

PHIL 117: Problems in Philosophy

Whitman College – Fall 2011

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Mon. 1:00-2:00 & Thu. 2:30-4:30

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Course Description and Goals

The word '**philosophy**' derives from Greek words meaning '**love of wisdom**'. So philosophy attempts to determine some of the deepest truths about our existence and the reality around us. What distinguishes philosophy is not just the issues that it addresses, since some of these are also addressed by other fields (like science and religion). What is distinctive about philosophy is the way in which it attempts to answer those questions: through **reason**. Philosophers attempt to justify their views with arguments, laying out the strongest reasons in favor of their positions and responding to the strongest objections against them.

This course is an introduction to some of the main issues that have occupied philosophers since the time of the ancient Greeks, and to some of the main views that have been developed about them. We will focus on four topics:

- ★ **Truth:** What does it mean for something to be true? Is there objective truth? Why does it matter?
- ★ **Free Will:** What would it take for me to be genuinely responsible for my own actions? Am I?
- ★ **The Mind:** What is the nature of the mind? How does it work? How does the human mind compare to the minds of other creatures?
- ★ **Morality:** How should I decide what to do? What is ultimately, intrinsically valuable in life?

Throughout the semester, we will be particularly concerned with the interrelations among all of the different issues and views that we examine. We will also consider how these kinds of philosophical questions relate to scientific inquiry, and the proper method(s) and standard(s) for doing philosophy.

Rather than looking quickly at a wide range of views about these questions across the history of Western philosophy, we will work through a single contemporary author's sustained attempt to address each topic, including her or his framing of the relevant issues and their interrelations, description of the main alternatives, and defense of her or his own view. These books have been written by serious, important philosophers, but are aimed at a general audience without assuming any prior background (though students with some experience with philosophy should also find them rewarding). Working through them (nearly) in their entirety should give you an accurate sense of how philosophy is currently done, and promote deep engagement with the issues and thorough development of their implications.

Note that there is no expectation that you will accept the views of all, or even any, of these authors. While their views are certainly plausible and worth taking seriously, they are also controversial, and in some cases quite radical. They have been chosen not to convince you of anything in particular, but simply to stimulate your own philosophical reflection.

Texts to be Used

A good dictionary. (You can't understand the readings if you don't know what the words mean!)

Michael Lynch, *True to Life: Why Truth Matters* (MIT Press, 2005).

Susan Wolf, *Freedom within Reason* (Oxford University Press, 1994).

Daniel Dennett, *Kinds of Minds: Toward an Understanding of Consciousness* (Basic Books, 1997).

Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 3rd edn. (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

The four main books for the course are also currently on 3-hour reserve at the Circulation Desk.

CLEo & E-mail

Being registered for this course automatically gives you access to the CLEo site that I will be maintaining. To log in to the site, simply go to <http://cleo.whitman.edu> (or use the pull-down menu on the right side of the students' version of the main Whitman webpage). Your username and password are the same as for your Whitman e-mail account. All of the handouts and other course documents will be available in the "Resources" tab, and old e-mails as well as the list-server address can be found in the "Email Archive."

Note that I will often distribute important announcements, reminders, and clarifications through the class list-server (which you are also welcome to use). It is your responsibility to *check your account every day!*

Summary of Requirements and Grading

Reading Guides – 10% of your total grade

For each of our books, I've put together sets of questions for you to work through as you're reading. Some of the questions (marked with bullet-points) will relate primarily to understanding and interpreting the main issues and ideas of the text, while others (marked with stars) will be intended to prompt your own questions, concerns, and alternatives in response. The guides will help you engage with the books more effectively than you would by simply reading them cold, and so will better prepare you both for our class discussions and ultimately for the papers.

Each reading guide will be available on the CLEo site, in both Word and pdf formats: the Word file will enable you to type in your notes, while the pdf file will be easier to print if you'd like to write in your notes by hand. You should look at the questions for each day *before* you read, and then write/type your responses as you're reading and/or after you're done. Your answers do not need to be carefully-crafted prose; bullet-points, key phrases, and/or relevant page numbers will typically be enough. (You are also welcome to add additional notes during and after our class discussions – but please be sure to do that in a different color/font, so I can see the difference.)

