with; **functionalism** holds that a mental state is defined by what it *does* — its causal role, connecting inputs to outputs and other mental states — rather than what it's physically made of, leaving open, at least in principle, whether something non-biological could ever genuinely think.

FREE WILL POSITION	PERSONAL IDENTITY PARALLEL	MIND POSITION
Hard determinism	No persisting self at all (Hume's bundle theory)	Physicalism
Libertarianism	A persisting, non-physical soul (Descartes)	Substance dualism
Compatibilism	Continuity via psychological connection (Locke)	Functionalism

Where This Goes Next — Chapters 5 and 6 turn from what exists to what we ought to do, pulling together Aristotle, Kant, and Bentham and Mill's own real, competing ethical frameworks — the same disagreement the trolley problem from Chapter 1 already put on the table.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

In the Frankfurt case, Jones couldn't have done otherwise, yet still seems responsible. Does that genuinely refute the idea that responsibility requires alternate possibilities, or does it just reveal a different, more subtle sense in which Jones "could" have chosen differently?

REFLECTION 2

Hobbes's reassembled-planks version of the Ship of Theseus produces two competing candidates for the "real" ship. Which one would you actually pick, and what does your answer reveal about which notion of identity — form or matter — you find more convincing?

REFLECTION 3

Functionalism suggests identity is about what a mental state *does*, not what it's made of. Could something entirely non-biological genuinely have a mind on this view — and if so, how would you ever be sure?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 4

- **Free will** — hard determinism, libertarianism, compatibilism; Laplace's demon (1814, he never used the word "demon" himself); Frankfurt cases (1969) challenging the Principle of Alternate Possibilities
- **Personal identity** — the Ship of Theseus (Plutarch; extended by Hobbes's reassembled-planks version); Locke's prince and the cobbler — identity tracks psychological continuity, not the body
- **Philosophy of mind** — Descartes's dualism and Chalmers's hard problem (Course 2), plus physicalism and functionalism as contemporary alternatives
- The identity-over-time question now spans three real forms across this whole project: Heraclitus/Atman-anatta (Course 1), Hume's bundle theory (Course 2), and the Ship of Theseus/Locke (this chapter)

CHAPTER 5: ETHICS I: CONSEQUENTIALISM, DEONTOLOGY & VIRTUE ETHICS

Core Philosophical Problems

Course 3 · Chapter 5 · Ethics I: Consequentialism, Deontology & Virtue Ethics

Chapter 1 previewed the trolley problem as a live test of two frameworks already introduced across Courses 1 and 2. This chapter finally lines all three major families of ethical theory up side by side — and adds real, substantial material each one's own earlier treatment left out.

Three Ways to Ask "What Should I Do?"

Consequentialism

An action is right if it produces the best overall outcome. What matters is the result, not the type of act or the actor's own character.

Deontology

Some actions are right or wrong in themselves, regardless of outcome — duty and rule, not consequence, is what makes an act permissible.

Virtue Ethics

The central question isn't "what should I do?" but "what would a genuinely virtuous person do?" — character comes first, action follows from it.

Consequentialism: Beyond Bentham and Mill

Course 2, Chapter 6 already covered utilitarianism's own founding form in depth — Bentham's greatest happiness principle and Mill's higher/lower pleasures. Both are real examples of **act utilitarianism**: judging each individual action by whether it produces the best outcome in that specific case.

Rule utilitarianism takes a genuinely different approach: rather than evaluating each act on its own, it asks which general *rule* would produce the best consequences if everyone followed it, then judges an individual action by whether it conforms to that rule — even in a specific case where breaking the rule might, in isolation, produce a slightly better local outcome. The real motivating worry: if everyone constantly recalculated whether breaking a rule would help in

their own particular situation, the resulting unpredictability and erosion of trust would make things worse overall, even though each individual exception looked locally justified.

Deontology: Beyond Kant

Course 2, Chapter 4 covered Kant's categorical imperative in depth — a single, universal, exceptionless rule from which every duty is meant to follow. W.D. Ross's real 1930 book *The Right and the Good* offers a genuinely different, more flexible deontological picture: rather than one master rule, Ross proposes seven real **prima facie duties** — obligations that hold "at first appearance" unless outweighed by a competing duty in a specific situation.

