

e x c e l l e n c e :

an introduction to philosophy

Introduction to Philosophy (course #PH-101-003; Spring 2011)

Among the things the faculty at Skidmore hopes you get out of your education, we have explicitly identified the following goal: “**strive for excellence.**” What is excellence? And is it the sort of thing that can be taught? We can raise many more questions about this:

- ✚ What is the role of the pursuit of knowledge in an excellent life?
- ✚ Must one be “good” to be “excellent”? That is, what role do our moral values play in our understanding of an excellent life?
- ✚ Is friendship a necessary part of an excellent life?
- ✚ What is the place of pleasure or happiness in the pursuit of excellence?
- ✚ Why don’t we always *want* to pursue excellence, even when we recognize that it will maximize our long-term happiness?

These questions have been a part of philosophy ever since its inception. In this class we will look at a variety of frameworks that have been proposed over the course of the history of philosophy for answering these questions. We will look specifically at the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Locke, and Kant (arguably, among the very best philosophers in the history of western philosophy) with an eye to understanding their conception of a well-lived life.

Course Texts

The following texts are required for this course. All but the *course packet* should be available at the Skidmore Shop:

Plato, *The Trial and Death of Socrates* (Hackett Publ. Co., ISBN: 9780872205543)
Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Hackett Publ. Co., ISBN: 9780872204645)
Descartes, *A Discourse on Method* (Oxford University Press, ISBN: 9780199540075)
Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Hackett Publ. Co., ISBN: 9780872202160)
Shelley, *Frankenstein* (Oxford University Press, ISBN: 9780199537167)
Vaughn, *Writing Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, ISBN: 9780195179569)
Course Packet

A note on the *Frankenstein* text: you may use a different edition of the text than the one listed here. Make sure the text you use is based on the third edition, published in 1831. To see if you have the right edition of the text, look at Chapter V, which should start with this sentence: “It was on a dreary night of November, that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils.” If Chapter V starts this way, you’ve got the right edition.

Instructor Information

Instructor: Larry M. Jorgensen
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Office Hours: Mon-Thu, 1-2 p.m.

Course Objectives

The main objective of this class is for you to get a taste of what it is to *do* philosophy (as opposed to merely learning about philosophers). Doing philosophy involves a lot of reading and writing, but not the sort of reading and writing you will likely have done, say, in your literature class. Reading philosophy involves careful attention to detail, and it will require you to slow down and concentrate on the specific claims that are being made in the text. With that in mind, we will work together on developing the skills of *reading*, *writing*, and *discussing* philosophical texts.

Specifically, by the end of this class, you will be able to

1. Read a philosophical text.
 - a. Identify arguments in a philosophical text, isolating the claim being defended and the reasons given in support of that claim.
 - b. Recognize differences in the sorts of arguments being made, distinguishing deductive & inductive, valid & invalid, and strong & weak arguments.
 - c. Form preliminary evaluations of arguments.
2. Write a philosophical essay.
 - a. Paraphrase and reconstruct a philosopher's argument in your own words, following principles of interpretive charity.
 - b. Formulate a focused, clear, and substantive thesis sentence, with a scope suitable for a relatively short philosophical essay.
 - c. Provide a clear argument in support of your thesis.
 - d. Assess and respond to key objections to your thesis.
3. Engage in a philosophical discussion.
 - a. Present your own philosophical views and interpretations orally and articulate your reasons for thinking those views are true.
 - b. Respond orally to objections and questions that others raise for your views.
 - c. Raise questions for others, demonstrating a sense for how your classmates can build on or develop their views further and for where problems lie for their argument.

Your grade in this class will be a function of how well you accomplish these three objectives, which I will evaluate in the following ways:

- A. Attendance, Participation, and Regular Assignments (20%)
Your participation in class will give me one way to see how well you are accomplishing the first and third of the objectives above. Obviously, failure to participate gives me very little to go on. See the section on attendance and participation below for examples of good participation. The reading responses will also give you a way of working towards the second goal.
- B. Two Exams (15% each)
The exams will ask you to identify, compare, and synthesize material we are studying, allowing me to see how well you are doing in achieving the first objective. This is the primary way I will be able to see the breadth of your learning.
- C. Three Papers (15% for the first two papers, 20% for the third paper)
You will write three papers of 5-7 pages each. Your papers are (obviously) the way to achieve the second goal. I will incorporate in-class writing activities to help you learn how to write a strong philosophical essay. I will give you more specific information about the paper assignments as the due dates approach.

