This course will be a survey introduction to basic philosophical questions. This means that you will receive exposure to two fundamental fields of philosophy (metaphysics and epistemology) via certain key figures and their writings, seeing why it is that the issues they’ve grappled with have proven so enduring over time. Each field will address (but is by no means limited to) a core question at its root: in epistemology, what is knowledge? in metaphysics, what is real? Deceptive in their simple phrasing, each of these questions begets a plethora of smaller (but no less important) questions: how do we gain knowledge?; what is the standard for deciding what is true or false?; can we discover and grasp the workings of reality or the universe?; how does our perspective shape the world we live in? etc. In either domain, but particularly with metaphysics, we will pay especial attention to the subfield of ontology—the study of being—which will in turn touch on issues of how we should live in light of our understanding.

Ultimately, students will keep in mind the question that informs any philosophical approach or methodology: what is philosophy? While definitive answers to these questions will be hard to come by, this class will work to understand, interpret, and criticize the responses offered by the authors we study. Beyond that, this class should ideally encourage you to indulge in a bit more aimless rumination and subversive interrogation tethered to the overriding principles of truth, trust, and tact.

Monday and Wednesday classes will largely consist of lecture, with Friday classes dedicated to discussion. Graded assignments will include mid-term and final exams, a final paper, reading responses, and typed discussion questions. Readings will include works on or by Pre-Socratic philosophers, Plato, Aristotle, Laozi, Sextus Empiricus, Francis Bacon, René Descartes, George Berkeley, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, William James, Aldous Huxley, Edmund Gettier, Allison Jaggar, and Michio Kaku.