ROSS'S SEVEN PRIMA FACIE DUTIES

Fidelity (keeping promises), reparation (making amends for wrongs), gratitude (repaying those who helped you), justice (distributing benefits fairly), beneficence (promoting others' good), non-maleficence (avoiding harm), and self-improvement. None is absolute on its own — when two genuinely conflict, judgment, not a fixed formula, decides which one actually wins in that particular case.

Virtue Ethics: Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean

Course 1, Chapter 4 introduced Aristotle's virtue ethics broadly. His real, specific mechanism for identifying a virtue is the **doctrine of the mean**: a virtue of character sits at a genuine middle point between two opposing vices — one of excess, one of deficiency.

DEFICIENCY	VIRTUE (THE MEAN)	EXCESS
Cowardice	Courage	Rashness
Insensibility	Temperance	Self-indulgence
Stinginess	Liberality	Prodigality

Aristotle applied this framework to eleven real moral virtues in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The mean isn't a fixed mathematical midpoint — it's the appropriate response for the actual situation, judged through *phronesis* (practical wisdom), the same faculty Course 1's own Chapter 4 already identified as central to Aristotle's ethics.

ONE CASE, THREE FRAMEWORKS

A friend asks whether you like their new haircut, which you privately think looks bad. A **consequentialist** weighs the likely outcomes of honesty versus a kind lie — which produces more overall wellbeing? A **deontologist** asks whether lying itself is permissible as a rule, regardless of outcome — Kant's own real answer, notoriously, was no, not even here. A **virtue ethicist** asks what a person with genuine honesty *and* genuine kindness would actually say — likely neither a flat lie nor a blunt insult, but something true, kind, and tactfully phrased. The three frameworks can converge on the same answer, or diverge sharply, depending on the case.

Where This Goes Next — Chapter 6 takes these three frameworks out of the classroom and applies them directly to genuinely contested, live contemporary moral debates.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Rule utilitarianism sometimes requires following a rule even when breaking it would produce a better outcome in one specific case. Does that make it a genuine improvement on act utilitarianism, or does it just import deontology's own rigidity through the back door?

REFLECTION 2

Ross offers no fixed formula for which prima facie duty wins when two genuinely conflict — it comes down to judgment. Is that a real strength (flexibility) or a real weakness (no reliable method) of his theory?

REFLECTION 3

In the haircut example, which framework's answer feels closest to what you'd actually do? Does your answer stay consistent if you imagine a higher-stakes version of the same dilemma?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 5

- **Consequentialism** — right action produces the best outcome; act utilitarianism (Course 2) vs. rule utilitarianism (judging rules, not individual acts, by their consequences)
- **Deontology** — Kant's categorical imperative (Course 2) vs. Ross's real 1930 prima facie duties (seven non-absolute obligations, weighed by judgment)
- **Virtue ethics** — Aristotle's doctrine of the mean: virtue as the midpoint between a vice of excess and a vice of deficiency
- The three frameworks can converge or genuinely diverge on the same real-world case

CHAPTER 6: ETHICS II: APPLIED ETHICS & CONTEMPORARY MORAL DEBATES

Core Philosophical Problems

Course 3 · Chapter 6 · Ethics II: Applied Ethics & Contemporary Moral Debates

Chapter 5 laid the three frameworks side by side in the abstract. This chapter takes them out of the classroom entirely, applying all three to two of the most influential — and most genuinely contested — arguments in contemporary applied ethics, both from the same real philosopher.

Singer's Drowning Child and Effective Altruism

Peter Singer's real 1972 essay "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" — written in response to the real Bangladesh Liberation War refugee crisis — opens with a now-famous thought experiment: you pass a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it. Saving the child is easy, but will ruin your clothes. Singer's real argument, built from four premises: suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and care are bad; if you can prevent something bad without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, you ought to; geographic distance makes no moral difference; and it makes no difference whether you're the only person who could help or one among millions. The conclusion, Singer argues, is a genuinely demanding one — the same obligation to save the drowning child applies, in principle, to donating a very substantial share of disposable income to prevent equally real, equally preventable suffering happening far away.

A Direct Echo of Course 2

Singer's argument is explicitly utilitarian in structure — weighing the moral importance of muddy clothes against a child's life is exactly the kind of calculation Bentham's own felicific calculus (Course 2, Ch.6) was built to make. The essay went on to genuinely, directly shape the modern effective altruism movement, including philosophers like William MacAskill.