Each reading guide will be submitted in its entirety (in electronic or paper form) when you submit the paper on that book. The reading guides will be graded on a 20-point scale, based on the thoroughness and care in your attempts to understand the text and to begin developing your own ideas in response. I recognize that you will be working on each day's questions *before* our discussion of that reading, and that there may be mistakes and dead-ends in the process. That's fine. Again, all I expect is that you be consistently thorough and careful in your work with the book.

Attendance and Participation – 10% of your total grade

Our class meetings will primarily focus on conversation about the readings and the larger issues that they address. It is essential for you to be an active and productive participant in our conversations. Philosophy is not a spectator sport! Understanding and insight take place *in the process* of engaging in discussion; they are not just products of it that you can passively absorb.

Careful completion of the reading guide before each class should give you a solid foundation for participating in our class meetings. But of course, you will then actually need to take the initiative to speak up. You should also be willing to think out loud, to raise questions that might seem basic, to offer interpretations that might seem uncertain, to propose links that might seem tenuous, to make arguments that might seem sketchy, and otherwise to take intellectual risks. In the process, you should be sure to address your classmates, and not just me. These are difficult readings about very difficult issues, and our class will only succeed to the extent that we're willing to struggle through them together.

More details about expectations and grading standards are printed below. If you find that you are having difficulty participating in class, you should at least discuss the texts and issues with me directly by stopping by my office hours or setting up meetings for other times. That's not the same as engaging in the group-conversations, but it's far better than doing nothing. And I'll be happy to meet with you at any point in the semester to help you develop some specific strategies and techniques for improving your participation.

NOTE: As a matter of **basic courtesy**, everyone in the room should be *fully mentally present*. No texting, tweeting, wuphping, or updating your status on The Facebook. If you have something else to do that can't wait, just go do that instead. If you're too drowsy to stay focused, just go home and take a nap. We're here to talk about the authors and issues, and everything you do in class should contribute to that. Otherwise, I may interrupt class to ask you to leave.

Papers – each worth 20% of your total grade

As we are working through each book, the reading guide and class discussions should help you to reflect on the author's ideas and arguments, and to develop your own thoughts in response. After we have finished with each one, you will submit a moderate-length essay (approximately 4-5 pages) presenting *some* kind of argument of your own that engages in a significant way with the text. More details about the assignment are printed below.

Rewrites: You will also have the opportunity (but not the obligation) of undertaking a substantial revision of any one or more of the first three papers. As long as your original paper reflects a credible attempt to complete the assignment well, the revised grade will replace the original. But if you have clearly blown off the original paper, then you will not be able to rewrite it for credit. The goal of the rewrite-option is to allow you to improve your work beyond what you're initially able to do. It's *not* meant to provide a safety-valve if you're busy with other things; that's what the extension-policy is for.

Writing Fellow

Nina Neff-Mallon is an outstanding senior philosophy major, who will be serving as the "Writing Fellow" for this course. Having honed her own skills in composing clear and convincing philosophical essays, she will now be working with you to develop yours. Of course, I will also be happy to meet with you, at any point in the semester; Nina's help is meant to supplement mine, and not replace it.

Before each paper, Nina will lead thesis-development workshops for small groups of students to hone their ideas and map out their arguments. And after each of the first three papers, she will be available for one-

on-one feedback strategy meetings to discuss the comments and suggestions you've received and to help you determine how to address them, either in rewriting that paper (if you choose to do so) or else in the next paper. More details about both of those are included with the explanation of the paper assignment at the end of the syllabus.

Each student will be **required** to participate in one of the thesis-development workshop before the first paper, and to schedule a one-on-one feedback strategy meeting with her after the first paper is returned. You will be **strongly encouraged** to participate in the later thesis-development workshops and to schedule feedback strategy meetings after the later papers are returned. Simply put: the more you work with Nina, the better your papers will be!

Please be sure to respect Nina's time and schedule at least as much as you would mine. Skipping a workshop or an appointment with her or cancelling later than 8:00 p.m. the night before will result in your overall grade for the course being lowered by 1% (i.e., about a third of a notch) each time that happens.

