

Philosophy 101H, Section 01
Introduction to Philosophy (Honors)
California State University, Spring Semester 2009
Tuesday / Thursday 11:00-12:15, OCNL 237

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PHILOSOPHY 101H IS AN APPROVED GENERAL EDUCATION COURSE, satisfying Area C3.

COURSE WEBPAGE: www.csuchico.edu/~tjollimore/Phil101.htm

1. THE TOPIC

What *is* philosophy? The *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* suggests the following:

“Most definitions of philosophy are fairly controversial, particularly if they aim to be at all interesting or profound. That is partly because what has been called philosophy has changed radically in scope in the course of history, with many inquiries that were originally part of it having detached themselves from it. The shortest definition, and it is quite a good one, is that philosophy is thinking about thinking. . . . A more detailed, but still uncontroversially comprehensive, definition is that philosophy is rationally critical thinking, of a more or less systematic kind about the general nature of the world (metaphysics or theory of existence), the justification of belief (epistemology or theory of knowledge), and the conduct of life (ethics or theory of value).” (*Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, p. 666)

Philosophy, then, deals with the most fundamental of issues at the most fundamental level. Philosophers tend to ask the sort of questions children ask: Why does the world exist anyway? Is there a God? Okay, but how do you *know* that the sun will come up again tomorrow? What happens when you die? Why *shouldn't* I just pursue my own self-interest at all times, regardless of cost to others? And so on.

In this course we will read selections from the works of philosophers both historical and contemporary. These texts deal with some of the main issues of epistemology and metaphysics: how we know what we know (and whether we really know anything at all); whether human beings have free will; what makes you the same person over time; whether God exists (and whether it matters); and so forth.

Keep in mind at all times that philosophy's main subject matter is human life and existence. With luck, and if you devote yourself seriously to the task of really *thinking*, by the end of the semester you may have a better understanding not just of philosophy, but of yourself.

2. LEARNING GOALS

The principal charge of General Education Area C is to provide students opportunities to develop understanding of human creativity, arts, values, and reasoning. At the conclusion of this courses, students will be able to:

- Summarize and evaluate arguments for and against some central claims about human nature and existence.
- Evaluate logical arguments and distinguish valid from invalid reasoning.
- Knowledgeably discuss some major figures in the development of the Western intellectual tradition.
- Demonstrate an appropriate level of competence in the use of the library for intellectual research.

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3. REQUIRED BOOKS

The following required books may be purchased at LYON BOOKS, 121 W. 5th Street Chico (across from the City Plaza and next to the downtown post office):

- Clifford Williams. *Free Will and Determinism: A Dialogue*. (Hackett).
- Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*. (Hackett)
- George Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge and Three Dialogues*. (Oxford)
- John Perry, *A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality*. (Hackett)
- Timothy Robinson. *God (Hackett Readings in Philosophy)*. (Hackett)

Additional readings may be made available in class or through Electronic Reserve.

4. DETERMINATION OF FINAL GRADE.

The final grade is based on four equally valuable components:

(1) Quizzes. There will be an unannounced number of quizzes during the course of the semester, which may or may not be announced in advance—so always come prepared!

(2) Class contribution. This has a number of aspects:

Attendance: Students are required to attend *all class sessions*. Each student may miss up to two classes without grade penalty; there will be substantial penalties for missed classes beyond this limit.

Preparation and Participation: Students are required to come to class prepared and to take part in discussion in a way that demonstrates that they have been keeping up with the reading and lectures/discussions, *and have been thinking about the issues*.

Weekly writing assignments / presentations. Every Thursday (beginning with Week Two) each student will prepare a 1-2 page critical response to the week's reading. Selected students will be called on at the beginning of class to read their papers to the class to serve as a basis for discussion. The instructor may collect these assignments at the end of the class session. There will be *very substantial penalties* if these assignments are missed.

(3) Final paper. The final paper is to be from 5-7 pages in length and is due on the last day of finals week. Further paper requirements will be provided later in the semester.

