

# Introduction to Philosophy

Philosophy 101-001  
Skidmore College  
Spring Semester: Mon 24 Jan – Mon 02 May 2011  
MW 4.00-5.50p, Tisch 303

## Instructor: Christopher Moore

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## Required Texts

Plato, *Five Dialogues* (Hackett)  
Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* (Oxford)  
Descartes, *Meditations, Objections, Replies* (Hackett)  
Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* (Hackett)  
Mill, *On Liberty* (Norton)

## Course

The aim of this course is to give an initial familiarity with the nature, history, practice, and hopes of philosophy and its twenty-five hundred year career. This will come through reading, discussing, and writing about key works from five of the most insightful, vigorous, and analytically powerful philosophers of the Western tradition. We will trace a series of arguments about a range of themes connected to a central question: How am I to decide what I should do about myself before I die? These themes include trying to comprehend what's special or significant about being a human, about being social animals, about judging others and oneself, and about our frailties, certain mortality, sources of meaning, decent relationships, and stable discoveries and practical confidence. These are the topics that we should all surely like most to be wise about. The argumentative procedures, methods, or activities by which one might come to that wisdom—at least more speedily than simply by aging—will be the objects of our study. For who knows whether, to find out how one ought to be—what kind of person to be, what kinds of actions to perform, what kinds of things to say—one needs knowledge or competence thinking about the nature of the cosmos, or the truth of religion, or the structure of selves, or the findings of anthropology and sociology, psychology and physics, or the well-worn adages of our tradition and of the noblest civilizations, or really no knowledge or competence at all but just a well-grounded upbringing and an openness to new ideas, experiences, and friends.

While we will talk about these big issues, most of our time and work will go into trying to make both microscopic and unifying sense of our assigned texts. We will do so in the faith that, easy or difficult as they may be to read, they will repay our reflection only with great concentration, sympathy, and imagination. We will be equally concerned with (i) discerning what position, if any, a respective author has, (ii) the way he has argued for that position, and (iii) why he posits such a position. These processes of reflection will be modeled and encouraged in class: I will help show what details in our texts are significant, how to discover the structure of an argument among a mass of words, to what to appeal in evaluating a position, and what to say overall about any theoretically-minded work. These processes of reflection will be practiced and perfected in writing assignments and exams: you will engage in the range of philosophically-useful outlines, articulations, elaborations, and syntheses.

This class should give you practice making and giving reasons for claims, especially claims the truth of which can't be established by pointing to empirical or perceptual data, and more generally claims on the topics we together judge significant. You should become aware of the most interesting and challenging authors, books, problems, and attempted solutions in the history of Western philosophy. You will improve your ability to read, where reading is considered a practical orientation to other people's attempts to write about the most vital shared questions. You might be surprised to discover some of your own views about human nature, and come to query those views. With your best effort you might develop the virtues concomitant to any commitment to wisdom and understanding, especially precision, patience, humility, perseverance, impartiality, self-critique, and optimism.

### **Class time**

We will spend much of our time in conversation about our assigned texts, most often through close reading of important or characteristic passages, though also through argument reconstruction and assessment, character and debate analysis, summary at various levels of abstraction, contextualizing, and critical response. We will ask questions like: "Are the premises plausible or substantiated?" "What total range of answers could we give to such a question?" "What does the fact that we find this claim completely implausible suggest about the text and about ourselves?" "Why would anyone want to investigate *this* issue?" "Can this issue be seen to matter a lot to *me* and the things I *already* care about?"

You will meet often for small-group discussions, during which time you will work together through the tasks specified on a guide I will distribute that day, generally a step-by-step investigation of part of the day's reading. I will observe your enthusiastic participation and minute-taking and count it as part of your course-wide participation grade. You are to explore each question as thoroughly as possible. The point is to be self-driven, practice cooperative understanding, articulate your own questions about your own puzzlements, and gain acumen in being intently but usefully curious.

Before each large lecture and small-group discussion, you must have read and marked up the day's reading. You are obligated to take notes every day, about what your classmates or I say and what's written on the board. I will expect your work to reflect total familiarity with what we've talked about. In-class use of your computer must be limited to note-taking. Please do not read or send texts or other electronic communications during our meeting time.

## **Work**

### Six Homework Assignments [50%]

Every other week you will respond in exactly one page, 1.5 space, 12 pt font, 1" margins, to a prompt about the reading I will distribute at least a week in advance. Over the term you will meet a variety of assignments, for example argument-outlines, description and narration exercises, position-taking, counterexample generation, and close readings. These assignments give you a chance to work on the skills learned in class, to strengthen your familiarity with our texts, to engage in a deliberate manner with me, and to develop your ability to articulate your reactions to the arguments, views, intuitions, and ideas we read about.

Assignments will always be due in class at the beginning of class. I will accept assignments only by hardcopy, never by email, unless you are explicitly told on the syllabus or prompt to email them. You must include full heading information (full name, course number, name of the assignment, and the date it is due); failures to do so will lower the grade. I will accept at most one late assignment, at my discretion and if you have a good faith reason; it will lose one letter grade every 24 hours it is late.

