Philosophy it may be taken as a strategy or set of strategies for thinking about what we do when we think; a framework for aesthetic, ethical, and political judgment; a technique for creating, analyzing, and evaluating arguments and concepts; an historical and literary tradition; etc. We will take all these definitions into account, but this class will consider philosophy above all to be the art of asking hard questions and thinking them through.

Our first major theme will be truth-telling and lying. What is truth and do we have an obligation toward it? Are there conditions under which lying is ethically justified, and if so, what are they and why? How are political power, truth-telling, and lying intertwined? We’ll begin by examining one the masterworks of the philosophical tradition, the ancient Greek philosopher Plato’s *Republic*. We’ll also consider a series of classical philosophical views on truth developed around the same time as Plato’s, including the Chinese philosophers Confucius and Mencius as well as Siddhartha Gautama AKA the Buddha. We’ll experiment with the extreme but compelling argument that lying can is never ethically justifiable, developed by the Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant. We’ll also consider Sophie Fiennes and Slavoj Zizek use the history of cinema to frame intriguing questions about power, political lying, and the formation of beliefs. We’ll conclude this unit by examining a timely essay on the links between totalitarianism and political lying, “Truth and Politics” by Hannah Arendt, a Jewish refugee from Nazism, undocumented immigrant to the US, and one of the premier political philosophers of the 20th century.

For the second half of the semester, our focus will turn to questions about skepticism and knowledge in relation to power and justice. What is the difference between opinion, belief, and knowledge? Should we reject the idea that we can know things with certainty? How are beliefs embedded in networks of power and what bearing do they have on any account we might give of a just society? We’ll return to Plato to examine his account of justice and his argument that to think philosophically means to be unequivocally committed to loving the truth. We’ll then read early modern French philosopher René Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy*, which asks a series of powerful questions regarding skepticism and certainty while considering how these bear on our account of who and what we are. We’ll also engage contemporary philosopher Linda Martin Alcoff, who offers a framework for considering truth, ignorance, and power in relation to experiences of race and racism. Using Alcoff, we’ll also think throughout writing by James Baldwin, one of the most insightful novelists and public intellectuals of 20th century America. Finally, we’ll return one last time to Plato, Fiennes, and Zizek to think about the fragility of democracy.

This course will encourage you to engage ideas and arguments in the fullest possible way by reading, reasoning, and writing philosophically. It will serve as an introduction to philosophical thinking and writing, question-formation, argument, conceptual interpretation. By the conclusion of the semester, students will be able to: read, understand, and analyze difficult philosophical texts; critically engage complex philosophical arguments by assessing their strengths and weaknesses; creatively and clearly formulate and explain their own philosophical positions; recognize the difference between well-constructed and poorly-framed arguments; and respond rigorously and creatively to difficult philosophical problems.