Animal Ethics and Speciesism

Singer's real 1975 book *Animal Liberation*, widely regarded as the founding philosophical statement of the animal liberation movement, coins the term **speciesism** — unjustified discrimination based purely on species membership, structurally parallel to racism or sexism. Singer's real argument grounds moral status in *sentience*, the capacity to suffer, rather than in intelligence or reasoning ability — noting that some animals show cognitive capacities comparable to some humans we'd never deny moral status to on intelligence grounds alone.

A Direct Echo of Course 2 — By Singer's Own Explicit Design

This isn't a loose thematic parallel — Singer built his own real argument directly on Bentham's real, already-quoted line from Course 2, Chapter 6: "The question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?" Two centuries separate Bentham's original claim from Singer's own extended application of it, and Singer names that debt explicitly rather than treating the idea as his own invention.

Applying All Three Frameworks

THREE VERDICTS ON THE DROWNING CHILD

A **consequentialist** agrees with Singer directly and without much friction — his argument already speaks their language. A **deontologist** working from Ross's real prima facie duties (Chapter 5) can reach a similar practical conclusion through a genuinely different route: a real, standing duty of *beneficence* toward those in need, not an aggregative calculation at all. A **virtue ethicist** reframes the question entirely — not "what does the math say?" but "what would a person of genuine compassion and generosity actually do here?" — often converging on Singer's own practical conclusion while resisting his framing of it as a strict, near-absolute obligation.

FRAMEWORK	ON THE DROWNING CHILD	ON ANIMAL SUFFERING
Consequentialism	Directly supports Singer's own conclusion	Directly supports Singer's own conclusion — suffering counts, wherever it occurs

FRAMEWORK	ON THE DROWNING CHILD	ON ANIMAL SUFFERING
Deontology (Ross)	Grounded in the duty of beneficence, not aggregation	Grounded in non-maleficence — a duty not to cause unnecessary suffering
Virtue Ethics	What would a compassionate, generous person do?	What would a person of genuine temperance and compassion eat?

Where This Goes Next — Chapter 7 scales this same three-framework toolkit up from individual moral choices to the level of a whole society: political philosophy, drawing on Locke, Mill, and Rawls's own veil of ignorance from Course 2.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Singer argues distance makes no genuine moral difference between saving a drowning child in front of you and donating to prevent an equally real death far away. Does that argument actually convince you, or does something about physical proximity still feel morally relevant even after considering his case?

REFLECTION 2

Singer explicitly builds his animal-ethics argument on Bentham's own two-centuries-earlier claim. Does tracing an idea's real lineage like this strengthen the argument, or does an idea need to stand on its own regardless of its pedigree?

REFLECTION 3

The three frameworks converge on similar practical conclusions here but for genuinely different reasons. Does that convergence make you more confident the conclusion is correct, or does the disagreement over *why* still matter?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 6

- **Singer's drowning child** (1972) — a real, four-premise utilitarian argument for a demanding duty to prevent distant suffering; directly shaped the effective altruism movement
- **Speciesism** (*Animal Liberation*, 1975) — unjustified discrimination by species; moral status grounded in sentience, not intelligence
- Singer's animal-ethics argument explicitly builds on Bentham's own real "can they suffer?" standard (Course 2, Ch.6)
- All three ethical frameworks from Chapter 5 can reach similar practical conclusions on both cases, but via genuinely different routes — aggregation, duty, or character

CHAPTER 7: POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY: JUSTICE, RIGHTS & THE STATE

Core Philosophical Problems

Course 3 · Chapter 7 · Political Philosophy: Justice, Rights & the State

Chapters 5 and 6 asked what an individual ought to do. This chapter scales the same underlying question up to the level of a whole society: what makes government legitimate at all, and what does a just distribution of wealth and power actually look like?

Three Pictures of the State of Nature

Social contract theory imagines what human life would be like without any government at all — the "state of nature" — to work out what could ever legitimately justify one. Three real, genuinely different answers:

Hobbes (Leviathan, 1651)

Life without government is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" — a real, exact quote — a war of all against all. People surrender their freedoms entirely to an absolute sovereign in exchange for basic security.

Locke (1689)

People hold real, pre-existing natural rights to life, liberty, and property even before government exists, bound by moral law. Government's only legitimate purpose is protecting those rights by consent — and can be rightfully overthrown if it violates them.