Academic Honesty

All of the work that you submit in this course must be entirely your own. Of course, you can seek help in a variety of ways as you're working on the papers. So it is **permitted** (and even encouraged!) for you: to consult additional readings, to search for material on the internet, to discuss your ideas with other students, to exchange notes with other students, and to read and to discuss drafts of each other's papers. But it is **not permitted** for you to use someone else's words or specific ideas in your written work without providing a proper citation to the source. Even if it's an accident, it's still plagiarism! You have a responsibility to keep track of the sources of the words and ideas in your work, and to include citations to them.

Plagiarism will *not* be tolerated in any form. You have signed a statement indicating that you understand and will abide by the College policy on plagiarism. **Any student caught plagiarizing will automatically fail the course, and may be expelled from the College.** For more details, see the Student Handbook.

If you have *any* questions about what would or wouldn't be plagiarism in this context, please just talk with me about it *in advance*.

Tentative Schedule of Topics & Assignments

1. Truth

Tue. Aug. 30 Lynch, introduction and ch. 1

Thu. Sep. 1 Lynch, ch. 2

Mon. Sep. 5 Lynch, ch. 3

Tue. Sep. 6 Lynch, chs. 2-3 (cont.)

Thu. Sep. 8 Lynch, ch. 5

Mon. Sep. 12 Lynch, ch. 4

Tue. Sep. 13 Lynch, ch. 8

Thu. Sep. 15 Lynch, ch. 9

Mon. Sep. 19 Lynch, ch. 10 and epilogue

2. Free Will

Tue. Sep. 20 Wolf, ch. 1

Thu. Sep. 22 Wolf, ch. 2

Mon. Sep. 26 Wolf, ch. 3

** paper about Lynch due **

Tue. Sep. 27 Wolf, ch. 4

Thu. Sep. 29 Wolf, ch. 4 (cont.)

Mon. Oct. 3 Wolf, ch. 5

Tue. Oct. 4 Wolf, ch. 5 (cont.)

Thu. Oct. 6 Wolf, ch. 6, *only* to p. 132

Mon. Oct. 10 **NO CLASS – FALL BREAK**

Tue. Oct. 11 **NO CLASS – FALL BREAK**

Thu. Oct. 13 Wolf, ch. 6, all

3. The Mind

Mon. Oct. 17 introductory discussion about the mind

Tue. Oct. 18 Dennett, ch. 1 and ch. 2 sec. 1 (through p. 26)

Thu. Oct. 20 Dennett, ch. 2 remainder (pp. 27-55)

** paper about Wolf due **

Mon. Oct. 24 Dennett, ch. 3

Tue. Oct. 25 Dennett, ch. 3 (cont.)

Thu. Oct. 27 Dennett, ch. 4

Mon. Oct. 31 Dennett, ch. 5

Tue. Nov. 1 Dennett, ch. 5 (cont.)

Thu. Nov. 3 Dennett, ch. 6

4. Morality

Mon. Nov. 7 Singer, ch. 1 and ch. 2 *only* through p. 24

Tue. Nov. 8 introduction to other approaches to ethics

Thu. Nov. 10 Singer, ch. 3

** paper about Dennett due **

Mon. Nov. 14 Singer, ch. 4
Tue. Nov. 15 Singer, ch. 4 (cont.)
Thu. Nov. 17 Singer, ch. 6 *except* the section on pp. 144-151

THANKSGIVING BREAK

Mon. Nov. 28 Singer, ch. 7
Tue. Nov. 29 Singer, ch. 7 (cont.)
Thu. Dec. 1 Singer, ch. 8

Mon. Dec. 5 Singer, ch. 10
Tue. Dec. 6 Singer, ch. 12
Thu. Dec. 8 semester wrap-up

*Mon. Dec. 12 * paper about Singer due by 11:00 a.m. **

Class Participation Expectations and Standards

As with any conversation, you can't usefully participate in class if you don't have anything to contribute. So it is essential that you come to our meetings prepared:

- Read (and often re-read) the assigned text carefully before class.
- Use the questions on the reading guide to develop your initial understanding of the text and some initial reactions to it. Be as thorough and careful as you reasonably can.
- Identify further questions, issues, and ideas to discuss that stem from your own interests and insights.