Important note: the following items will result in automatic failure of the course:

1. Failure to hand in one of the three assigned papers.
2. Any honor code violation (plagiarism, cheating, and the like).
3. Six or more absences (for whatever reason).

Attendance & Participation

Since the arguments we will be reading are provocative and difficult, it is essential that you come to class prepared to discuss them. So, attendance and participation is *required*. Any absence will reduce your attendance/participation grade by 10 percentage points. (The only exceptions to this are absences due to illness, family emergency, or religious observance.) **However, six or more absences, including absences due to illness, will result in automatic failure of the course.**

Participation should not be understood in terms of simply promoting your own views—if that’s *all* you did, you would not be a good participant. Good participation means that you are actively engaged *during the class time* in trying to understand clearly the arguments being presented. So, even if you don’t yet have a view of your own on the issue under discussion, good participation will include asking clarifying questions (of me and of your classmates), raising possible counterexamples, proposing alternative ways of understanding an argument, uncovering underlying assumptions, and any other way of honestly and respectfully engaging with the issues being discussed.

Honor Code

In keeping with the Honor Code, I must give you some sense of what constitutes “honesty and integrity” in your work for this class. The main things I would be concerned about in this class are:

- a. **Papers:** any sources that you use in your paper must be properly quoted and cited. I don’t expect you to do any outside research for the papers in this class. But if you do happen to consult other sources (whether formal research materials in the library or less formal research materials such as online write-ups), you *must* identify the source. If there is any uncertainty about what constitutes plagiarism or unauthorized aid on the papers, you should discuss it with me.

Of course, you are free to make use of peer reviews, visits to the Writing Center, meetings with me, etc., to sharpen your paper. In fact, **I encourage wide use of such aids.**

- b. **Exams:** you may study together (again, I encourage it!), but you may not make use of any notes or help from others (in any form) during the exams.

If you are in doubt about whether anything else constitutes a violation of the honor code, it is your responsibility to consult with me first. Any violation of the honor code will result in failure of the class.

Tentative Schedule

Note: The readings and schedule may change through the course of the semester. I will announce any changes in class. The Workshops, in particular, may be changed depending on the needs of the class.

Monday, Jan. 24: Introduction to the Course

I. Excellence and Inquiry

Wednesday, Jan. 26: The Examined Life

Readings: Read through the syllabus thoroughly and bring any questions to class.

Plato, *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, pp. 20-42

Reading Closely: *Writing Philosophy*, pp. 3-13

Workshop: *Identifying Arguments*

Monday, Jan. 31: What is excellence?

Readings: Plato, *Meno*, CP, 70a-79e

Reconstructing an Argument: *Writing Philosophy*, pp. 13-20

Outline of *Meno* 70a-79e due

Workshop: *Active Reading and Outlining*

Wednesday, Feb. 2: The Paradox of Inquiry

Readings: Plato, *Meno*, CP, 80a-86c

Identifying Arguments: *Writing Philosophy*, pp. 21-27

Outline of *Meno* 80a-86c due

Workshop: *Paraphrasing/ Summarizing Arguments*

Monday, Feb. 7: Shackling Down our Beliefs: Is Excellence Teachable?

Readings: Plato, *Meno*, CP, 86d-100c

Evaluating Arguments: *Writing Philosophy*, pp. 28-42

Outline of *Meno* 86d-100c due

Workshop: *Evaluating Arguments*

Wednesday, Feb. 9: A Method for Inquiry

Readings: Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, Parts 1 through 3 (pp. 5-28)

The Basics of a Philosophy Paper: *Writing Philosophy*, pp. 55-60 and 126-132

Reconstruction w/ Evaluation due

Workshop: *Writing a Strong Thesis*

Monday, Feb. 14: The Method Applied

Readings: Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, Parts 4 and 5 (pp. 28-50)

An Example of a Philosophy Paper: *Writing Philosophy*, pp. 60-68

Workshop: *The First Draft*

Wednesday, Feb. 16: An Empiricist Response: Can we Know Things from Our Own Minds?

