

Introduction to Philosophy

Philosophy 101-002
Skidmore College
Fall Semester, 08 Sep – 10 Dec 2010
WF 12.20-2.10p, Ladd 307

Instructor: Christopher Moore

Philosophy Department
Office: 214 Ladd Hall
Phone: 518 580 5403
Email: cmoore1@skidmore.edu
Office Hours: M 3:15-4:15p, W 2:15-3:15p, and by appt.
Course Website: ph101.wordpress.com

Required Texts

Plato, vol. 1, tr. Allen (Yale)
Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Hackett)
Descartes, *Meditations, Objections, Replies* (Hackett)
Mill, *On Liberty* (Hackett)
Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* (Penguin)
J.L. Austin, "Other Minds," "Plea for Excuses" [handout in class]

Course

English has plenty of words for thinking, or thinking deeply, or thinking well. And being prone to introspection or reflection or deliberation hardly differentiates anybody from the mass of humankind in any really unusual way. Yet there is a somewhat narrowly-defined discipline to study, a way of life to adopt, that our culture, along with nearly every other, calls "philosophy," and there are readily identifiable individuals we want to call nothing other than "philosophers" or at least "budding philosophers." These aren't the same people we would consider sages (if such people even exist), people who are wise (such as some people's grandparents), brilliant thinkers (who hold great jobs), or really together individuals (the most admirable of our friends). Philosophers seemed defined by their special *concern for* and *approach to* becoming wise. That seems true whatever wisdom might be, whether it's a sort of liberal-arts competence or a social savvy, an unrelenting commitment to truth or a high degree of self-realization, a keen attention and unerring judgment or an accumulated mass of life experience.

The hope for this course is to give some sense for the nature, history, practice, and hopes of philosophy. This sense will come through reading key works from six of the most insightful, vigorous, literarily competent, and idiosyncratic philosophers of the Western tradition. We will see the continuous focus on a certain range of themes, most

connected to a central question, What should I do about myself? These themes include trying to comprehend what's special or significant about being a human, about being an individual in a society, about judging people worse than they should be or better than they need to be, and about despairing at our impending difficulties and frailty and mortality and cheering at our successes and decent relationships and stable discoveries. These are perhaps the things that one should like to be wise about, and the procedures, methods, or activities by which one might come to that wisdom will be the objects of our study. For who knows whether, to find out how one ought to be, one needs knowledge about the nature of the cosmos, or the truth of religion, or the structure of oneself or of selves in general, or the findings of anthropology and sociology and physics, or the well-worn adages of our tradition and of the noblest civilizations, or really no knowledge at all but just a well-grounded upbringing and an openness to new ideas, experiences, and friends.

While we will talk about these big issues, most of our time and work will go into trying to make microscopic and macroscopic sense of our assigned texts. We will do so in the faith that, easy or difficult as they may be to read, they will repay our reflection only when we put as much into them as their authors did. We will not be mainly concerned with discerning what position—if any—a respective author has but rather with thinking through, once we've discerned it, why the author posits such a position at all. These processes of reflection and thinking through will occur in class—I will try to model and encourage a broad array of ways—and even more in frequent formal and informal writing assignments. Indeed, in many weeks the reading will be minimal; the expectation is that writing will be your principal work. If there is a hypothesis to this class, it is that philosophizing involves seeking self-knowledge conversationally; but these words do not make clear the essential role writing, note-taking, brainstorming, and prepared correspondence play in this practice. The class is structured to involve such modes of writing into our overall activities of reading, self-discovery, and verbal exchange.

Class time

We will spend much of our time in conversation about our assigned texts, most often through close reading of important or characteristic passages, though also through argument reconstruction and assessment, character and debate analysis, summary at various levels of abstraction, and critical response. We will ask questions like: “Why would the author say this?” “What total range of answers could we give to such a question?” “What does the fact that we find this claim completely implausible suggest about the text and about ourselves?” “Should we suspect that a Greek or French or English or German would have the same perspective on this issue that we would?” “Under what conditions would I find this argument valid or this claim substantiated?”

You should take notes every day, about what your classmates or I say and what's written on the board. I will expect your work to reflect familiarity with what we've talked about. In-class use of your computer must be limited to note-taking. Please do not read or send texts or other electronic communications during our meeting time.

Work

A broad range and high frequency of (short) writing assignments will give you a chance to work on the skills learned in class, to strengthen your familiarity with our texts, to engage in a deliberate manner with your peers and your instructor, and to develop your ability to articulate your reactions to the arguments, views, intuitions, and ideas we read about. There are three categories of assignments.

Six Homework Assignments [45%]

Every other week you will respond in exactly one page to a prompt about the reading I will distribute at least a week in advance. Over the term you will meet a variety of assignments: argument-outlines, description and narration exercises, position-taking, counterexample generation, close readings, imaginative reconstruction or speculation, and judging quantitative and qualitative differences between argumentative efforts.

