

**PHIL 1700: Introduction to Philosophy  
Stoner/Spring 2018**

T/Th 11-12:25, Room 2200

Instructor

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Office hours: Mondays 1:30 – 3:30, Tuesdays 1 – 3.

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 modern (are affirmative action programs morally permissible?). 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

Group-written reading questions:	55 points total (11 assignments of 5 points each)
Weekly 1-page papers:	210 points total (14 papers of 15 points each.)
Homework exercises:	150 points total (5 assignments of 30 points each.)

Self-evaluations of engagement: 250 points (5 self-evaluations of 50 points each.)  
Discussion guide: 185 points  
Final exam: 150 points

**Group-written reading questions.** Most weeks you will spend about an hour of class time discussing readings in small groups using one of my discussion guides. At the end of class on small-group discussion days, you will work with your group to write up a discussion question that you wished I had included in my guide. Provided that you generate a question that could foster better discussion of the reading, everyone in the group will get full credit for these 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 14 best scores out of 16 available assignments. (That is, I'll drop your lowest two scores.)

**Argument exercises.** You'll turn in five homework 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. Argument exercise assignments will be posted and turned in on D2L.

**Self-evaluations 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 five points over the course of the semester I will ask you to reflect on, and report to me, some details of your engagement with the course. Self-evaluation assignments will be posted and turned in on D2L.

**Discussion guide.** This is the capstone summative assignment for this 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.

### 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.

<u>Letter Grade</u>	<u>Point threshold</u>
A	900
B	800
C	700
D	600
F	–

## Course Calendar

### **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.

- 1/9: What is philosophy? Syllabus overview.
- 1/11: Practice with arguments.  
Discussion: Tellez, “Just Lather, That's All”

### **The meaning of life**

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?

- 1/16: Is life meaningless?
- 1/18: Nagel against the nihilists  
Discussion: Nagel, “The Absurd”
  
- 1/23: Wolf’s account of meaningful lives  
Discussion: Wolf, “Meaning in Life”

### **The problem of personal identity**

What makes you you? What is the core feature of you that, if it changed, you would literally 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.

- 1/30: The problem and two solutions: personality theory and body theory.  
Recommended reading: Perry, “A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality”
- 2/1: Dennett’s fictional explanation of the problem of personal identity  
Discussion: Dennett, “Where Am I?”
  
- 2/6: Challenges for both solutions: branching cases, teleportation.
- 2/8: Discussion: Excerpts from an interview with Parfit about personal identity and survival.

### **Is death bad for the person who dies?**

Most of us fear the prospect of our own deaths. But this fear is puzzling. More than 2,000 years ago, Epicurus argued that death cannot possibly be bad for us: when we are alive we are not dead and so are not harmed by death; after we are dead, we no longer exist and so cannot suffer any harm. Is Epicurus right? Does it make sense to dread our own inevitable deaths?

- 2/13: How could death possibly be bad for the person who dies?  
Recommended reading: Epicurus, excerpt from “Letter to Menoece”
- 2/15: Nagel’s deprivation account of the badness of death

Discussion: Nagel, “Death”

### **Free will, moral responsibility, and punishment**

We usually hold people responsible only for actions that are 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.

2/22: Libertarianism, hard determinism, and the control principle  
Required short story: Ballard, “The Subliminal Man”  
Required philosophy background: TBD

2/27: Compatibilism  
3/1: Moral luck  
Discussion: Nagel, “Moral Luck”

3/6: Standard views of the ethics of criminal punishment  
3/8: Rachels’s defense of retributivism  
Discussion: Rachels, “Responsibility and Punishment”

### **Will computers ever be intelligent?**

Conscious, self-aware computers have been a staple of science fiction for more than half a century. More recently, companies like Google, IBM, and Wolfram Alpha promise that genuine Strong AI—computers that can learn and adapt as well as or better than humans—is just around the corner. Should we believe these promises? Will computers soon be intelligent, in much the same way that we humans are intelligent?

3/20: The Turing Test  
Recommended reading: Turing, “Computing Machinery and Intelligence”  
3/22: Searle’s skepticism about the possibility of Strong AI  
Discussion: Searle, “Minds, Brains, and Programs”

### **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 critically evaluate two answers to the question of when are protesters morally justified in breaking laws in pursuit of a better society.

3/27: Civil disobedience and other forms of law-breaking  
2/29: When is civil disobedience morally justified? King’s answer  
Discussion: King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail”  
4/3: When is civil disobedience justified? Dworkin’s answer  
Discussion: Dworkin, “Civil Disobedience and Nuclear Protest”

4/5: Class debate: are BLM shutdowns of freeways morally permissible?

### **Affirmative action**

People across the political spectrum agree that justice and equality are morally important values—they disagree, though, about what justice and equality require in practice. Disagreement about these values is especially clear in debates about the moral permissibility of affirmative action programs. In this unit we'll focus especially on the question of whether affirmative action programs in college admissions are a morally defensible means of promoting justice and equality.

- 4/10: The history and terms of the affirmative action debate
- 4/12: Pojman's arguments against affirmative action  
Discussion: Pojman, "The Case Against Affirmative Action"
  
- 4/17: Affirmative action and principles of compensation
- 4/19: Boxill's argument for affirmative action  
Discussion: Boxill, "Affirmative Action"

### **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. **NOTE:** Attendance on 5/1, 5/3, and 5/8 is mandatory. Missing one of those days without prior arrangement with me will incur a loss of points on your discussion guide assignment.

- 4/24: Factual background for our three final papers
- 4/26: Discussion and preparation for guide-writing
  
- 5/1: Student discussion guides for Norcross, "Puppies, Pigs, and People"
- 5/3: Student discussion guides for Huemer, "Is There a Right to Immigrate?"
  
- 5/8: Student discussion guides for LaFollette, "Licensing Parents Revisited"
- 5/10: Semester Wrap-up and final exam review

### **Finals Week**

- 5/15: Final exam

### 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 and that they arrive on time. 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.

**Important dates:** Full refund is available until January 12th, 2018.  
The last day to withdraw from this course is April 20th, 2018.

If, for any reason, you decide not to complete the course, please officially withdraw as soon as you have made your decision. If you do not withdraw officially (and I cannot do it for you), you will receive a failing (F) grade for the course.

As per school policy, if it is before the withdraw deadline and you miss two consecutive weeks of class, I will assign you a grade of FW (Failure to Withdraw). You can still withdraw (before the withdraw deadline) even after I've filed an FW.

If you have a medical, family, or other situation causing trouble for you in this class, please contact me immediately so we can arrange a way to avoid running afoul of these college rules.

**Late work.** Weekly short writing, usually due at the beginning of class on Tuesdays, and group-written discussion questions, usually due at the end of class on Thursdays, will not be accepted late for any reason. Note that you get to drop your two lowest 1-pager grades; if you miss one of those assignments, that 0 will be one of your drops. All other assignments may be turned in at a penalty of 10 points per day late.

**Contacting me:** The best way to contact me is to come see me in office hours. A short conversation can often accomplish more than a long exchange of emails. If you cannot visit me in office hours, email me. I will make every effort to respond within 48 hours.

**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 Saint Paul College's excellent Writing Center. Walk in any time to Rm 3125—you don't need an appointment.

**Academic integrity.** 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.

For a longer statement of school policies regarding academic integrity, see:

<https://www.saintpaul.edu/studentservices/academic-integrity-policy>