

Knowledge, Reality, Self

Philosophy 1000 Foundation Narrative

Philosophy begins in wonder and nowhere else, and this wondering is an experience which is characteristic of a philosopher. Plato, Theatetus 155d

For many young people, the undergraduate experience is a time of wonder, when fundamental questions are raised and long-held views explored. Like the young Augustine, students often re-examine the values they were taught by their parents, the beliefs they have acquired from their teachers and the world around them, and the meaning of tragic events they have witnessed (such as the deaths of friends and relatives). Their courses will pose new intellectual challenges and their exposure to new classmates from different cultures and backgrounds may also cause them to re-examine their understanding of concepts such as friendship and loyalty. At some point many young people will also step back from these questions and ask themselves a more sophisticated question, not just “What is true?” but “How can I know what is true?”

The Philosophy foundation course – Knowledge, Reality, Self – is designed to take some of the questions that many students are already exploring and give them a conceptual and historical framework for thinking and talking about them. It starts with the question “What can I know?” and then sees that question itself as grounded in deeper questions about the nature of reality and the capacities of the knowing self.

The course typically begins at the birth of western philosophy in the classical Greek tradition of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Students start by reading works by Plato which are, in many ways, as fresh and exciting today as they were over 2,400 years ago. Students encounter Plato’s writings about Socrates who wrestled with deep questions about the meaning of justice, courage and love and about what makes life worth living. Students also study Plato’s attempts to answer those questions by exploring both the nature of reality and the nature of the soul that knows. These texts introduce students not only to ideas that have occupied western thinking ever since, but also to the techniques of logic and argumentation that Plato devised to answer those questions. As students debate and discuss Plato’s ideas, they begin to develop new skills of argument and analysis and also probe more deeply their own emerging ways of understanding the world.

St. Augustine himself says it was his reading of the “books of the Platonists” that contributed to his journey of faith. In Knowledge, Reality, Self, students follow that same path. After studying Plato, they often read philosophical works from the Catholic tradition. This supplements some of what they have learned in the Augustine and Culture Seminars and gives students an opportunity to explore foundational Christian philosophical ideas and to understand how Catholic perspectives are important for philosophy.

Just as Augustine himself explored many different traditions, including those that were hostile to the Christianity of his childhood, Knowledge, Reality, Self exposes students to skeptical voices that

question many traditional ideas and values. Students read important philosophical texts from Descartes to the present which raise the same philosophical questions concerning the possibility of knowledge, the nature of the world, and the nature of the knowing self, but give answers that often challenge assumptions grounded in religious traditions. Students also explore the perspectives of philosophical voices that are under-represented in the western intellectual tradition, in particular those of women and people of color. Students are in this way introduced to the multi-voiced philosophical dialogue taking place in the world around them.

This course helps students develop skills they will need both in their professional lives and in their personal development. It teaches them to read and analyze important and difficult texts and to communicate their insights both in discussion and in written work. This course is also designed to help students develop values and perspectives, including a willingness to bring intellectual rigor to topics where there are no clear answers and to look beyond the practicalities of life toward higher meanings. In the encounter with philosophy – literally, the "love of wisdom" – students will develop and deepen their innate desire to better understand themselves, their world and those who share that world with them.