Assignments will always be due in class at the beginning of class. I will accept assignments only by hardcopy, never by email, unless you are explicitly told on the syllabus or prompt to email them. You must include full heading information (full name, course number, name of the assignment, and the date it is due); failures to do so will lower the grade. I will accept at most one late assignment, at my discretion and if you have a good faith reason; it will lose one letter grade every 24 hours it is late.

Class blog [30%]

On the weeks during which there is no homework assignment, I will post on our class blog a range of prompts. You will write a blog post—generally on some descriptive, autobiographical, narrative, or critical topic—in response to one of those prompts. You ought to have the course reading and discussion somehow in mind, but you should be most interested in sincere, rigorous self-reflection and well-crafted public articulation of your views. You will also comment on your classmates' posts in any way that seems to you responsive, productive, and provocative. The main part of your grade for this overall assignment is your frequency, seriousness, and community-helpfulness of your posting and commenting. (It will be a major demerit to your grade if you do not contribute during the week in which the prompts are posted; it will be a valuable boost to your grade if you contribute even during off-weeks.) I will also be concerned with the depth, breadth, and creativity of your contributions.

Final take-home exam [25%]

During finals period you will pick up, at a time of your choosing, a list of questions, from which you will choose three to which to respond. You will have 24 hours, with access to your texts and notes, to type up your answers, which may be of any length. I will distribute sample questions in advance.

Logistics

Attendance

Much of the activity and value of the class comes through our twice-weekly discussions. Accordingly, your final grade will take into account your attendance, which I will spot-check. Repeated tardy arrivals and insufficient participation may count as absences. You must submit appropriate paperwork to excuse any absence. After two unexcused absence, each absence will lower your grade by one increment (e.g., from A- to B+).

Grades

Your course grade will represent the precision, accuracy, comprehensiveness, care, thoughtfulness, and effort demonstrated by your participation in the course activities. You will receive the grade nearest to your average numerical score; for example, a 3.9 will be an A; a 3.47 will be a B+

A 4.0 – Extraordinary	B- 2.66	D+ 1.33
A- 3.66	C+ 2.33	D 1.0 – Minimal pass
B+ 3.33	C 2.0 – Acceptable	D- 0.66
B 3.0 – Good	C- 1.66	F 0.0 – Fail

Technology

Please check class-related emails each weekday, and respond promptly. I will do the same. I will email you additional readings and assignments if I do not distribute paper copies. Please check with fellow students to ensure you have not missed any handouts, which include paper-prompts and notes.

Accessibility

If you are a student with a disability and believe you will need academic accommodation, you must formally request accommodation from Meg Hegener, Coordinator for Students with Disabilities. You will also need to provide documentation which verifies the existence of a disability and supports your request. For further information, please call 580-8150, or stop by the office of Student Academic Services in Starbuck Center.

Cheating

Academic dishonesty in any portion of the academic work for this course shall be grounds for failing the entire course and communication of dishonesty to the College. This includes, but is not restricted to, any plagiarism on any paper, or cheating on any portion of the homework. Plagiarism includes, among other things, not citing text, paraphrases, or ideas taken from any assigned or unassigned reading, or other students' comments or papers. Read at cms.skidmore.edu/advising/integrity/index.cfm and please ask about any case you're concerned about.

Reading and Assignment Schedule

September

- W 08 Syllabus.
F 10 Plato, *Meno* 70a1-81e2. Student introductions.
- W 15 *Meno* 81e3-89e8.
F 17 *Meno* 89e9-100c2.
- W 22 *Euthyphro*.
F 24 *Apology*. **HW I.**
- W 29 Descartes, "Dedication," "Letter," "Synopsis," "Meditation I."

October

- F 01 "Meditation II."
- W 06 "Meditation III"
F 08 Selections from "Objections and Replies." **HW II.**
- W 13 Hobbes, *Leviathan* Part I, i-v
F 15 *Leviathan* vi-ix.
- W 20 *Leviathan* x-xii.
F 22 *Leviathan* xiii-xvi. **HW III.**
- W 27 Mill, *On Liberty* I.
F 29 *On Liberty* II.

November

- W 03 *On Liberty* III.
F 05 *On Liberty* IV. **HW IV.**
- W 10 Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* pp. 31-49.
F 12 *Twilight* pp. 52-70.
- W 17 *Twilight* pp. 78-103.
F 19 *Twilight* pp. 103-122. **HW V.**
- W 24 **[THANKSGIVING]**
F 26 **[THANKSGIVING]**

December

- W 01 J.L. Austin, "Other Minds."
F 03 "Other Minds." **HW VI.**

W 08 J.L. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses."
F 10 Course evaluations.
W 15 **Final exam due by 1.30p**