

# Introduction to Philosophy: Philosophical Questions

*Instructor:* Andrew Werner

*Time:* Tues/Th 2:30-3:50pm

*Location:* SMUD 205

*Office:* Science Center A020

*Office Hours:* Wednesday 10am-12pm

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## Course Description

In this course, we will explore two connected, but nevertheless distinct subjects: philosophy and academic philosophy. Philosophy is the love of wisdom, concerned chiefly with living an examined life. When doing philosophy we ask and seek to answer the most fundamental questions about the human condition: What is the good life? What is the meaning of existence? What is truth? How do I relate to the world? These questions might be asked and answered in all kinds of ways: for instance, in a short story or through studying a film. All of the humanities are concerned with these questions.

Academic philosophy is a specific discipline within the humanities, one that cultivates and deploys a certain set of tools in its attempt to ask and answer the questions of philosophy: chiefly, specific methods for critically reading and writing and engagement with certain texts. The value of academic philosophy lies in its ability to help us do philosophy.

This course will examine some of the fundamental questions at stake in philosophy through deploying and teaching the tools of academic philosophy. The ultimate point of the course is to help you live a more reflective life. By developing the skills to read and write in a more argumentatively rigorous way, you will develop your understanding of the human condition, of *your* condition, and as a result be able to more thoughtfully and consistently act in light of that understanding.

## Requirements

### **Academic Honesty**

Please read the Statement of Intellectual Responsibility, as well as the other information contained in 'Academic Honesty and Plagiarism' on the Dean of Students website <[www.amherst.edu/campuslife/deanstudents/acadhonesty](http://www.amherst.edu/campuslife/deanstudents/acadhonesty)>. If you have any questions about what constitutes academic honesty or dishonesty, come speak to me about them. ("But I didn't know that was plagiarism" will not serve as an excuse.)

You are not expected to consult any sources other than those assigned. If you do so for an assignment, you must credit that source (a footnote stating what the source is and what you have gained from it will suffice).

### **Deadlines**

Some students will encounter personal crises, family emergencies, and other struggles throughout the semester. I am committed to doing what I can to see to it that those students' performance is not adversely affected by these external factors. If you find that you are unable to complete an assignment by the deadline because of some crisis or emergency, do contact me and let me know

what is going on. This is crucial, for I can only help you if I know what is going on. And it is just as crucial that you contact me *on or before* the deadline, for, once the deadline has passed, there is much less I can do to help. Do not assume, without contacting me, that you may turn an assignment in late.

## Short Writing Assignments

One of the major goals of this course is to train you to become better academic philosophers. In particular, by the end of the course you will have the capacity to read and write in an argumentatively rigorous way at the collegiate level. Reading and writing in this way involves an interlocking but distinguishable set of skills.

There will be short, written assignments for every class (starting in week 3). Each of these assignments will be designed to isolate a specific skill that is important to reading and/or writing in an argumentatively rigorous way. Each assignment should take you between 30 minutes and 1 hour. The first assignment for each week is due on Wednesday by 5pm; the second on Friday by 5pm. The assignments will be returned to you promptly (typically within 24 hours), and will be graded with a check plus, check, or check minus. Where appropriate, I will provide a sentence or two of feedback on each of these assignments.

*Note on Reading:* we will together develop strategies for reading philosophical texts over the course of the semester. To start with, though, I will provide you with reading questions to facilitate your engagement with the text. I **strongly encourage** you to write out the answers to these questions as you read, to look back over them after you have finished reading, and then to bring them to class. (In fact, if you would like, you may turn in your answers; I will happily read them and give you feedback on them.) You should expect the reading to progress slowly, and should plan how much time it will require accordingly.

## Essays

In addition to the short written assignments, you will be expected to write two five page essays. This is really where the work of the semester pays off, where it all comes together: as a result of developing the individual tools through class participation and the short assignments, you will be able to write an essay that is much more argumentatively satisfying, both to others and for yourself. As a result, you will be able to ask and answer the questions required to lead an examined, reflective life in a more sustained and developed way. And so you will be able to live in a way that is more attuned to what you take to be the ultimate point of it all.

For each paper, you will turn in a first draft; you will receive full credit for this draft if you turn it in on time and demonstrate that you put in good faith effort on it. I will give you extensive feedback on the draft, and you will then be responsible for revising it and resubmitting it. You may turn in any number of further drafts before the deadline for the final version of the paper, and I will provide feedback on them as well.

## **Presentations**

At some point in the semester (after week 6), you will be expected to give a group presentation. Each group will consist of 4-5 people. Your group will be assigned one class session, and you will be expected to present on the reading assigned for that class session. We will develop the format of the presentation gradually over the course of the first half of the semester. In essence, the presentation will consist in (1) breaking down the reading into its major parts, (2) giving an account of each of the parts, (3) their significance, and (4) asking critical questions about each part. We will discuss the questions as a class after the presentation. Each presentation should be roughly 20-25 minutes long, with equal time given to each member of the group (roughly, 5 minutes of speaking each).