(4) Final exam. The final examination will be held on Thursday, May 21 at 10:00 in the regular classroom for the course. The examination will be cumulative (i.e. will cover all of the material covered in the course.)

5. ADDITIONAL NOTES AND CLARIFICATIONS ON GRADING:

(a) The readings. Students are required to do *all* of the assigned reading *by the beginning of the session for which it has been assigned*. To “do” a reading is to engage with it: to spend some serious time and serious effort *before class* trying to understand what the author is trying to tell you. (This will usually involve reading the assigned text *at least twice*.) So expect to spend a lot of time and energy on the readings! Remember, the instructor’s job is to help you understand texts you have already grappled with on your own, not to spoon-feed you summaries of texts to which you have given a cursory glance. Philosophy is difficult and a philosophical text rarely yields up its full meaning on the first attempt. It is your responsibility to make sure that you have not only looked over the assigned readings, but have made a significant, genuine effort to understand them.

(b) The GE Events Requirement. GE guidelines state that students must “attend, where feasible, at least four relevant public events or arts events” during the course of the semester. Each student must submit a short (2-3 paragraph) description of each of the four events she chooses by the end of the semester. (The instructor will discuss in class what constitutes a “relevant” event.)

(c) Late assignment policy. The instructor’s policy on late assignments is very simple and straightforward: **no late written assignments will be accepted**. If you miss the deadline, you have missed your chance. *It is therefore crucial that you do not miss deadlines.*

(d) Standards for written work. All written work must be composed of complete, grammatically correct sentences. *Proper citation is essential*. Handwritten work is *not* acceptable. Points will be lost for poor grammar, misspellings, improper use of punctuation, awkward phrasing, confusing organization, etc. You should also take care to express your ideas as clearly as possible, to show that you have carefully considered the readings you address, and to display clear, careful thinking about the issues. *Always proofread your work carefully* before submitting it.

6. DISABILITY POLICY

Let the professor know if you have a disability and have course-related accommodation needs. It is your right, in accordance with the provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act, to make such requests.

7. ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

The standards of academic honesty as set forth in the CSU, Chico University catalog and other relevant documents are to be conformed to. **Plagiarism, or any other form of cheating, will result in a failing grade for the course, and will be reported to Student Judicial Affairs.** Students should understand that plagiarism includes *any* uncredited use of another person’s words, ideas, or intellectual work, or any attempt to claim as one’s own the product of someone else’s intellectual labor. This means that assignments must be written predominantly in your own words, and that any use of other people’s words or ideas (including those of other students!) *must* be footnoted and cited. **It is each student’s responsibility to ensure that she understands how to avoid plagiarism. See the instructor if you have any questions or are unclear on the matter.**

8. A WORD TO THE WISE: WHY BAD GRADES (SOMETIMES) HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE

A grade reflects one thing and one thing only: the quality of the work submitted by that student *for that particular course*. The fact that a student does well in her *other* classes is not relevant; nor is the fact that she is a very nice (or not nice) person, or that she tried her hardest, etc. A grade is not an evaluation of a person's character or personality; nor is it an evaluation of what he does in his other courses, or what he could have done in this one under ideal conditions (if he hadn't gotten the flu, broken up with his girlfriend, had a once in a lifetime chance in the middle of the semester to go to Mexico, etc.) It is not even (except indirectly) a reflection of how hard the student tried. Rather, one's final grade will reflect *the quality of the work actually submitted in order to complete the course*.

For this reason, personal circumstances, etc., are essentially irrelevant to the question of grading. A student who is having a difficult semester, for any of various reasons, might perform less well than he or she would have under other circumstances. And since some students are more naturally talented than others, some who work less hard might master the course material better than students who are working considerably harder. Nevertheless, if the work a student actually submits is of C quality, she will receive a C. Students, in other words, will be evaluated on the basis of their comprehension of the course materials, as reflected in the work they submit; they will *not* be graded on the basis of how much effort they put into it, nor on the hypothetical quality of the work they might have done under other, more favorable circumstances.