With so many of us in the room, no one person needs to talk all of the time. As long as you are regularly involved in the discussion, the *quality* of your contribution is much more important than the *quantity* of time that you're speaking. As mentioned earlier, there are many different ways of contributing, all of which are very important. At the same time, I hope that you don't settle into a rut, but rather try different forms of participation on different occasions. I also understand that everyone has good days and not-so-good days; some of the readings and conversation topics will engage you more than others. Your participation grade will be based on your overall involvement throughout the semester.

These are the grading criteria that will be used:

An **OUTSTANDING** participant (A-level) typically:

- Displays deep enthusiasm and engagement with the texts and issues.
- Plays a leadership role and advances the conversation to new levels.
- Contributes complex insights into the texts and issues.
- Draws connections among the different texts and issues.
- Raises provocative new questions and issues.
- Enhances the participation of others by questioning, actively listening, and sharing time.

A **GOOD** participant (B-level) typically:

- Shows interest and effort.
- Stays on-topic and furthers the conversation.
- Expresses substantial, well-grounded ideas.
- Asks good questions about the texts and issues.
- Speaks to other students, and not just me.

An **ADEQUATE** participant (C-level) typically:

- Listens but does not volunteer.
- Shows acquaintance with the texts and signs of preparation if called on.
- Offers opinions on the text, but without specific textual reference or other support.

UNACCEPTABLE (failing) behavior includes any of the following:

- Frequent absence
- No evidence of preparation.
- Dozing off in class. (If you're that sleepy, you should simply go home and take a nap!)
- Other signs of disengagement: doodling, working for another class, etc.
- "Toxic" or hostile behavior that undermines our intellectual community.

Paper Assignments

The purpose of the papers is to give you a forum to develop, express, and defend your own ideas about the course material, and to receive my feedback and guidance about those ideas. The only requirements are:

1. Your essay must directly engage at least one significant view from the assigned book.

On the one hand, you shouldn't try to evaluate the author's entire argument – that's far too much material for this assignment. But on the other hand, you shouldn't simply nitpick or take a claim in isolation. You should aim for something in between: an aspect of the author's view that's focused enough to be manageable, while still important enough to be worth examining.

2. Your essay must explain and support a single, main claim (i.e., a thesis).

Your essay shouldn't simply present a series of reactions, but should instead be shaped into a unified argument with a definite conclusion.

Very generally, some of the possibilities include:

- Identify one of the important assumptions behind an author's view.
- Provide further or different support for one of the author's central claims.
- Present an objection to one of the author's central claims.
- Defend one of the main alternative views that the author argues against.
- Propose a new alternative view of your own development.
- Explore the connections between two different aspects of the author's view.
- Relate one of the author's main ideas to the views of another author that we've read.
- Extend or apply one of the author's main ideas to some other issue that she or he doesn't consider.

I will distribute some possible topics as we finish each book. But those will simply be possibilities to consider and inspire your own thinking. Any topic at all will be fine, as long as it satisfies the two requirements listed above.

Length: Your paper should be just as long as it needs to be – no longer, and no shorter. As a *rough* guide, I would expect most students to need about 4-5 pages to give adequate attention to an appropriate topic.

Format:

- Your essay should be typed using 12-point Times New Roman font, with one-inch margins all around.
- In the upper left-hand corner, single-spaced, you should list your name, the course, my name, and the date.
- The title of your essay should be centered and in bold font, and it should indicate the specific topic or view that you will discuss. (Cleverness is optional.)
- The body of your paper should be double-spaced.
- You should use parenthetical citation, not footnotes or endnotes.
- You should *not* include a list of works cited, *unless* you use sources that aren't assigned for this class.
- Multiple pages must be stapled together. If possible, please print on both sides of the paper.

