

Adult Education Course in Western Philosophy: Course Content

Course Content & Structure: Throughout, the course will focus chiefly on the discussion of ideas. We will examine some of the most important themes and questions that have characterised Western Philosophy and study some of the works of individual philosophers that, in one way or another, exemplify and have shaped the themes covered. Many of the sessions will be accompanied by handouts & recommended further reading, and you will have the option (if you wish) of undertaking some written work.

---No prior knowledge is assumed!---

Aesthetics: What is beauty? What makes something or someone beautiful? Should we think that there have to be similarities between Doric columns, poems, mathematical equations, sunsets and people if we are to understand each of them as beautiful? Or is beauty a criterion for saying that they are similar? What is the aesthetic status of artistic forgeries?

Philosophy of Religion: Does God exist? How might we establish whether or not God exists? Philosophy of Religion is neither a species of religious studies nor religious philosophy. Rather, it is philosophy about religion which means that it tries to understand the kinds of thinking that underpin peoples' religious convictions and clarify the nature of religious thought in general.

Personal Identity: Who am I? What makes a person a person? What makes someone the same (or a different) person today as they were 10 years ago? Does physical change determine identity or is it psychological continuity? Perhaps it is a combination of these factors or, maybe, neither of them?

Free Will: Do we genuinely possess the freedom to choose? If thoughts are essentially physical processes in the brain then they must have had preceding physical causes (one cannot have an effect without a cause after all). Can we be said to have chosen freely even if we think we have, or is the truth that our thoughts (whatever they may be) are wholly determined by preceding physical causes?

Philosophy of Mind: What is the mind? Is the mind identical with the brain? Should we think of the brain as an organic computer? If so, will computers in the future be able to think? What are the criteria for saying that someone (or something) thinks at all?

Moral Philosophy: Moral philosophy explores the different forms of thought and argument that give rise to moral questions. Are there moral truths, or is our ethical thought made up entirely of opinions? Can reason shed light on what our moral duties are, or should we restrict ourselves to trying to make the majority happy whilst simultaneously minimising unhappiness?

Existentialism: Famously characterised by Jean-Paul Sartre in his slogan "existence precedes essence", existentialism is the philosophical approach which advocates that human beings define their own meaning and individuality through affirming their own choices in the lack of order that exists around them.

Theory of Knowledge (Epistemology): What is knowledge? What counts as knowledge? Is knowledge any different from belief? Can science tell us what knowledge is, or does it presuppose the possibility of knowledge before embarking on investigations? Do we have innate knowledge or does all knowledge come from experience? Does experience teach us what to learn from it?

Metaphysics: *This branch of philosophy deals with the underlying principles of reality. It is the study of what there is. What are concepts? Are concepts real? If we understand and describe the world through concepts and they are not real, how can we be said to have objective knowledge of the world at all?*