

PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS (PI)
September 1, 2015

I. Short Description

Students will study substantive philosophical texts and arguments that address complex questions about faith, knowledge, reality, and value. These courses will introduce philosophical methodologies, and will emphasize ways Christian faith bears on philosophical inquiry and, in turn, how such inquiry affects matters of faith. Among other skills, students will cultivate their ability to read and interpret philosophical texts, construct, defend, and evaluate arguments for a philosophical position, and put philosophical views in historical context.

II. Thematic Core Learning Outcomes and Interpretation

A. Students will be able to....

1. interpret significant primary philosophical texts subtly and critically, with sensitivity to their logical structure and role in a tradition of thought
2. communicate cogent arguments in defense of philosophical positions, including examining and responding to potential objections
3. assess the merits of varied answers to perennial philosophical questions recognizing their implications for Christian faith and practice

B. Expansion and interpretation of the outcome statements

1. Learning Outcome #1: Students will be able to interpret significant primary philosophical texts subtly and critically, with sensitivity to their logical structure and role in a tradition of thought.

“Significant primary philosophical texts”: Both what counts as a philosophical text and what counts as a significant text are subject to reasonable disagreement. Philosophical texts need not be part of the "western canon" (insofar as there is one), and they may vary widely in literary genre. Nor is it expected that every course text be a classic. Significant philosophical texts must, however, present answers to some perennial philosophical questions (see outcome #3 below for more on this notion), and have arguably been received into some tradition of philosophical inquiry or conversation.

“Interpret . . . subtly and critically”: Students must devote significant time trying to figure out for themselves what course texts mean, using philosophical methodologies, such as logical, linguistic, historical, or phenomenological modes of analysis with attention to the texts’ logical structure and role in a tradition of thought.

“Logical structure”: Students should be able to identify answers that texts give to certain philosophical questions, and how the texts’ authors attempt to defend their answers to these questions with arguments. Students should understand and recognize different types of argument (such as inductive and deductive arguments) and the techniques used to assess arguments (such as validity, soundness, strength, et cetera).

“Role in a tradition of thought”: One distinctive of philosophical inquiry is that even the most original contributions to the field take place in the context of a tradition of inquiry. Part of interpreting significant philosophical texts subtly and critically is understanding how they

interact with this context.

2. Learning Outcome #2: Students will be able to communicate cogent arguments in defense of philosophical positions, including examining and responding to potential objections.

“Communicate cogent arguments”: Students must cultivate abilities to put together their own arguments in support of philosophical positions, and to communicate these arguments clearly and effectively with humility and charity. They should be able to do this at least in written form, and in classroom discussions, but formal oral presentations of arguments are also highly encouraged.

“Philosophical positions”: Present answers to philosophical questions.

“Potential objections”: As mentioned above, philosophical inquiry is dialectical, pursued in conversation with partners in a tradition. Students must cultivate the abilities not solely to defend their own answers to philosophical questions, but to anticipate how conversation partners might disagree with their answers or arguments, and to respond appropriately.

3. Learning Outcome #3: Students will be able to assess the merits of varied answers to perennial philosophical questions, recognizing their implications for Christian faith and practice.

“Assess the merits”: It is expected that students will not simply become acquainted with the views of others, but will grapple with perennial philosophical questions themselves, evaluating the strength of their own and others' answers. Philosophical investigations should involve robust self-examination. Hence to "assess the merits" of answers to philosophical questions involves serious consideration as to whether these answers are acceptable to them, and what impact such an answer would have on their lives if so.

“Perennial philosophical questions”: Philosophical questions are fundamental in the sense of aiming at the foundations of our beliefs and practices. They do not take for granted the way certain disciplines are pursued, or certain topics thought about, but challenge these pursuits and ways of thinking at their roots for the sake of deepened understanding. They often do so across the disciplinary spectrum, and new avenues for philosophical questioning certainly develop as other disciplines evolve. It is expected that any course meeting this theme will involve significant consideration of ways the philosophical questions it *does* consider intersect with Christian faith and practice.

“Implications for Christian faith and practice”: As explained above, part of assessing the merits of different answers to philosophical questions will involve students considering the impact accepting these answers would have on their lives. This includes their lives as Christians, both in terms of what they believe and in terms of the decisions they make.

III. Guidelines

A. Expanded Description

Philosophical investigations are characterized by their reflective, self-critical focus on fundamental questions across the gamut of human experience and activity, by their unfolding historically as an ongoing dialogue or conversation, and by their careful attention to argumentative structure. Because they range across human experiences and activities, nearly any

discipline may be investigated philosophically — including scientific and artistic pursuits — and courses fitting the Philosophical Investigations theme are not required to focus exclusively on "traditional" philosophical texts.

B. Connection between area outcomes (Part II above) and the 12 overall program goals of Christ at the Core (see p. 8-9 of the Proposal).

The Philosophical Investigations theme would connect closely to several of the learning goals mentioned here :

1. The three outcomes for courses in the Philosophical Investigations them support “Christ at the Core,” Holistic Learning Goal #1, including especially “evaluating information” needed “to draw conclusions,” “practicing analytic ... reasoning,” and “presenting their thoughts clearly in oral and written forms.”
2. Student learning outcome #1 involves interpreting classic philosophical texts in which some of the “intellectual traditions” developed. These traditions include cultural and theological dimension, as well as intellectual ones, and thus this outcome directly supports “Christ at the Core,” Holistic Learning Goal #3: “understanding the contours of theological, cultural, and intellectual traditions.”
3. Student learning outcome #3, which requires assessing “the merits of varied answers to perennial philosophical questions,” connects to “Christ at the Core,” Holistic Learning Goal #2: “pursuing varied approaches to knowledge with discernment and humility as they map both the rich connections and the conflicts among the disciplines.”
4. Student learning outcome #3 stresses cultivating capacities for self-examination and learning outcome #1 emphasizes developing abilities to express and defend opinions. These support “Christ at the Core,” Wisdom Learning Goal #3, which involves “growing in intellectual virtue and critical self-awareness through engagement with the complex questions of history, human values, and contemporary life,” as well as Wisdom Learning Goal #4, which focuses on “cultivating ... capacities for independent thought and action.”

C. Examples for Assessment

A range of rigorous assignments could provide evidence that students have successfully achieved the three Student Outcomes given in section II.A. Depending on the structure of the course, one significant assignment might be relevant for assessing more than one outcome; in other cases a series of assignments will be more appropriate. A few examples and suggested approaches are offered here as *possible inspiration* of disciplinary appropriate and rigorous options, but **use of these exact assignments is not required**. Faculty are encouraged to go beyond these or substitute other creative assignments as they develop individual courses.

1. Assessment of Outcome 1: Students include an exposition section in an argumentative essay that presents a thinker’s position on a debated topic (and strongest evidence for that position) clearly, succinctly, and charitably (including some type of comparison with another position), or the students might write an independent essay that is focused exclusively on interpreting some segment of a philosophical text.
2. Assessment of Outcome 2: Students write argumentative papers or hold in-class debates on

philosophical topics, where they are required to respond to the other side's objections. Alternatively, students might apply some philosophical theory to contemporary issues and experiences and evaluate whether it can successfully account for them.

3. Assessment of Outcome 3: Students write an argumentative essay or engage in an online discussion of significant philosophical questions relevant to the Christian faith, such as the problem of evil, the nature of will, the role of feelings in assent, etc.

D. General Advice

None given.