

PHIL 270: Metaphysics

Whitman College – Fall 2011

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

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.

Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that attempts to understand the ultimate nature of reality – what the nature of the world really is, what things the world really does contain, what the different categories of existing things really are, and what kinds of relations really exist among those things. It considers such basic concepts as existence, identity, possibility, necessity, substance, matter, form, cause, and time.

In this course, we will focus on the metaphysics of **human beings**, and in particular on three issues:

- ★ **Personal Identity:** What makes me the same person at one time as at another?
- ★ **The Self:** What exactly am I? Is there really such a thing as a unified self at the core of my being?
- ★ **Free Will:** What would it take for me to be genuinely responsible for my own actions? Am I?

In the process, we will also touch on philosophical views related to a number of other metaphysical issues, such as the nature of substance and causation. 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 metaphysical questions relate to questions in other areas of philosophy, such as epistemology (how can our beliefs be justified?) and ethics (how should one live?), and how all of these different branches of philosophy relate to scientific inquiry.

While metaphysics has occupied philosophers for millennia, in this class we will focus on current approaches and theories. This means that we will be examining some difficult and complicated texts in contemporary philosophy. Nonetheless, this course is meant as an introduction to philosophy, and does not assume any prior background (though students with more experience with philosophy should also find it rewarding). We will take the time to make sure that at least the main ideas are clear and accessible to everyone.

Texts to be Used

Raymond Martin & John Barresi, eds., Personal Identity (Blackwell, 2002) [labeled PI on schedule]

Robert Kane, ed., Free Will (Blackwell, 2001) [labeled FW on schedule]

Daniel Wegner, The Illusion of Conscious Will (MIT, 2003)

In addition, there are a number of readings available on the course CLEo site (explained below). I strongly recommend that you print out those readings so that you can mark them up, and have them available in class and when writing papers. If you do print them out, I strongly encourage you to print on both sides of the paper, if possible. (Most campus printers can print double-sided – if you're unsure how, just ask.)

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. The site is pretty simple to navigate. Please take a few minutes now to poke around and see what is (or could be) there.

Note that I will often distribute important announcements, reminders, and clarifications through the class list-server. It is your responsibility to *check your Whitman e-mail account every day!*

Summary of Requirements and Grading

Preparation and Participation – 15% 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.

To be an effective participant, you must carefully read (and often re-read) the assignment before class, and come to our meetings with questions and ideas to discuss. There will occasionally be additional preparatory assignments for you to complete. More details about expectations and grading standards are printed below.

Response Papers – 60% of your total grade (10% each, with lowest grade dropped)

As we are examining the different views, it is important for you to reflect on the ideas presented and to develop your own thoughts in response. About once every two weeks, you will have the opportunity to articulate and to support your views on the material in a brief essay. Students will be split into two groups, with essays typically (but not always) due on alternating weeks, as indicated on the schedule below. More details about the assignment are printed at the end of this syllabus.

Final Examination – 25% of your total grade

There will be a comprehensive take-home final examination, which you will be able to complete at your convenience during exam week. The exam questions will give you an opportunity to demonstrate that you have understood, synthesized, and reflected on the issues and views that we've examined throughout the semester. More details will be provided toward the end of the semester.

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. Personal Identity

Tue. Aug. 30 Perry, Dialogue on Personal Identity – CLEo

Thu. Sep. 1 Williams, "The Self and the Future," PI pp. 75-91

Tue. Sep. 6 Nozick, "Personal Identity through Time," PI pp. 92-114

Thu. Sep. 8 Parfit, "Why Our Identity is Not What Matters," PI pp. 115-43

Mon. Sep. 12 *response paper due for BOTH groups*

Tue. Sep. 13 Lewis, "Survival and Identity," PI pp. 144-67

Thu. Sep. 15 Schechtman, "Empathic Access," PI pp. 238-59

Mon. Sep. 19 *response paper due for group A*

Tue. Sep. 20 Korsgaard, "Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency," PI pp. 168-83

2. The Self

Thu. Sep. 22 Crane, "Mental Substances" – CLEo

Mon. Sep. 26 *response paper due for group B*

Tue. Sep. 27 Strawson, "The Self," PI *only* pp. 335-42 and 344-63

Thu. Sep. 29 Dainton, "The Self and the Phenomenal" – CLEo

Mon. Oct. 3 *response paper due for group A*

Tue. Oct. 4 Braude, First Person Plural, excerpts of chs. 3 and 7 – CLEo

Thu. Oct. 6 Dennett, Consciousness Explained, ch. 5 sec. 1 and ch. 13 – CLEo

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

Wed. Oct. 12 *response paper due for group B*

Thu. Oct. 13 Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, The Embodied Mind, ch. 4 and excerpts of ch. 6 – CLEo