If a student should face extraordinarily difficult circumstances that prevent her from completing the course in a satisfactory manner (for instance, a serious accident or disruptive illness), the professor will be willing, should it be appropriate, to drop the student from the course without penalty. Under no circumstances, however, will the professor raise a student's grade in order to reflect his estimate of what that student might have done under better conditions. *Thus, the only way to earn an A for this course is to submit work that merits an A.*

9. CLASSROOM CONDUCT: THE CLASSROOM AS FREE SPEECH ZONE

It is important that students feel free to express or bring up any idea that they may wish to discuss. It does not matter if you are sure that it is true, if you think it might be true but is likely false, if you think it might offend somebody – what matters is whether you think it worth discussing. The point of philosophy is to try to get at the truth (or as near the truth as possible) and that will only happen if people are committed to free and open discussion. The philosophy classroom, then, ought to be a free speech zone—with one important exception, which is discussed in the box below.

Note what the phrase “free speech zone” *does* mean and what it *does not* mean. It *does* mean that students should be free in, and should not be prevented from, introducing and discussing any idea they think is worthy of discussion—even ideas that might strike some people as offensive.¹ It *does not* mean that everything that is said must be “respected” or treated (by the professor or by other students) as true or reasonable. (One can respect a person’s right to speak freely and truly while not respecting what is being said. Indeed, if we *prevent* others from disagreeing, or even from strongly disagreeing, then we are violating *their* right to free speech.) And it *does not* mean that there are no standards, or that it does not matter what is said in the classroom since, after all, “anything goes.” Some contributions are better—more reasonable, more articulate, better thought out—than others, and in the context of the classroom, students should always be trying to think and speak at the highest level possible. (For more detail on just what counts as “the highest level possible” see Appendix 1: “Standards: The levels at which students perform the task,” especially the “Conduct” and “Speaking/Reasoning” sections.)

The one exception to the free speech rule

The one exception to the free speech rule is this: **no one, student or instructor, may address another individual in an abusive manner or launch a personal attack.** At the risk of repetition: you may criticize the *ideas* of other people as strenuously as you like – indeed, we should all feel *obligated* to criticize all ideas as strenuously as we can – but at the same time, the people who voice the ideas must always be treated with respect. This is a fine but usually clear line; if the professor feels it is being crossed, he will say so, and students are expected to defer to his judgment on this matter. (Of course, if you feel you are being personally attacked and the professor doesn’t say anything, then you should speak up. But don’t respond by attacking the attacker.)

Self-criticism

As mentioned above, students are encouraged to be critical of the ideas discussed. The hardest, but perhaps most important, part of this is being critical of one’s *own* ideas. The talent for being self-critical—for asking “why do I believe this, and is my reason for believing it good enough?”—is what separates many otherwise competent thinkers from those who truly shine. We all know people who are so bound up in their own beliefs and prejudices that they cannot even take seriously the possibility that they might be mistaken. What is hard, but *essential*, is that you do your best to make sure that you yourself are not one of those people.

¹ What do you do when someone offers an idea you find offensive? You don’t have the right to keep them from speaking; but you certainly do have the right, as well as the obligation, to speak up and say exactly what you think of the proposal under consideration. (Students also have the right to leave the room if they feel very uncomfortable. It’s usually better, however, to stay and speak up, than to get up and leave.)

10. BAD ARGUMENTS

There are a lot of arguments in philosophy—by which we mean, reasoned defenses of one’s position on some matter—and a first step in learning to conduct oneself properly and proficiently in a philosophy classroom is to learn to recognize, and then avoid, certain common but weak types of argument. Here are three that are exceptionally common, and exceptionally important to avoid. If you find yourself using them, **stop**; if you hear someone else using one of them, call him on it! (Note: this is not intended as a comprehensive list; more bad arguments—and some good arguments as well—will be discussed in class.)

