

**PHIL 1700: Introduction to Philosophy
Stoner/Fall 2017**

T/Th 8:30-9:55, Room 3110

Instructor

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Office hours: M 11 – 1, T 12 – 1, W 11 – 1.

Course Description

The academic discipline of philosophy is less a body of knowledge than a set of approaches to thought and discussion, applicable to a wide variety of questions. This course covers a sampling of those questions. Some are abstract (do human beings have free will?) and some are concrete (when is civil disobedience morally permissible?). Some are ancient (what is the meaning of life?) and some are new (is it morally wrong to watch horror films?). In every case, we will take care to understand each question, and to understand the strengths and weaknesses of some important answers to them. By critically evaluating the views of others, as well as our own initial views, we will not only gain a deeper understanding of the topics scheduled on this syllabus, we will also develop philosophical skills that allow us to think more productively about any other philosophical questions that grab our attention.

My learning objectives for you

In preparing this class, I've kept in mind two core academic skills and two philosophical techniques. My hope is that, at the end of the semester, you'll be different in these four ways:

1. Academic skill: **“deep” reading** of meaningful texts. You will be better at reading actively, as a colleague in dialogue with authors, engaged in a shared project of inquiry.
2. Academic skill: **critical discussion** with peers. You will be better at discussing difficult and controversial subjects with peers who don't always agree with you, better at articulating and justifying your own positions, better at understanding and critically evaluating alternative positions.
3. Philosophical technique: **examples**. You will be able generate effective illustrative examples and counterexamples.
4. Philosophical technique: **arguments in standard form**. You will be comfortable working with standard argument structures, including argument from analogy.

Your learning objectives for you

Every course presents an opportunity for you to practice and improve areas of your own choosing. Some examples of the sorts of specific goals you might have in taking Introduction to Philosophy:

- Participate more effectively in full-class discussions
- Ask more/better questions during lectures
- Improve attention span during lectures
- Take more effective notes in a subject that isn't information-oriented
- Be more willing to ask the instructor for help
- Pursue more opportunities to study/collaborate with peers outside the classroom
- Effectively time-manage concurrent assignments
- Effectively chunk large projects into sub-tasks
- Establish distraction-free reading/study time
- Communicate more effectively through writing
- Notice (or create) connections between your courses
- Notice (or create) connections between course material and "outside" life
- Improve skill in tracking the argument thread in a dialogic text
- Improve skills in tracking complicated syntax in academic texts
- Get better at creating for yourself interest in topics that don't immediately grab your attention

This small fragment of the full list of possibilities is intended to jog your thinking about what you want out of this class. Take a few minutes to think about how you might use this class as an opportunity to practice the skills and habits that you would like to develop during your time in college. In what ways would you like to be able, at the end of the semester, to look back and notice that you've changed?

There are two reasons why you should engage in this exercise in every class you take, every semester. First, it will make you a better student. The process of reflecting on your own performance and planning steps to improve it in the ways that matter to you guarantees that you will grow *much* faster than students who see courses merely as the delivery of content they are expected to absorb.

Second, if you develop the skill of articulating your own learning objectives, you will find bad classes less frustrating. Some bad classes are the fault of instructors who have done a poor job of designing or executing their lesson plans. Some bad classes are the result of an unlucky mix of students who can't figure out a way to work together. Whatever the reason, you *will* experience some bad classes. Every student does. But even in a bad class, you will have opportunities to pursue the learning objectives you've identified for yourself. That means you can get something that matters to you out of *any* class, even if that class fails to meet its instructor-identified learning objectives.

Your top three learning objectives:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Required Texts

I'll distribute all required and recommended readings via D2L.

On small-group discussion days, please be sure to bring the assigned reading to class with you.

Course Requirements

Minute papers:	80 points total (16 papers of 5 points each)
Weekly 1-page papers:	195 points total (13 papers of 15 points each.)
Homework exercises:	150 points total (5 assignments of 30 points each.)
Discussion guide:	250 points
Final exam:	150 points

Self-evaluation of engagement: 175 points

Minute papers. At the end of class each week I will ask you to take a few minutes to reflect on the week's material. You'll write down answers to two questions: what is the most important thing you learned this week? What question still remains in your mind? So long as your answer indicates some genuine thought and reflection, you'll get full credit for completing these weekly assignments.

Weekly 1-page papers. Each Tuesday you will turn in a one-page paper explaining a crucial passage in the assigned reading for the coming week. I will post the prompt to D2L on Thursday afternoon, and the papers are due (on paper) at the beginning of class the following Tuesday. One-page papers will not be accepted late for any reason. Your total score for the weekly writing assignments will be the sum of your thirteen best scores out of 15 available assignments. (That is, I'll drop your lowest two scores.)

Argument exercises. You'll turn in five short assignments that will ask you to demonstrate skill in several of our basic philosophical techniques, such as generating counterexamples, representing arguments in standard form, and critically engaging arguments from analogy.