Rousseau (The Social Contract, 1762)

Legitimate society requires citizens to fold their individual will entirely into the collective "general will," with direct popular sovereignty — Rousseau real, explicitly rejected representative government as insufficiently legitimate.

Locke's real theory went on to directly shape real, world-changing events — his natural-rights framework is a documented, direct influence on both the American Declaration of Independence and the French Revolution's own Declaration of the Rights of Man.

Rawls Revisited

Course 2, Chapter 9 already covered John Rawls's real 1971 *A Theory of Justice* in depth — the veil of ignorance, designing a society's rules without knowing what position you yourself will occupy in it, guaranteeing basic liberties no aggregate calculation can override. Rawls's own approach judges justice by the fairness of the *end state* a society produces — an "end-result" or "patterned" theory of distribution.

Nozick's Libertarian Challenge

Robert Nozick's real 1974 book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* is a direct, explicit response to Rawls, defending instead a genuinely minimal state — "limited to the narrow functions of protection against force, theft, fraud, [and] enforcement of contracts." Nozick's own real **entitlement theory** judges justice not by whether a distribution matches some ideal pattern, but by the real *history* of how holdings came about: justice in acquisition (how unowned things become owned), justice in transfer (how property changes hands legitimately), and justice in rectification (correcting past violations of the first two).

THE WILT CHAMBERLAIN ARGUMENT

Nozick's real, famous thought experiment: start with any distribution you consider perfectly just (D1) — Rawls's own favored pattern, say. Now suppose a million people each freely choose to pay basketball star Wilt Chamberlain 25 cents to watch him play. Chamberlain ends up with \$250,000, and the resulting distribution (D2) no longer matches the original pattern — yet every single transaction that produced it was entirely voluntary. Nozick's real conclusion: maintaining any fixed "just" pattern requires the state to continually interfere with people's own free, voluntary choices, which he argues makes patterned theories of justice fundamentally incompatible with real liberty.

Another Closure, Reopened

This is the exact same pattern Course 2's own capstone traced across the whole 20-chapter history — Rawls's own confident 1971 answer to utilitarianism gets directly, explicitly reopened just three years later by Nozick, using the same real philosophical toolkit against Rawls's own conclusion.

Mill's Harm Principle, Applied

Course 2, Chapter 6 already covered Mill's real harm principle in depth — power may be rightfully exercised over someone against their will only to prevent harm to others, never merely for their own good. Applied here: Hobbes would tolerate real, significant state paternalism in the name of order; Locke and Nozick would both resist it strongly as a rights violation; Rawls's own basic-liberties principle sits closer to Mill's own position than to Hobbes's.

THINKER	WHAT LEGITIMIZES THE STATE	VIEW OF INDIVIDUAL LIBERTY
Hobbes	Escaping a brutal state of nature	Sacrificed heavily for security
Locke	Protecting pre-existing natural rights	Strongly protected; government can be overthrown if it fails
Rousseau	Expressing the general will directly	Folded into collective sovereignty
Rawls	Fair rules chosen behind a veil of ignorance	Basic liberties protected from aggregate override
Nozick	Protecting rights through a minimal state only	Maximal — any redistribution beyond rectifying injustice is itself unjust

Where This Goes Next — Chapter 8 turns from the state to a different kind of authority entirely: philosophy of religion, revisiting Aquinas's Five Ways from Course 1 alongside the classic arguments for and against God's existence.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau each imagine the state of nature completely differently — brutal, morally governed, or simply pre-political. How much of each thinker's own political conclusion actually follows from that starting picture, rather than from anything else?

REFLECTION 2

The Wilt Chamberlain argument shows that maintaining a fixed just distribution requires ongoing interference with free choices. Does that convince you patterned theories of justice are flawed, or does it just show that *some* ongoing redistribution is a legitimate cost of fairness?