(1) “Well, that’s just my opinion.” If you have a *reason* for your opinion, say what it is; if you don’t, then it’s time for some self-criticism: i.e. ask yourself, *why* is that my opinion? (Is it something I absorbed growing up? Is it just something that makes me feel good to think, whether it’s true or not?) If you have no *evidence* to offer in favor of a claim, you shouldn’t expect others to accept it, and you should probably reconsider your own acceptance of it. In other words, once you are conceding that something is *just* your opinion, you’re not really engaged in rational discussion any more; you’re just spouting off.

(2) “Well, that’s just who I am.” There are many variants of this: “As a capitalist, I believe in free unregulated markets.” “As a Christian, I believe that homosexuality [or drug use, or lying, or insert your favorite vice] is a sin.” Citing membership in some group does not justify accepting the beliefs of that group: you need to give others some *reason* to accept the claims of capitalism, Christianity, or whatever group it is. Essentially this is the same argument as “that’s just my opinion.”

(3) Name-calling. This is the inverse of (2): instead of saying “I was brought up in France so I think *x* must be true,” people sometimes say things like “He was brought up in France, so whatever he thinks must be false.” Both arguments are equally lousy. Name-calling is equally lousy in its slightly more subtle forms—for instance, when people say things like “That’s just what liberals think,” or “You just got that from Rush Limbaugh.” Well, so what if liberals think it, or if Rush Limbaugh said it? It might still be true. In any serious discussion, what demands attention are the *reasons* (again, the *evidence*) for or against any given claim. Facts about who believes it, or doesn’t, are mere distractions.

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10. Frequently Asked Questions

Q. Do I *really* have to do *all* of the reading *before* the class begins?

A. Yes!

Q. What if I miss a class?

A. Find out what you missed *from one of the other students*. (Do *not* come into office hours expecting the instructor to re-present the material he has already presented during the regular class session.)

Q. If I miss a class, do I need to get the instructor an excuse?

A. No. A missed class is a missed class. If you miss two or fewer, there will be no penalty. If you miss three or more, there will be a penalty regardless of your reason for missing them. The only special case is if you miss so many that you cannot successfully complete the course, *and* have a very compelling justification for missing that many (some sort of *serious* life crisis). In that case, *provided with appropriate documentation, etc.*, the instructor may be willing to drop the student from the class. See section 5, “A Word to the Wise,” for more on the practice of grading.

Q. What happens if I miss a quiz?

A. You lose those points. That’s one of the reasons why it’s important not to miss classes!

Q. If I am e-mailing the instructor about something related to the class, what should I put in the subject line?

A. Just make sure the class number (101H) is in the subject line. This will make it much less likely that your e-mail will get lost in the ether.

Q. Is it okay to read newspapers during class time?

A. No! It’s very rude (and this applies to all your classes, not just this one.) Reading newspapers is fine, and indeed a good thing to make a habit of; but do it in the coffeeshop, not the classroom.

Q. Are we allowed to use laptops to take notes, etc.?

A. Sorry, no. First, the “etc.” is worrying—the instructor can never know whether you are actually paying attention, or whether you are surfing the web, *etc.* Second, even if you are paying attention, it tends to distract other students. Third, even if you *think* you are paying attention most laptop users are *themselves* fairly distracted, and are rarely capable of fully participating in classroom discussions. So: **No laptops, no cell phones (including texting), no iPods, etc.: no electronic devices of any kind! Turn them off before you come in.**

Q. What sort of extra credit is available in this class?

A. None. That’s why you need to come to every class, keep up with the readings and weekly writing assignments, and generally stay on top of things.

Q. Isn’t that expecting kind of a lot?

A. Yes! And you’re perfectly capable of it. As John Steinbeck said, “It is the nature of man to rise to greatness, if greatness is what is expected of him.” If other instructors expect less of you, *they’re* the ones you should complain to—their opinion of you is too low.