Readings: Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book I, chapters 1 & 2 (pp. 4-14)

Paper One Due

Workshop: *Reflection on your Finished Paper*

Monday, Feb. 21: An Empirical Theory of Knowledge

Readings: Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II, chapters 1 & 8 (pp. 33-39 and 47-56)

Style in Philosophy, Part I: *Writing Philosophy*, 43-48

Workshop: *Identifying Arguments II: Missing Premises and Interpretive Charity*

Wednesday, Feb. 23: An Empirical Theory of Excellence

Readings: Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*,
a. Book I, chapter 3, §§1-6 (pp. 15-18);
b. Book II, chapter 20 (pp. 90-92);
c. Book II, chapter 21, §§31, 35, 38, 41-44, 47, 48, 52, and 54 (pp. 101-110); and
d. Book II, chapter 28, §§4-15 (pp. 151-154)

Style in Philosophy, Part II: *Writing Philosophy*, 49-54

Workshop: *Identifying Arguments III: Implicit Arguments in Fiction, Poetry, and Other Creative Forms of Expression*

Monday, Feb. 28: **Midterm Exam**

Interlude: The Moral Education of a Monster

Wednesday, Mar. 2: **First Disputation**

Readings: TBD

Monday, Mar. 7: *Frankenstein*, Part I

Readings: Shelley, *Frankenstein*, pp. 13-89

Workshop: *Verbal Arguments and Philosophical Discussions*

Wednesday, Mar. 9: *Frankenstein*, Part II

Readings: Shelley, *Frankenstein*, pp. 90-164

Workshop: *Debating the Issues*

Mar. 14-18: **Spring Break**

Monday, Mar. 21: *Frankenstein*, Part III

Readings: Shelley, *Frankenstein*, pp. 165-223

III. Excellence and Human Nature

Wednesday, Mar. 23: Happiness and the Human Good

Readings: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 1-13, pp. 1-18
Getting to the First Draft: *Writing Philosophy*, pp. 69-78

Workshop: *Generating Counterexamples/Counterarguments*

Monday, Mar. 28: Virtues of character

Readings: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II, 1-9, pp. 18-30
Revise, Revise, Revise: *Writing Philosophy*, pp. 78-84

Workshop: *Global Revision*

Wednesday, Mar. 30: Virtue and voluntary action

Readings: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III, 1-5, pp. 30-40
Paper Two due with earlier draft, prior to global revision

Workshop: *Reflection on your Finished Paper*

Monday, Apr. 4: Bravery and Temperance

Readings: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III, 6-12, pp. 40-49
Avoiding Bad Arguments: *Writing Philosophy*, pp. 85-89

Workshop: *Recognizing Bad Arguments I*

Wednesday, Apr. 6: The relation of virtues of thought to virtues of character (or *knowing don't make it so*)

Readings: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 1-6 and VII, 1-8, pp. 86-90 and 99-111
Avoiding More Bad Arguments: *Writing Philosophy*, pp. 90-95

Workshop: *Recognizing Bad Arguments II*

Monday, Apr. 11: Friendship

Readings: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII, 1-8, 13-14, and IX, 8-11, pp. 119-129, 134-137, 146-152
Citing Your Sources: *Writing Philosophy*, pp. 96-102 and scan pp. 133-138

Workshop: *Proper Citation*

Wednesday, Apr. 13: Happiness vs. Duty

Readings: Kant, *The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Selection), **CP**

Workshop: *Focusing Your Topic: Advanced Thesis Development*

Monday, Apr. 18: Humanity as Ends

Readings: Review Kant, *The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Selection), **CP**
Thesis Worksheet Due

Wednesday, Apr. 20: Practical Matters: We Must Do Better

Readings: Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," **CP**

Workshop: *Local Revision*

Monday, Apr. 25: Who Counts? And Why?

Readings: Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (selection), **CP**
Wolstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (selection), **CP**
Paper Three due

Workshop: *Reflection on your Finished Paper / Preparing for the Disputation*

Wednesday, Apr. 27: **Second Disputation**

Readings: TBD

Monday, May. 2: Ultimate Choices

Readings: None

Exam Review

Final Exam: Wed., May 11, 1:30-4:30 p.m.

(**Note:** The only exceptions allowed for the scheduled exam date and time are (a) conflict with other exams or (b) health problems or injury.)