REFLECTION 3

Which of the five real positions in this chapter's own closing table comes closest to your own actual view of what makes a government legitimate?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 7

- **Hobbes** (1651) — state of nature as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short"; absolute sovereign for security
- **Locke** (1689) — pre-existing natural rights (life, liberty, property); government by consent, overthrowable if it violates them; real influence on the American and French Revolutions
- **Rousseau** (1762) — the general will; direct popular sovereignty over representation
- **Rawls** (Course 2) — the veil of ignorance; a "patterned"/end-state theory of justice
- **Nozick** (1974) — entitlement theory (acquisition, transfer, rectification); the Wilt Chamberlain argument against patterned distributions
- Mill's harm principle (Course 2) applied across all five positions

CHAPTER 8: PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

Core Philosophical Problems

Course 3 · Chapter 8 · Philosophy of Religion

Course 1's own capstone closed with Aquinas's Five Ways, real arguments drawing directly on Aristotle's physics. This chapter widens the lens — a different kind of argument for God's existence, two real objections to it, and philosophy's own oldest, sharpest challenge to belief in a good and all-powerful God at all.

Aquinas's Five Ways, Revisited

Course 1, Chapter 10 already covered Aquinas's Five Ways in depth — the Unmoved Mover, the First Cause, contingency, degree, and final cause, each built directly on Aristotle's own real arguments from Course 1, Chapter 4. All five are **cosmological** or **teleological** arguments — they reason from some observed feature of the world (motion, causation, purpose) toward God as the necessary explanation.

Anselm's Ontological Argument

A genuinely different kind of argument needs no observation of the world at all. Anselm of Canterbury's real 1078 *Proslogion* — the same Anselm credited, in Course 1, Chapter 10, with actually coining "faith seeking understanding" — defines God as "a being than which no greater can be conceived." His argument: if such a being existed only in the mind, a still-greater being — one existing in reality too — could be conceived. That would contradict the original definition of God as the greatest conceivable being. Therefore God must exist in reality, not just as an idea.

A Direct Echo of Course 1

This isn't a loose thematic link — it's the exact same historical figure making two of medieval philosophy's own most influential real contributions, roughly two decades apart: the phrase this course already corrected back to him in Course 1, and this chapter's own centerpiece argument.

Two Real Objections

GAUNILO'S LOST ISLAND

Anselm's real contemporary, Gaunilo of Marmoutiers, offered a real, pointed parody: imagine "the most excellent island conceivable." By Anselm's own logic, if this island existed only in the mind, a still-more-excellent island — one existing in reality — could be conceived, so the perfect island must exist. Since that's absurd, Gaunilo argued the argument's own form must be flawed — it proves too much, working for anything at all, not just God.

KANT'S "EXISTENCE IS NOT A PREDICATE"

Kant's real objection, from the same *Critique of Pure Reason* covered in Course 2, Chapter 4, goes deeper: "being" isn't a real property that adds anything to a concept's own description at all — it simply indicates that the concept is actually instantiated in reality. A perfectly described, supremely great being that doesn't exist is still fully conceivable and coherent; adding "and it exists" doesn't make the concept any greater or more complete, it just asserts something additional and separate. Anselm's whole argument, on Kant's account, rests on treating existence as though it were a quality like "wise" or "powerful," which it isn't.

The Problem of Evil

If God is genuinely all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good, why does evil and suffering exist at all? A classic formulation runs: if God is willing to prevent evil but unable, God isn't all-

powerful; if able but unwilling, God isn't good; if both willing and able, why does evil exist? If neither, why call it God at all?

A Genuine Correction — this formulation is almost universally attributed to Epicurus. The real record doesn't support that attribution with confidence: no surviving text by Epicurus himself contains it. Its earliest documented source is Lactantius, a 4th-century *Christian* writer, who offers no citation for attributing it to Epicurus at all. Some real scholarship (Reinhold F. Glei) argues the argument is actually anti-Epicurean or non-Epicurean in origin, with the philosopher and skeptic Carneades a real, plausible alternative source. The attribution to Epicurus, real and widespread as it is, rests almost entirely on one later, potentially biased source.

A Direct Echo of Course 1

Course 1, Chapter 7 already covered a real, related correction about Epicurus — his own actual ascetic teaching being inverted into the "hedonist" reputation popular culture now attaches to his name. This chapter's own correction is a second, genuinely separate case of the same real figure's legacy being distorted by later hands — first his own teaching, now an argument he may never have actually made.

