

Well, the general philosophy course consists of eight topics, and those topics are all pretty central in epistemology and metaphysics. Epistemology, the theory of knowledge - what can we know, how can we know it? Metaphysics - what is the nature of things? More importantly, in a way, general philosophy illustrates to you how philosophy is done. So, the importance isn't just the particular topics; it's understanding the discipline of philosophy, how it works, the sorts of considerations that are brought to bear in discussing these topics, and so forth. It makes you a better philosopher thinking about these topics. And it's got some historical focus. You'll find that seven out of the eight topics are introduced through literature of the 17th and 18th century. Not a lot, typically. On each of these topics, you'll have one reading that goes back to what we call the early modern period. You might wonder why that's so. You came here to study philosophy, not to study history. Why should you be interested in what happened two or three hundred years ago? Well, the point is that these problems became evident there for a good reason. Certain things were happening in the world. A scientific worldview was largely replacing, or at least augmenting, a predominantly religious view, and a lot of these problems naturally emerged then, and they remain important today. But because the problems emerged then, a lot of the labels that we use when discussing these problems are inevitably historical. If you don't know what Cartesian dualism is, for example, you will be lost in a lot of modern discussions as well as older ones. So, you need to know something about what Descartes said, not necessarily because the way he said it remains particularly important today. It's not that we are now going to take his arguments as the last word, but because the discussions today still reflect the language of the past in some ways. You need to know that. So, I've given some examples there of the sorts of labels we get.

Welcome to those who've just arrived. One of the things I said at the beginning of the lecture was that we start a bit late. You haven't missed very much. I'm well aware that you have a bit of a job getting here. You might notice as you come in that I put handouts at the door. I suspect you all came in quickly and quietly without noticing. You'll be able to pick some out as you go. But all of the slides that you see up here are on the handouts, okay?

Another point is by studying these philosophers of the past, you are studying people who are undoubtedly great thinkers, some of the very greatest thinkers that have ever been. You're certainly not wasting time looking at their work. There are still plenty of insights to be gleaned from them. Another point about studying philosophy historically is to do with interconnections between topics. If you just study topics in isolation, it's all too easy to view them just as separate things that you can pick and mix. But philosophical ideas aren't normally like that. They have very deep connections. Taking a view on one particular position may well commit you to a view on another. Now, one of the great ways of seeing that is to see the interplay between these ideas in historical figures, to see one great figure arguing against another and understanding how one view impacts on a different one. So, we'll see examples of that in what follows.

Many of these themes that arose back in the 17th and 18th centuries, as I've said, remain today. So, looking at those battles can actually throw a very useful light on modern debates. It is not uncommon to find people debating now in ways that overlook points that were made back then. And if you know about that history, you were able to find points that were made that remain valid again. Looking at things with a historical perspective can prevent our getting blinkered by what happened to be the concerns of today. So, there are all sorts of good reasons for getting some historical perspective in philosophy. You don't have to be, as it were, an antiquarian in order to get value from this sort of discussion.

Okay, here briefly after topics. I'm not going to say very much about these. You know them from the syllabus: skepticism, knowledge, perception, primary and secondary qualities, induction, free will, mind and body, personal identity. And I've given some notes there of particular big thinkers that we're going to be mentioning as we go through. So, in this lecture and the next, I'm basically focusing on a historical perspective, which I hope will enable you to see how all these different topics tie together, why they arose when they did, why they were so important, and why many of them remain important. In subsequent lectures, I'll be looking in detail at each of those topics in turn.