

PHIL 117: Problems in Philosophy

Whitman College – Spring 2020

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stop by to talk

Wed. & Thu. 2:30 - 4:00

Writing Fellow: XXX

Course Description

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 reflection. Philosophers attempt to justify their views purely with analysis and 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?
- ★ **Personal Identity:** What makes me the particular person that I am? What makes me a person at all?
- ★ **Morality:** What is ultimately, intrinsically valuable in life? How should that be pursued?

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

Rather than looking quickly at a wide range of views about these questions across the history of 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 wider audience without assuming much 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 respects 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

- Michael Lynch, *True to Life: Why Truth Matters* (MIT Press, 2005).
- Susan Wolf, *Freedom within Reason* (Oxford University Press, 1994).
- Hilde Lindemann, *Holding and Letting Go: The Social Practice of Personal Identities* (Oxford University Press, 2014).
- Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, 2nd edn. updated (University of California Press, 2013).

These books are also currently on 3-hour reserve at the Penrose Library Circulation Desk.

Learning Goals

This class satisfies the Humanities distribution requirement, by pursuing the following learning goals:

- Read texts with precision and generosity.
- Recognize and appreciate the various philosophical dimensions of complex problems.
- Effectively communicate, both in speech and in writing, insights drawn from the works you have read.

The class also contributes to the curriculum in the Philosophy Department, by pursuing the following learning goals:

- Use philosophical tools for close reading, analysis, and argument.
- Discover and question hidden assumptions in your own views and the views of others.
- Develop individual insights, and present them clearly in writing.

Support for Students with Disabilities

I believe that every student should have an equal opportunity to succeed in this course. If you are a student with a disability who might need accommodation in order to have that opportunity fully, please meet with Antonia Keithahn in the Academic Resources Center for assistance in developing a plan to address your academic needs. All information about disabilities is considered private, and so if I receive notification that you are eligible to receive an accommodation due to a verified disability, I will provide it in as discreet a manner as possible.

Technology

In the Classroom: You are welcome to use a computer, tablet, or smart-phone in the classroom, as long as it is *exclusively* focused on our immediate tasks: the readings, note-taking, etc. You should ***never, ever*** take even a moment to check your e-mail, blog your status on The Facebook, tweet your snapchat, etc. If I catch you doing that even once, you will no longer be permitted to use such devices in class.

Communication outside of Class: I will often distribute important announcements, reminders, and clarifications through the canvas site's "Announcements" feature. You should take steps to ensure that you see those messages, and then read them carefully.

Summary of Requirements and Grading

Reading Guides: up to 10% of your total grade

For each of our books, I'll post to the canvas site a document with questions that will help guide your reading and preparation for class. Some of the questions (marked with bullet-points) will relate primarily to identifying, understanding, and interpreting the main issues and ideas of the text. Other questions (marked with stars) will be intended to prompt your own questions, concerns, and alternatives in response to the text. The reading 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 essays.

Each reading guide will be available on the canvas 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. The guide will be most helpful if you look at the questions for each day *before* you read, and then write/type your responses as you're reading and/or right after you're done.

It will be up to you whether you'd like to submit each completed reading guide to be counted in place of part of your grade for Attendance, Preparation, and Participation (see below). Each reading guide that you submit will count for 2½% of your total grade, with participation counting for that much less.

If you do plan to submit the reading guides, 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 or font, so I can easily see the difference. Each reading guide will be submitted in its entirety (either electronically or on paper) when you submit the essay on that book. The reading guides will be graded on a 25-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.

If you decide not to submit the reading guides to be graded, I would still urge you to use them to help with your reading and preparation. You'll get more out of the books that way, and should do better with participation and the essays as well.

Attendance, Preparation, and Participation: 10-20% 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 consideration 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. 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 on Wednesday or Thursday afternoons, or setting up appointments for other times. That's not the same as engaging in the group conversations in class, but it's still very valuable. 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. If you have something else to do that can't wait, just go do that instead. If you're too drowsy to stay awake and 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.

Essays: 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 included later in the syllabus.

Writing Fellow

XXX is an outstanding junior Philosophy and Psychology double-major, who will be serving as the "Writing Fellow" for the class this semester. 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; XXX's help is meant to supplement mine, not to replace it.

Before the due-date for each of the essays, XXX will be available for one-on-one meetings to help you develop your ideas and map out your arguments. And starting with the second essay, she will also discuss the feedback you've received to help you determine how to address my comments and suggestions in the next essay. More details about how those meetings will work are included with the explanation of the essay assignment at the end of the syllabus.

You will be **required** to meet with XXX before each of the first two essays. You will be **strongly encouraged** to meet with her before each of the remaining essays. Simply put: the more you work with XXX, the better your essays will be!

Please be sure to respect XXX's time and schedule at least as much as you would respect mine. Skipping a meeting with her, or cancelling less than 24 hours in advance, 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 essays. 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, and to read and to discuss drafts of each other's essays. 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 origins 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 be reported to the Dean of Students' office for academic misconduct.** For a first offense, the consequence could range up to failing the course. For a second offense, the consequence could range up to dismissal 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.	Jan. 21	Lynch, introduction and chapter 1
Thu.	Jan. 23	Lynch, chapter 2
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Tue.	Jan. 28	Lynch, chapter 3 and chapter 5 (<i>yes, we're going out of order here</i>)
Thu.	Jan. 30	Lynch, chapter 4
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Tue.	Feb. 4	Lynch, chapter 8 and chapter 9
Thu.	Feb. 6	Lynch, chapter 10 and epilogue
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2. Free Will

Tue.	Feb. 11	Wolf, chapter 1
Thu.	Feb. 13	Wolf, chapter 2
* Fri.	Feb. 14	* <i>essay about Lynch due by 4:00 p.m.</i> *
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Tue.	Feb. 18	Wolf, chapter 3
Thu.	Feb. 20	NO CLASS (Power & Privilege Symposium)
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Tue.	Feb. 25	Wolf, chapter 4
Thu.	Feb. 27	Wolf, chapter 4 (continued)
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Tue.	March 3	Wolf, chapter 5 <i>except</i> the section on pp. 97-100
Thu.	March 5	Wolf, chapter 6
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3. Personal Identity

Tue.	March 10	Lindemann, preface and chapter 1
Thu.	March 12	Lindemann, chapter 2
* Fri.	March 13	* <i>essay about Wolf due by 4:00 p.m.</i> *

SPRING BREAK

Tue. March 31 Lindemann, chapter 3

Thu. April 2 Lindemann, chapter 4

Tue. April 7 **NO CLASS** (Undergraduate Conference)

Thu. April 9 Lindemann, chapter 5

Tue. April 14 Lindemann, chapter 6

Thu. April 16 Lindemann, chapter 7

4. Morality

Tue. April 21 Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (excerpts on canvas)

Thu. April 23 Noddings, chapters 1-3

* *Fri. April 24* * *essay about Lindemann due by 4:00 p.m.* *

Tue. April 28 Noddings, chapter 4

Thu. April 30 Noddings, chapter 5

Tue. May 5 Noddings, chapter 7

Thu. May 7 Noddings, chapter 8

* *Mon. May 18* * *essay about Noddings due by 4:00 p.m.* *