Pascal's Wager

Blaise Pascal's real argument, from his posthumously published *Pensées* (1670), is genuinely different in kind from everything else in this chapter — not an argument that God exists, but an argument that **believing** is the rational choice regardless. Since reason alone can't settle the question, Pascal frames it as a wager: believing costs little if God doesn't exist, but gains infinite reward if God does; disbelieving risks infinite loss for a small finite gain. A real, standard objection — the "many gods" problem — asks which god you're supposed to wager on, given competing religions each claiming exclusive truth; Pascal's own real, brief response dismisses casual doubt as insincere, though later defenders have refined the reply further.

ARGUMENT	TYPE	REAL OBJECTION
Aquinas's Five Ways	Cosmological / teleological — from observed features of the world	Depends on Aristotelian physics later chapters of Course 2 complicated

ARGUMENT	TYPE	REAL OBJECTION
Anselm's ontological argument	A priori — from the concept of God alone	Gaunilo's Lost Island; Kant's "existence is not a predicate"
The problem of evil	An argument against God's existence (or nature)	Its own popular attribution to Epicurus is itself genuinely disputed
Pascal's Wager	Pragmatic / decision-theoretic, not evidential	The "many gods" problem

Where This Goes Next — Chapter 9 turns to aesthetics, the one core branch this course hasn't yet drawn on any earlier chapter's material for — genuinely new territory.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Kant argues existence isn't a real property that can make a concept "greater." Does that objection feel decisive to you, or does Anselm's own argument survive it in some form?

REFLECTION 2

The problem of evil's attribution to Epicurus rests on one later, possibly biased Christian source. Does the argument's own force depend at all on who first made it, or does that question matter only for the history, not the philosophy?

REFLECTION 3

Pascal's Wager doesn't try to prove God exists — only that believing is the rational bet. Is that a legitimate kind of argument for religious belief, or does genuine belief need to rest on something more than a calculated wager?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 8

- **Aquinas's Five Ways** (Course 1) — cosmological/teleological arguments built on Aristotle
- **Anselm's ontological argument** (1078) — God as "a being than which no greater can be conceived"; the same Anselm behind "faith seeking understanding" (Course 1)
- **Gaunilo's Lost Island** and **Kant's "existence is not a predicate"** — two real objections
- **The problem of evil** — its popular attribution to Epicurus is genuinely disputed, resting on one uncited 4th-century Christian source
- **Pascal's Wager** (1670) — a pragmatic, not evidential, argument for belief; the "many gods" objection

CHAPTER 9: AESTHETICS: PHILOSOPHY OF ART & BEAUTY

Core Philosophical Problems

Course 3 · Chapter 9 · Aesthetics: Philosophy of Art & Beauty

Every other chapter in this course has drawn on Course 1 or Course 2's own established cast. This one is genuinely new territory — though, fittingly, its two founding figures are two thinkers this course already knows well.

Kant's Third Critique

Kant's real 1790 *Critique of Judgment* is his third and final major critical work, completing a project Course 2, Chapter 4 already covered two-thirds of — the first critique addressed knowledge, the second addressed morality, and this one addresses aesthetic and teleological judgment. Kant draws a real, precise distinction between two aesthetic experiences: the **beautiful**, a harmonious "free play" between imagination and understanding when an object seems purposefully designed without serving any actual practical purpose — real **"purposiveness without purpose"** — and the **sublime**, the genuinely different feeling of awe or even fear provoked by something that overwhelms comprehension, without the object itself needing to pose any real danger.

Central to both is **disinterested pleasure**: a genuine aesthetic judgment doesn't depend on wanting or needing the object to actually exist — you can find a sunset beautiful without wanting to own it. This, Kant argues, is what makes a judgment of beauty genuinely different from either simple sensory pleasure or moral approval.

A Direct Echo of Course 2

This is the same Kant who reframed epistemology around synthetic a priori knowledge (Ch.4) and ethics around the categorical imperative (also Ch.4) — his aesthetic theory completes a real, three-part critical project this course has now covered in full, work by work.

Hume and the Standard of Taste

David Hume's real 1757 essay "Of the Standard of Taste" tackles a real, genuine puzzle: taste seems entirely subjective — beauty isn't a property sitting in the object itself, but a response the object provokes — yet we still, in practice, judge some aesthetic opinions better than others. Hume's own real solution isn't to locate beauty objectively in the artwork (as some of his French contemporaries tried), but to identify what makes some *judges* more reliable than others: a genuine "ideal critic" combines delicacy of taste, extensive practice, the ability to compare across many works, freedom from personal prejudice, and good sense.