Discussion guide. This is the capstone summative assignment for the course. In the last two weeks of the semester, you will write your own discussion guide for one of the assigned readings. You will use your guide for an in-class small-group discussion, and then turn it in for a grade.

Final exam. The final is an in-class short-essay exam. I will hand out review questions ahead of the test, and will draw all test questions from the review sheet.

Self-evaluation of course engagement. Engaging effectively with a college course requires both pre-class preparation and in-class participation. The single most important thing you can do to improve your learning is to get better at self-monitoring your own engagement. At the end of each unit I will ask you to take some notes on your engagement over that unit, and to think of some strategies for improving in the next. At the end of the semester, you will use those notes to write up a 3-page paper reflecting on and evaluating your engagement over the course of the semester. You will turn in your 3-page self-evaluation for a grade.

Grade Table

At the end of the semester, I will total up all your points and assign letter grades based on this table. These thresholds indicate firm cut-off points. For example, a total score of 799 is a C, while a total score of 800 is a B.

Letter Grade	Point threshold
A	900
B	800
C	700
D	600
F	—

Course Calendar

Unit 1: Introductions to philosophy, the course, and each other

The question “what is philosophy?” is itself a contested philosophical question. In this introductory unit, I explain my own view of what philosophy is and why it is worth studying.

8/22: What is philosophy? Syllabus overview.

8/23: Practice with arguments.

Required reading: Tellez, “Just Lather, That's All”

Unit 2: The problem of personal identity

What makes you you? What is the core feature of you that, if it changed, you would be a different person after the change? We will focus on two well-established answers to the question, and discuss how well they explain some popular science-fictional puzzles including cloning, teleportation, and body-swapping.

8/29: The problem and two solutions: personality theory and body theory.

Required reading: Perry, “A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality”

8/31: Dennett’s explanation of the problem of personal identity

Required reading: Dennett, “Where Am I?”

9/05: Challenges for both solutions: branching cases, teleportation.

9/07: Williams’ critique of personality theory

Required reading: Williams, “The Self and the Future”

Unit 3: The meaning of life and the badness of death

Nearly all of us have known people whose lives we believe are meaningful. And nearly all of us have had moments where we worry that our own lives are meaningless. What makes meaningful lives different from meaningless lives? What role should the certainty of our own eventual deaths play in our evaluations of the meaning of our own lives? Does it make sense to dread our own eventual deaths?

9/12: Is life meaningless?

Required reading: Nagel, “The Absurd”

9/14: Wolf’s account of meaningful lives

Required reading: Wolf, “Meaning in Life”

9/19: Is death bad for the person who dies?

Required reading: Nagel, “Death”

9/21: Velleman on time and death

Required reading: Velleman, “So It Goes”

Unit 4: Free will, moral responsibility, and punishment

We usually hold people responsible only for actions that were under their control. But what is the best way to distinguish actions we control from actions we don’t control? Our answers to this classic philosophical question are relevant to practical moral and political concerns. We will focus on the question of relationship between moral responsibility and criminal punishment.

9/26: Libertarianism, hard determinism, and the control principle

Required reading: Ballard, “The Subliminal Man”

9/28: Frankfurt's criticism of the control principle
Required reading: Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility"

10/3: Compatibilism

10/5: Nagel on Moral luck

Required reading: Nagel, "Moral Luck"

10/10: Standard views of the ethics of criminal punishment

10/12: Rachels's defense of retributivism

Required reading: Rachels, "Responsibility and Punishment"

Unit 5: Short take: is time travel possible?

Time travel is a staple of science fiction stories, but many people believe the very idea of time-travel is conceptually incoherent. Their worry is that travel backwards in time would generate a variety of impossible paradoxes, including the famous Grandfather Paradox. In this 1-day unit, we'll look at Lewis's defense of the possibility of travel backwards in time.

10/17: Lewis on time travel

Required reading: Lewis, "The Paradoxes of Time Travel"

10/19: NO CLASS

Unit 6: Civil obedience and disobedience

The USA has a long tradition of law-breaking in pursuit of a more just system of laws. For most of us the best-known example is civil disobedience during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Questions of when civil disobedience is morally justified are once again central to the public debate, both nationally and specifically in Minnesota, where Black Lives Matter has organized several controversial protests that shut down freeways. This unit will begin with a general and abstract question: is there any moral duty to follow the law? And it will end with a more practical question: when are protesters morally justified in breaking laws in pursuit of a more just society?

10/24: Is there a duty to obey the law? The question and some classic answers

10/26: Smith's argument that there is not a general moral duty to obey the law

Required reading: Smith, "Is there a duty to obey the law?"

10/31: When is civil disobedience justified?

Required reading: King, "Letter From Birmingham Jail"

11/2: Dworkin's practical account of permissible disobedience

Required reading: Dworkin, "Civil Disobedience and Nuclear Protest"

Unit 7: Equality and affirmative action

People across the political spectrum agree that equality is morally important—they disagree, though, about what equality means. In the first week of this unit, we'll discuss a few different kinds of equality, and try to get clear on which kinds of equality are the ones that matter morally. In the second week we'll discuss whether affirmative action programs in college admissions are a morally defensible means of promoting equality.