Citation (*very important!*): If you use someone else's exact words, you must put them in quotation marks, and you must give proper acknowledgment. You must also acknowledge any specific passages or ideas that you paraphrase. Remember, you have a responsibility to keep track of the sources of the words and ideas in your work, and to include citations to them. Failure to provide citations when called for, whether intentionally or not, constitutes plagiarism – and will result in an 'F' for the course.

Extension Policies:

- If you have a Whitman-sanctioned activity (such as athletics or debate), a religious observance, or a pre-planned family event (such as a wedding), you should talk with me in advance, and I'll be happy to make any reasonable accommodation.
- If you have an unexpected emergency (such as a significant illness or death in the family), you should talk with one of Whitman's Powers That Be (such as the Dean of Students or Counseling Center) as soon as you can afterwards. Once I get official clearance, I will be happy to make any reasonable accommodation.
- For any other reason you like, or for no particular reason at all, you may take a 4-day (exactly: 96 hour) extension on *any two* of the four papers. That means that a paper due on a Monday would instead be due by that Friday, and a paper due on a Thursday would instead be due by the following Monday. In all cases, the deadline remains 11:00 a.m. Note that taking an extension on the fourth paper will require you to submit it on a day that you could have one or two final exams from other classes. That's your choice to make.
- You don't need to tell me in advance if/when you decide to take an extension; you can simply submit that paper at the later time.

*** *Late papers will not be accepted for credit under any other circumstances!!!***

Rewrite Policies for Papers #1 - #3:

Philosophy takes place through dialog: the philosophers we read are all in dialog with other philosophers, and we're in dialog with them and with each other about them. That's the goal of our in-class discussions, and it applies to our writing as well: the surest way to improve as both a philosopher and a writer is to build from the feedback and responses you get to your work.

Thus, you are permitted (though not required) to rewrite any one or more of the first three papers. But it's essential for your rewrite to be substantial; just fixing a few typos and adding a quotation or two isn't productive, and won't be accepted. If you decide to rewrite one of the papers, here are the steps you must follow:

1. ***Within 7 days*** of receiving the graded essay, develop a specific plan for improving the essay, as explained above, and then have a feedback strategy meeting with Nina or with me (see below).
2. ***Within 10 days*** of receiving the graded essay, submit the completed rewrite. Along with it, you should also submit the original graded version and the plan you discussed at the feedback strategy meeting.

If your rewrite shows significant work to make substantive improvements, then its grade will replace the original grade. If your rewrite shows only superficial changes, then your original grade will stand. (And remember, if your original paper doesn't reflect a credible attempt to complete the assignment well, then you won't be able to rewrite it for credit.)

How Nina Can Help You

(1) Thesis-Development Workshops:

In the days leading up to the due-date for each paper, Nina will lead a series of thesis-development workshops with small groups of students. Those will help you to refine and to focus your ideas, and then to structure your paper to support your thesis in a systematic way.

Prior to the workshop, you will be expected to have a written plan with a draft thesis and an outline/sketch of how your paper will present and support it. Of course, you are welcome to modify that plan in whatever ways seem appropriate based on the workshop.

At the end of the workshop Nina will initial that plan, for you to submit with your paper. Details about the timing of the workshops and the process for signing up will be announced as each paper approaches.

Note that all students will be **required** to participate in a thesis-development workshop before the first paper is due. For the remaining papers, participating in a workshop will be strongly encouraged – it's a very small time-commitment that could make a big difference in the quality of your work!

(2) Feedback Strategy Meetings:

In order to improve your philosophical understanding and insight, as well as your ability to present and support those in writing, it is crucial for you to build from the feedback you receive your papers. After each of the first three papers is returned, Nina will be available for one-on-one meetings to talk through your understanding of the feedback and suggestions that you've received, as well as your ideas for addressing the issues that have been pointed out – either in rewriting that paper (see above) or in writing the next paper.

Prior to a meeting, you will be expected to develop a specific, written plan for how you would/will improve the essay in response to the comments and suggestions provided. It should be as specific as possible: Don't just state goals; explain how to achieve them. If there are problems with the structure and organization, figure out how you can rearrange and/or make the steps of your argument clearer. If your representation of the author's claims isn't entirely accurate, then check the text and your class notes again to improve your understanding. If there are concerns about the strength of your view, develop further arguments to support it and/or refine it to be more plausible.