A Direct Echo of Course 2

This is exactly the same empiricist instinct Course 2, Chapter 3 already covered — grounding a judgment in actual, observable human response rather than an abstract, mind-independent property — applied here to beauty instead of causation or the external world.

Is Beauty Subjective or Objective?

Kant and Hume represent two genuinely different real ways of avoiding pure relativism without claiming beauty is simply an objective, mind-independent fact. Kant grounds it in a shared structure of human cognition — the same free play of imagination and understanding everyone, in principle, shares. Hume grounds it in the real, cultivatable qualities of a good judge. Neither says "anything goes," but neither locates beauty purely in the object either.

What Makes Something Art? The Institutional Theory

DUCHAMP'S FOUNTAIN

Marcel Duchamp's 1917 *Fountain* — a mass-produced urinal, signed and submitted to an exhibition — poses a genuine, sharp real puzzle: what makes this object art, when an identical urinal sitting in a hardware store isn't? Neither Kant's nor Hume's own theory

was built with this case in mind, since neither depends on the object's own beauty at all here.

Arthur Danto's real 1964 concept of the **"artworld"** proposed an answer: seeing something as art requires "an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art" — context the eye alone can't supply. George Dickie's real **institutional theory** formalized this further: an artwork is "an artifact on which some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld) has conferred the status of candidate for appreciation." On this view, what makes *Fountain* art isn't any property of the urinal itself, but its real, conferred status within a real social and institutional context — galleries, critics, art history.

THEORY	WHAT GROUNDS AESTHETIC VALUE/STATUS
Kant	Shared structure of human cognition — the free play of imagination and understanding
Hume	The real, cultivatable judgment of an ideal critic
Institutional theory (Danto/Dickie)	Status conferred by the artworld's own institutions — galleries, critics, history

Where This Goes Next — the capstone closes this course, and the full Philosophy Subject, by applying the entire toolkit built across all nine prior chapters to one real, live contemporary problem.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Kant's "disinterested pleasure" says genuine aesthetic judgment doesn't depend on wanting the object. Can you think of a case where your own aesthetic judgment and your desire to own or possess something were genuinely entangled?

REFLECTION 2

Hume's ideal critic requires practice, comparison, and freedom from prejudice. Does that framework actually solve the subjectivity problem, or does it just relocate the disagreement to who counts as an "ideal" critic in the first place?

REFLECTION 3

If the institutional theory is right and art status is conferred by the artworld rather than any property of the object, could literally anything become art given the right institutional context? Is that a genuine insight or a real weakness of the theory?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 9

- **Kant** — *Critique of Judgment* (1790); the beautiful (purposiveness without purpose) vs. the sublime; disinterested pleasure; his third critical work, completing Course 2's own Kant coverage
- **Hume** — "Of the Standard of Taste" (1757); the ideal critic (delicacy, practice, comparison, freedom from prejudice, good sense)
- **Institutional theory of art** — Danto's "artworld" (1964) and Dickie's formal definition; motivated by Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917)

CHAPTER 10: CAPSTONE — APPLYING PHILOSOPHICAL REASONING TO A REAL CONTEMPORARY PROBLEM

Core Philosophical Problems

Course 3 · Chapter 10 (Capstone) · Applying Philosophical Reasoning to a Real Contemporary Problem

No new philosopher, no new theory. This capstone takes the entire toolkit Chapters 1 through 9 built — logic, epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, political philosophy, and aesthetics — and runs it against one genuinely live, unresolved question that today's own philosophers are actively, publicly disagreeing about.

The Question: Do AI Systems Deserve Moral Consideration?

As AI systems become more sophisticated — holding conversations, generating language, responding in ways that can seem genuinely thoughtful — a real, contested question has moved from science fiction into active academic philosophy: could such a system ever have morally relevant experiences, and if so, what, if anything, would we owe it?

Applying the Toolkit, Chapter by Chapter

CHAPTER 2 — LOGIC

"This system processes and produces language the way a person does, therefore it's conscious the way a person is" is a real, common argument shape — but it needs scrutiny. Fluent output is evidence *consistent with* genuine understanding, but similarity in behavior alone doesn't logically guarantee similarity in underlying experience; treating it as though it does risks a version of affirming the consequent.