All students will revise HW I and resubmit it for a grade. I may on occasion require you to revise additional papers. On these occasions I will return your paper marked "NO CREDIT"; you must come to my office within three school days to discuss a revision-plan. During that meeting I may ask you to revise only part of the paper in only some respect; in any event, you will be required to rewrite and meet with me until you have perfected whatever part and respect we have discussed. We will determine together hard deadlines for these revisions and meetings. You will receive credit (not necessarily an A) upon submission of a paper I judge sufficiently responsive to my comments and our meetings.

### Midterm in-class exam [25%]

This closed-book, closed-notes blue-book exam requires you to answer your choice of two questions from a subset of longer list of questions that I will have distributed at least two weeks earlier. You will need excellent familiarity with details of the lectures, readings, small-group discussion results, and good homework answers.

### Final take-home exam [25%]

After the last day of class you will pick up, at a time of your choosing, a list of questions, from which you will choose three to which to respond. You will have 24 hours, with access to all and only your texts and notes, including small-group discussion minutes, to type up your answers, which may be of any length. I will distribute sample questions in advance.

## **Logistics**

### Attendance and Participation

Much of the activity and value of the class comes through our twice-weekly discussions; indeed, a principal goal of this class is for you to learn to engage verbally with your peers and me in a text-attentive and critically reflective way. Accordingly, your final grade will take into account your attendance and participation, which I will spot-check. Repeated tardy arrivals may count as absences. Participation involves active visual engagement, note-taking, answering questions asked of you, asking your own questions, making contributions to the discussion, and chatting about relevant topics with your classmates or your professor. Unless you have documented medical excuses, your grade may be affected after several unexcused absences or weeks of insufficient participation, up to a two grade-level decrease, calculated according to my judgment.

### Grades

Your course grade will represent the precision, accuracy, comprehensiveness, care, thoughtfulness, and effort demonstrated by your participation in the course activities. You will receive the grade nearest to your average numerical score; for example, a 3.9 will be an A; a 3.47 will be a B+

A 4.0 – Extraordinary	B- 2.66	D+ 1.33
A- 3.66	C+ 2.33	D 1.0 – Minimal pass
B+ 3.33	C 2.0 – Acceptable	D- 0.66
B 3.0 – Good	C- 1.66	F 0.0 – Fail

### Technology

Please check class-related emails each weekday, and respond promptly. I will do the same. I will email you additional readings and assignments if I do not distribute paper copies. Please check with fellow students to ensure you have not missed any handouts, which include paper-prompts and notes.

### Accessibility

If you are a student with a disability and believe you will need academic accommodation, you must formally request accommodation from Meg Hegener, Coordinator for Students with Disabilities. You will also need to provide documentation that verifies the existence of a disability and supports your request. For further

information, please call 580-8150, or stop by the office of Student Academic Services in Starbuck Center.

### Cheating

Academic dishonesty in any portion of the academic work for this course shall be grounds for failing the entire course and communication of dishonesty to the College. This includes, but is not restricted to, any plagiarism on any paper, or cheating on any portion of the homework. Plagiarism includes, among other things, not citing text, paraphrases, or ideas taken from any assigned or unassigned reading, or other students' comments or papers. Read [cms.skidmore.edu/advising/integrity/index.cfm](http://cms.skidmore.edu/advising/integrity/index.cfm) and please ask about any case you're concerned about.

### **Reading and Assignment Schedule**

#### January

- M 24      Discuss *Rival Lovers*, Plato, and philosophy. Circulate syllabus.  
W 26      Plato, *Meno* 70a1-81e2. Introductions.
- M 31      Plato, *Meno* 81e3-89e8. **HW I.**

#### February

- W 02      Plato, *Meno* 89e9-100c2. Talk about the first homework assignment.
- M 07      Plato, *Apology*.  
W 09      Plato, *Crito*. **HW I Revision.**
- M 14      Plato, *Phaedo* 57a1-72e1.  
W 16      Plato, *Phaedo* 72e2-88c5.
- M 21      Plato, *Phaedo* 88c6-100a7.  
W 23      Plato, *Phaedo* 100a8-118a10. **HW II**
- M 28      Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* I-III.

#### March

- W 02      Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* IV. **HW III**
- M 07      Descartes, "Dedication," "Letter," "Synopsis," "Meditation I."  
W 09      Descartes, "Meditation II"
- M 14      **[SPRING BREAK]**  
W 16      **[SPRING BREAK]**
- M 21      Descartes, "Meditation III." Circulate Midterm Study Questions.  
W 23      Descartes, "Meditations IV." **HW IV**

M 28     Descartes, "Meditations V"  
W 30     Descartes, "Meditations VI"

April

M 04     **MIDTERM EXAM**  
W 06     Kant, *Groundwork* I

M 11     Kant, *Groundwork* II  
W 13     Kant, *Groundwork* III

M 20     [No new reading.] **HW V**  
W 22     Mill, *On Liberty* I

M 27     Mill, *On Liberty* II  
W 29     Mill, *On Liberty* III. Course evaluations.

M 02     Mill, *On Liberty* IV. **HW VI**

TBA     **FINAL EXAM DUE**