The presentation gives you the opportunity to try to talk through some philosophical issues. This is an important component of the course because philosophy and academic philosophy are not just about reading and writing – they are also about effective oral communication. Throughout the semester, you will be developing this skill in the classroom, in office hours with me, and (I trust) in conversation with one another outside of class. The group presentation is one place in which you can bring together the oral communication skills you are developing through these other avenues.

## **Class Participation**

Attendance is required and will be checked every class. It counts as 20% of your grade. To get full credit for attending you must (1) come to class on time (2) with the reading printed out. You must also (3) participate in class. Large chunks of this class will be conducted as a seminar; large chunks of it will be done in small groups. Both seminars and small group discussions require active participation from everyone.

I recognize that not everyone is completely comfortable speaking up in a larger setting. But that lack of comfort is outweighed by your moral obligation to yourself, me, and your classmates to speak up. If something seems false or confusing to you, and you let us pass on without speaking up about it, then you have robbed us all of the opportunity to learn.

## **Electronic devices**

Use of electronic devices is not permitted during class time. Again, this is the result of our shared moral obligation to treat the classroom as an environment where we hold each other accountable for learning. You need only bring your printed text and a notepad.

## **Office hours**

I will hold weekly office hours and I encourage you to stop by. Office hours are an invaluable opportunity for you to work through some question, concern, thought with me in a way that is maximally tailored not only to that question, concern or thought but also to your individual understanding. They are also an invaluable opportunity for me to get to know more about how class

is going, and to alter my teaching accordingly. If you cannot make my normal office hours, or would like to meet more often than they permit, email me – I'm happy, even eager, to arrange meetings outside of my regularly appointed times.

To facilitate your engagement with office hours and with the course more generally, everyone will be **required** to sign up for one 30 minute office hour sometime during the first or second week (the sign-up sheet will be handed around in the first class, and posted on Moodle). The point of this meeting is twofold: first, to give me a chance to get to know you; second, to prompt you to articulate, for yourself and for me, what you want to achieve by taking this course. This will not only help you direct your participation more effectively throughout the semester; it will also help me design the class to more effectively help you achieve your goals.

### **Disability Statement**

This course is open to all students who meet the academic requirements for participation. Any student who has a need for accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact Charri Boykin-East, Senior Associate Dean of Students, at [cjboykineast@amherst.edu](mailto:cjboykineast@amherst.edu) or in Converse Hall 105. Only those students with a documented disability can arrange for accommodations, and it is the student's responsibility to inform the professor of those accommodations once Dean Boykin-East has documented a disability. For more info, see: [www.amherst.edu/campuslife/deanstudents/disability](http://www.amherst.edu/campuslife/deanstudents/disability).

### **Grading**

Attendance: 20%

Short Writing Assignments: 20%

Presentation: 10%

Essay Drafts (2, 5% each): 10%

Revised Essays (2, 20% each): 40%

### **Reading Schedule**

\*All texts will be made available *via* Moodle. Also, this reading schedule is provisional: we may speed up, slow down, skip readings, or add readings, depending on where our discussion leads and the interests of members of the class.

### **The Meaning of Life, Death, and the Afterlife (Weeks 1-5)**

9/6 - Plato, *Apology*

9/11 - Plato, *Phaedo*

9/13 – Plato, *Phaedo*

9/18 – Plato, *Phaedo*; Perry, *Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality*, First Night

9/25 – Perry, *Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality*, Second Night

9/26 – (OUTSIDE OF CLASS) Film Screening: *Ikiru*

9/27 – *Ikiru*, discussion

10/2 – Wolf, ‘The Meanings of Lives’

10/4 – Sartre, *Nausea*, excerpt

FALL BREAK

10/11 - Epicurus, excerpts on death; Nagel, ‘Death’

## **Emotion**

10/16 – Aristotle, *Rhetoric*; Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, chs. 1-2 (selections)

10/18 - Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, chs. 1-2 (selections); optional reading: Seneca, ‘On Anger’, selections

10/22 – (OUTSIDE OF CLASS) Film Screening: *Inside Out*

10/23 – Keltner and Ekman, ‘The Science of Inside Out’; Scarlet, ‘“Inside Out” – Emotional Truths by Way of Pixar’; Hewitson, ‘Inside Out and the “Science” of Emotions’

10/30 – Lorde, ‘The Uses of Anger’

11/1 – Lorde, ‘Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power’

## **Knowledge and Skepticism**

11/6 – Descartes, *Meditation 1*

11/8 – Descartes, *Meditation 1*

11/13 – Descartes, *Meditation 2*

11/15 – Descartes, *Meditation 2*

THANKSGIVING BREAK

11/27 – A visit to the Mead Art Museum

11/29 – Putnam, ‘Brains in a Vat’

12/4 – Putnam, 'Brains in a Vat'

12/6 – Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, excerpt

12/11 – Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, excerpt