11/07: What kind of equality should we care about?
11/09: Nussbaum's answer
Required reading: Nussbaum, "Political Equality"

11/14: Is affirmative action a permissible means of promoting equality?
Required reading: Pojman, "The Case Against Affirmative Action"
11/16: Boxill's justice-based argument for affirmative action
Required reading: Boxill, "Affirmative Action"

Unit 8: Short take: is it morally wrong to watch horror films?

Forms of entertainment that graphically display fictional violence, such as some horror movies and FPS video games, are perennially controversial. In this 1-day unit, we'll critically evaluate two arguments for the conclusion that it is morally wrong to watch gorey movies.

11/21: DiMuzio's argument from analogy and Woodcock's argument from principle
Required reading: DiMuzio, "The Immorality of Horror Films"
11/23: NO CLASS

Unit 9: Student-led discussions of problems in practical ethics

In the last unit of the semester, the students will take over the class, leading the discussion on three topics in practical ethics. We will focus our attention on papers that use arguments from analogy to advance interesting and provocative conclusions.

11/28: Is it morally wrong to factory farm animals for meat? ATTENDANCE MANDATORY
Required reading: Norcross, "Puppies, Pigs, and People"
11/30: Should the USA open its borders? ATTENDANCE MANDATORY
Required reading: Huemer, "Is there a right to immigrate?"
12/5: Should parents be required to get a parenting license? ATTENDANCE MANDATORY
Required reading: LaFollette, "Licensing Parents Revisited"
12/7: Semester wrap-up, final exam review

Finals Week: Take the final exam, turn in your participation self-evaluation

12/12: Final examination
12/14: Participation self-evaluation due by noon.

Course Policies

Accessibility. I want this course (in both content and assessment) to be accessible to all students regardless of impairments and disabilities. If you have a disability that I can better accommodate, please consider meeting with me to talk about it. Improvements to accessibility are improvements to the course, and students in future semesters will owe you a debt of gratitude (that will, of course, go unpaid) for taking the time to give me your feedback on accessibility.

Testing accommodations require you to register with Access and Disability Resources (Room 1328). Contact Nee Xiong, Director of Access & Disability Resources at AccessResources@saintpaul.edu or 651.846.1547.

Attendance. It is characteristic of good students that they come to class. The active practice of critical reading and thinking skills, the development of which is the primary goal of the course, cannot be replicated alone in your room. The serious consideration of a variety of perspectives only happens when you are present to hear other perspectives in the first place.

If you choose not to attend a given meeting, you will miss important content and opportunities for practice. If you make a habit of staying home, your progress and your engagement grade will suffer.

In the last two weeks of the semester, you and your peers will provide discussion guides that we will use for small-group discussions. You must attend those three class meetings; if you miss class, you will leave one of your peers short of partners for his or her discussion guide. Please make doubly certain you do not schedule any conflicts for those class meetings.

Late work. Weekly short writing, due at the beginning of class on Tuesdays, and minute papers, due at the end of class on Thursdays, will not be accepted late for any reason. All other assignments may be turned in at a penalty of 15 points per day late.

Emailed work. If you anticipate missing class on a day an assignment is due, please talk to me ahead of time to make arrangements to turn in your work via email. I will accept emailed work ONLY IF we've discussed it and I've approved it ahead of time.

Extra credit: There will be no extra credit. Keep up with the course as it happens!

Electronic Devices. Do not use any electronics in the classroom, please. No phones, no laptops, no tablets, no nothing. Please turn off your phones and leave them out of sight in your bag. If you have a special reason for bringing a device to class (if you have a sick kid at home who might need to call you, for example) please let me know before class starts. One exception: if you prefer to do your assigned reading on a tablet or other device, it's OK to use your preferred reading device during guided small-group discussions.

Small group discussions. Guided small-group discussions are the core of this course. Disagreement is an inevitable and desirable consequence of any serious philosophical discussion. Disagreement can be fruitful, it can be fun, and it can also be frustrating. I expect you to be—always and without fail—respectful, thoughtful, and kind in discussion, even in the face of frustrating disagreements. This is not hard to do. If at any point you feel the temptation to sneer, or get angry or hurt, or raise your voice, take a moment to calm down. Then offer, as clearly and generously as you can, the reasons you disagree with the trend of the discussion.

Writing support. Most of your course grade is based on your writing. Don't hesitate to seek writing help from me, or from Saint Paul College's Writing Center (Room 2115).

Plagiarism. Do not copy another author's words, or paraphrase another author's ideas without citing your sources. Citations should be thorough enough to allow your readers to locate the passage you are quoting or paraphrasing. There is no shame in understanding, appreciating, and incorporating another writer's views, so long as you give credit where it's due. There is much shame in passing off someone else's hard work as your own.

If I discover you've plagiarized any part of any assignment, you'll get a zero for that assignment (or, in the case of weekly writing, a zero for your entire weekly writing grade) and I'll file a report of academic dishonesty with Saint Paul College.