Mon. Oct. 17 *response paper due for group A*

Tue. Oct. 18 Albahari, "Nirvana and Ownerless Consciousness" – CLEo

Thu. Oct. 20 Gallagher & Marcel, "The Self in Contextualized Action" – CLEo

Mon. Oct. 24 *response paper due for group B*

3. Free Will

Tue. Oct. 25 Williams, Free Will and Determinism, excerpts – CLEo

Thu. Oct. 27 Nielsen, "The Compatibility of Freedom and Determinism," FW pp. 39-46
Dennett, "I Could Not Have Done Otherwise – So What?" FW pp. 83-94

Mon. Oct. 31 *response paper due for group A*

Tue. Nov. 1 Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility" – CLEo
Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," FW pp. 127-44

Thu. Nov. 3 Wolf, "Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility," FW pp. 145-63

Mon. Nov. 7 *response paper due for group B*

Tue. Nov. 8 van Inwagen, "The Mystery of Metaphysical Freedom," FW pp. 189-95
Chisholm, "Human Freedom and the Self," FW pp. 47-58
O'Connor, "The Agent as Cause," FW pp. 196-205

Thu. Nov. 10 Kane, "Free Will: New Directions for an Ancient Problem," FW only pp. 222-40

Mon. Nov. 14 *response paper due for BOTH groups*

Tue. Nov. 15 Wegner, Illusion of Conscious Will, ch. 1

Thu. Nov. 17 Wegner, Illusion of Conscious Will, chs. 2-3

THANKSGIVING BREAK

Tue. Nov. 29 Wegner, Illusion of Conscious Will, ch. 5 and pp. 254-70

Thu. Dec. 1 Wegner, Illusion of Conscious Will, ch. 9

Mon. Dec. 5 *response paper due for BOTH groups*

Tue. Dec. 6 Pereboom, "Determinism al Dente" – CLEo

Thu. Dec. 8 semester wrap-up

Class Participation Expectations and Standards

Most of our time together will be spent in a group conversation about the issues, views, and questions suggested by the readings. You will learn not only from the authors and from me, but also from each other.

As with any conversation, you can't usefully participate if you don't have anything to contribute or if you don't know what you're talking about. So it is essential that you come to our meetings well-prepared:

- Carefully read (and often re-read) the assignment before class.
- Reflect on the reading, and identify some questions, issues, and ideas that are worth discussing.
- Complete any additional assignments that have been given.

Everyone in the class should be a part of our conversation. With around 20 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 contributions is much more important than the *quantity* of time that you're speaking. I also understand that everyone has good days and not-so-good days; some of the readings and issues will engage you more than others. Your participation grade will be based on your overall involvement throughout the semester.

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

- Displays genuine enthusiasm and engagement with the readings.
- 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-supported ideas.
- Asks good questions about the texts and issues.
- Engages other students, and not just me.

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

- Listens but does not volunteer.
- Shows acquaintance with the texts and some signs of preparation if called on.
- Offers opinions on and reactions to the texts, but without specific textual references 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.

Response Papers

The purpose of the response papers is to give you a forum throughout the semester to develop and express your own thoughts about the course material. The only requirements are:

1. **Your essay must make direct contact with at least one specific idea or passage from one of the readings that we discussed since your previous paper was due.**
2. **Your essay must make a point: explain and support a particular claim (i.e., your thesis).**

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.
- 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.

These are only suggestions; any other topic is fine, as long as it satisfies the two requirements listed above.

Length: There is an *absolute* maximum length of **1000 words**.

(I mean it! – Longer papers will not be accepted for credit!)

Due: Papers are due by *noon* on the day specified on the schedule. You should submit your paper to my mailbox in the main Olin office. (I am willing to accept papers through e-mail only if truly necessary.)

Students who will be away from campus or unable to complete an assignment because of a Whitman-sanctioned activity (such as a sport), a religious observance, or a pre-planned family event (such as a wedding) should talk with me *in advance* to make other arrangements to complete that assignment. In such situations, accommodations will *not* be made after the fact.

If you find yourself in an extraordinary circumstance, such as a prolonged illness or family emergency, you should first talk with one of Whitman's Powers That Be (Dean of Students, Counseling Center, etc.). In that case, I will be willing to make any reasonable accommodation to help you get back on track.

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.
- At the end of your essay, you should include a word-count.
- Multiple pages must be stapled together. If possible, please print double-sided.

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.

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 an 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 believe it. 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. **Precise expression**. Language is your only means of communication, and so it's vital for you to use it effectively. Your words should capture exactly what you mean – no less and no more.
6. **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 will employ:

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

- Reveals a thorough and careful reading of the text(s).
- Contains sophisticated and penetrating insights into the text(s) 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(s) and issues.
- Proposes a thesis that goes beyond what's directly stated in the text(s) 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(s) and issues.
- Indicates a reasonable attempt to address the assignment.

but has serious flaws, such as:

- Incomplete or partially mistaken views about the text(s) or issues.
- Too little substance beyond summary.
- 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.

★ In calculating your overall grade, **your lowest response paper grade will be dropped**. However, **you must complete all seven response papers** at a passing level. If you miss or fail one of the response papers, that will count as part of your overall grade and the next lowest grade will be dropped instead.