CHAPTER 3 — EPISTEMOLOGY

This is where the question becomes genuinely hard, not just practically hard. Even in principle, we have no reliable method for detecting subjective experience in *any* system, biological or artificial — the same epistemic gap the hard problem names. Any belief we form here, in either direction, risks being a real Gettier-style case: possibly true, possibly justified by the available evidence, but not resting on anything that actually tracks the fact in question.

CHAPTER 4 — METAPHYSICS

This is the question's own real center of gravity. Chalmers's hard problem of consciousness (Course 2) asks why any physical process is accompanied by subjective experience at all — a question that applies with exactly the same force to silicon as to neurons. **Functionalism** (Ch.4) matters directly here: if a mental state is defined by its causal role rather than its physical substrate, then **multiple realizability** — the same functional state, realized in genuinely different materials — becomes a live possibility, not a category error. Chalmers's own real thought experiment, gradually replacing biological neurons with functionally identical silicon substitutes one at a time, was built to test exactly this question directly, and remains genuinely unresolved.

CHAPTERS 5-6 — ETHICS

Singer's real argument against speciesism (Ch.6) grounds moral status in the capacity to suffer, not in intelligence, species, or — by direct extension — physical substrate. If that's the right standard, the central ethical question isn't "how smart is this system?" but "can it suffer at all?" — and Chapter 3's own epistemic gap means we may not currently be able to answer that with confidence in either direction. A deontologist working from Ross's prima facie duties (Ch.5) might frame the same uncertainty as a live question about whether non-maleficence applies here at all; a virtue ethicist might ask what a genuinely careful, non-complacent person does in the face of real uncertainty like this.

CHAPTER 7 — POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

If some future AI system did have genuine moral status, Locke's own natural-rights framework (Ch.7) would suggest it might hold real claims government exists to protect. Rawls's veil of ignorance (Course 2) offers a genuinely pointed test: would you design a society's rules without knowing whether you yourself might turn out to be the kind of entity whose moral status is in question?

CHAPTER 9 — AESTHETICS

A structural echo, not a direct application: the institutional theory of art (Ch.9) argued that status can be genuinely *conferred* by social consensus rather than discovered as an inherent property. Moral status could, in principle, work the same way — though whether that would be a legitimate way to settle a real ethical question, or merely a way of dodging one, is itself a live disagreement.

An Honest, Unresolved Conclusion

This capstone doesn't close with an answer, because there genuinely isn't a settled one yet. Real, working philosophers — type-identity theorists arguing consciousness requires specific biological properties, functionalists arguing the substrate shouldn't matter, researchers like Anil Seth arguing complexity itself carries some independent weight beyond pure function — remain in real, documented disagreement. A 2023 review of the field concluded plainly that "even the most prominent theories of consciousness remain incomplete and subject to ongoing debate." This course closes, appropriately, not with a verdict, but with the same toolkit this whole project has been assembling since Course 1's own opening chapter — logic, evidence, and honest uncertainty, applied to a question that is still, genuinely, open.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Given real, current uncertainty about whether any AI system can suffer, does the mere possibility create a moral obligation to act cautiously — or is caution itself unjustified until there's real evidence either way?

REFLECTION 2

Functionalism suggests substrate shouldn't matter to moral status, only function. Does that argument genuinely convince you, or does something about biological embodiment still feel morally relevant even after considering it?

REFLECTION 3

Across this entire 30-chapter, three-course project, which single idea — from any course, any chapter — do you find yourself returning to most, and why?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 10 (CAPSTONE)

- The question — do AI systems deserve moral consideration — applied through logic, epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, political philosophy, and aesthetics in turn
- The hard problem of consciousness and functionalism (Ch.4) sit at the real center of the debate; Chalmers's own neuron-replacement thought experiment tests it directly
- Singer's speciesism argument (Ch.6) extended: moral status tracks the capacity to suffer, not substrate — but Chapter 3's own epistemic gap means that capacity may be currently unknowable
- Real, working philosophers remain in genuine, documented disagreement — this capstone closes honestly unresolved, not falsely certain

Course 3 Complete — And the Full Philosophy Subject

Core Philosophical Problems is now complete — 10/10 chapters. Together with History of Philosophy I: Ancient to Medieval and History of Philosophy II: Early Modern to

Contemporary, the full Philosophy Subject now stands at 30 chapters across three courses — two chronological, one thematic, closing with a question genuinely still being worked out today.