Studying Philosophy Online

Getting Started

This document is the starting point for our online *Introduction to Philosophy of Art* **(IPA)**. Since the **philosophical** aspects of this course, and my approach to studying online, may be new to many of you, I'll start with a general introduction to the study of philosophy online.

Kurt Schwitters, Opened by Customs, 1937-8

Everyone knows that philosophy is challenging. And most people assume, incorrectly, that online courses are not as difficult as face-to-face seminars. Students who take online courses and who take their studies seriously know better. There are unique problems that must be solved in order to learn effectively in what we call an "asynchronous distributed learning environment" — a very technical way of describing a course of study which does not occur "in-person" or "face-to-face". Online courses, designed and taught properly, are intense, exhilarating, and rewarding. But they take more time, careful planning, and a great deal of independent work and concentration. Studying **philosophy** together will also require sustained effort on your part and mine, the collective intelligence of everyone involved, and our ability to collaborate creatively as a group.

If this is your first online course, it may take a few weeks to catch the rhythm of asynchronous online learning. Online courses require different skills and make particular demands on both students and teachers. If you are highly motivated, able to work independently and set up a schedule for yourself that enables you to complete your assignments on time, you should not have trouble with the online format. On the other hand, if you tend to procrastinate and put things off until the last minute, it's very likely you will not do well.

Even if you have taken online courses at The New School, you may find the approach in this course somewhat different.

The first and most important advice I would give is to **take your time**. To allow the time you need to complete your assignments each week you should set up a routine that will suit your schedule. Be sure to schedule your reading and writing assignments when you are generally at your best. And write down your questions and observations in a convenient place.

Be sure to **read** the **syllabus** carefully and make a note of any **questions** you have about the course requirements. We'll discuss these together during the first two weeks in our **group forum**. If you have questions you don't feel comfortable discussing in the group forum, feel free to contact me directly.

In addition to the **course requirements** and **course description**, the syllabus contains information about **student resources** and **university policies** that affect our course. If you have special needs and concerns, I have provided links to the people you should contact. If there is something you need and don't see it listed, please ask me about it. And by all means let me know if you encounter any incorrect or outdated links.

You should also be sure to review the list of **Topics** and **Schedule of Readings** and give some thought to what additional resources you might need to make things easier for you.

Note: You may find that it is easier to print and read the electronic documents offline. To facilitate this, and to literally keep everyone on the same page, nearly everything I upload for you is available as a PDF. The PDFs are compatible with a wide range of mobile devices. And if you work on an iPad, you may find an app called iAnnotate useful for making notes and marking up your PDFs.

The first two weeks you will be working more or less independently — completing a **tutorial** on creative and critical thinking, and completing your first introductory reading assignments on the philosophy of art. The **Canvas** online discussion forum during the first week or two will focus largely on technical issues, as well as questions about the course structure, process, and expectations.

I can't stress enough how important it is to take your time, complete each task carefully and systematically, and be sure to ask questions when you run into problems. Don't let the technology and new software frustrate you.

Philosophical Analysis

As I said before, studying philosophy online presents its own challenges. In general, to do well in philosophy you must be able to think both **analytically** and **abstractly**. Philosophical texts are grounded in complex patterns of reasoning. So, for example, to understand Plato's claim that art is dangerous and can cause great harm to society, we must determine whether he has any **reasons** or evidence to support this claim.

If we can identify the reasons, we must then try to determine whether those reasons form a **coherent argument**. If we can understand and formulate the argument in our own words, we then have to determine whether it is **valid** or **invalid**. This process of interpreting and assessing the strengths and weaknesses of a pattern of reasoning is what we call "analysis" or "critical thinking". We find it in good newspaper columns and editorials, in honest and rational political debates, in art and literary criticism, and of course in philosophical texts.

However, in the philosophical context, the concepts used, such as truth, beauty, justice, the good, etc., are considerably more abstract and elusive than the terms we encounter in debates over funding for public education, equal rights for women, or how best to approach global climate change. Just defining terms such as "truth", "beauty", and "justice" may seem impossible.

How do we begin? Even that can be a philosophical problem. Working a particular issue out in a weekly two-hour face-to-face classroom seminar discussion is difficult enough. Doing it asynchronously online with seventeen people over the course of seven days with significant gaps in between makes the task even harder. It requires a great deal of concentration, attention, patience, and persistence to reach both an individual and a shared understanding. My introductory texts, the academic resources on the website, and the **Critical Thinking Tutorial** assignment offer additional pointers, examples, practice, and guidelines.

Timothy Quigley, revised 30 July 16