At the end of the meeting Nina will initial your plan, for you to submit either on its own or with your rewrite. Details about Nina's availability and the process for setting up a meeting will be announced when each paper is returned.

Note that all students will be **required** to schedule a feedback strategy meeting with Nina after the first paper is returned. For the remaining papers, having such a meeting will be strongly encouraged – again, it's a very small time-commitment that could make a big difference in the quality of your work!

Elements of a Successful Philosophy Paper

A successful philosophical essay advances a position with clarity, momentum, and the force of compelling evidence. It must include:

1. A **thesis**. This is the position which you are proposing. It should be stated clearly and fully at the outset of the paper. (Surprise is not a virtue!) A thesis is not just the topic or issue you are writing about, it is what you are claiming about that topic or issue.
2. Clear **organization** and explicit **structure**. State your thesis at the outset of the paper and then organize your paragraphs to prove that thesis. Each paragraph should have its own “paragraph thesis,” stated at its beginning, which that paragraph tries to establish. A paragraph is not a typographical unit but an intellectual unit: one paragraph should equal one main idea. You should also make it clear to your reader how each paragraph/idea contributes to your overall thesis.
3. Careful use of **textual evidence**. Every idea that you attribute to the author should be grounded in citations to specific passages from the text. You should use direct quotes only if the exact words of the author are important, or if you couldn’t possibly capture the idea better yourself; otherwise, you should paraphrase. Whenever you do quote, make sure that you also explain in your own words what the quoted passage is saying and how it fits into your discussion.
4. Thorough and convincing **arguments** in support of your thesis about the author’s views. Simply stating your view isn’t enough; you need to articulate as clearly and carefully as you can why you think that. Provide as complete a statement of your reasoning as you possibly can, and when you reach its foundation, identify your starting assumptions explicitly. If you can think of any examples to help illustrate your view, present them and explain how they help. As well, you should consider what kinds of objections or counter-examples might be presented, and do your best to avoid or address them.
5. **Mechanical correctness**. There is no excuse for mistakes! You should refer to Hacker’s *Pocket Style Manual* for matters of grammar and usage, and to your dictionary for matters of spelling. Make sure that you proofread very carefully.

Grading Standards

It is important to understand that the quality of your understanding and insight cannot directly be graded. All that can be graded is the *product* of that understanding and insight: your paper. These are the standards of evaluation that I employ:

An **OUTSTANDING** (A-level) paper:

- Reveals a thorough and careful reading of the text.
- Contains sophisticated and penetrating insights into the text and issues.
- Draws interesting and thought-provoking connections among ideas.
- Moves well beyond our class discussions.
- Is written in lucid and elegant prose.
- Is well-organized, with a logical flow.
- Displays a clear structure, with a helpful introduction, transitions, and conclusion.
- Is virtually flawless in its mechanics, with almost no typos, misspellings, or mistakes of grammar or punctuation.

A **GOOD** (B-level) paper:

- Indicates a good grasp of the text and issues.
- Proposes a thesis that goes beyond what's directly stated in the text and what we directly discussed in class.
- Develops a coherent line of argument.
- Is written clearly enough to convey its points.
- Follows a discernible structure.
- Has few mechanical errors, such as typos, misspellings, and mistakes of grammar and punctuation.
- May compensate for weakness in some aspects with particular strength in others.

A **POOR** (C-level) paper:

- Displays some understanding of the text and issues.
- Indicates a reasonable attempt to address the assignment.

but has serious flaws, such as:

- Incomplete or partially mistaken views about the text or issues.
- Too little substance beyond summarizing the text.
- Insufficient evidence and argumentation to articulate and support its basic claims.
- Jumping from point to point without a central line of argument or discussion.
- Writing that is too unclear to express your thoughts.
- Major mechanical errors: too many typos, misspellings, and/or mistakes of grammar and punctuation.

UNACCEPTABLE (failing) work may include any of the following:

- A complete misunderstanding of the material.
- A lack of substance normally found in college-level work.
- Incomprehensible writing.