Philosophy 125C, Section 02

Great Philosophers

Fall 2014
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 10:00-11:30
McDonnell 362

INSTRUCTORS

Prof. Eric Brown
Wilson 213
eabrown@wustl.edu
Wednesdays, 10:00-11:30,
and by appointment

Ms. Lauren Olin
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Thursdays, 3-4,
and by appointment

GOALS

We would like every student who completes this course to understand better what philosophy is and to believe more fully that philosophy is a worthwhile human pursuit, even if we do not all pursue it to the same degree. (We’d be tickled if a few of you decided that you wanted to pursue it more yourselves. But you don’t have to love something for yourself in order to value the activity, and our primary goal is that you value philosophical activity.)

In some ways, philosophy is like dance or poetry: we can enrich our lives by appreciating these activities and by participating in them. Not that these are merely pastimes. Just as dance might change the way you move all the time or poetry might change the way you hear and use language all the time, so too might philosophy change the way you think all the time.

We would also like every student who completes this course to be better at thinking critically, at reading difficult material, at presenting thoughts orally, and at writing effectively and efficiently. These skills are central to philosophy, but of course not merely to philosophy. There are reasons why philosophy majors regularly rank at or near the top in the main graduate admissions exams (such as the GRE, MCAT, and LSAT), and why philosophy majors regularly rank at or near the top of mid-career salary rankings. Philosophy focuses very closely on some very useful skills.

PREREQUISITES

Curiosity. Willingness to treat others’ views seriously, respectfully, and sympathetically. Commitment to work hard reading puzzling essays, thinking about difficult questions, and writing up to very high standards. Courage to think through difficult matters and volunteer thoughts that one might later come to reject.
We will be happy to accommodate those with disabilities, in accordance with the university's established procedures. Please contact us confidentially.

PROCEDURES

There is no final exam in this course, as we are not emphasizing recall of information or quick thinking. The procedures we are using instead reward thoughtful reading (and re-reading), cooperative discussion, and careful writing. The procedures, in other words, match the goals.

Preparation and Participation. (100 points)
Everyone is expected to raise questions (about the issues, about the reading, about what someone else in the class said), to offer possible answers to any such questions, and to point to the text both in asking and answering questions. We especially want to encourage you to engage orally in the classroom, as this involves a set of skills and habits that are worth developing. We will reward you for doing this as follows:

Everyone starts the semester with 75 points, and no one will lose points unless they disrupt the class. (Causes of disruption include arriving late or departing early (without a written excuse), leaving the room during class without a medical emergency, talking without being recognized during class, having a computer or other electronic device on during the class, having a cellular phone or other electronic device beep or ring during class, or otherwise engaging in activities other than attending to class during class.)

There will be a deck of playing cards, arranged in the usual order for playing cards (2 through Ace of Clubs, then Diamonds, then Hearts, then Spades), and your name will be on one of the cards (the same card for the whole semester). When you enter class, you will pick up your playing card, and when you want to contribute you will raise your hand holding the card. For a good contribution, we'll collect the card and later record a point in the gradebook.

We will also accept emailed questions about the reading up to 40 minutes before class. A good question will earn you 1/2 point. Send these to both instructors.
You may, of course, contribute orally after emailing a question in writing, but no one will earn more than one point per class session.

We understand that students sometimes have very good reasons to miss class: religious obligations, illness, a commitment to family or teammates. The same rules apply: earn 1/2 point by emailing a question in advance of the class session. (If you were suddenly ill or too ill to read and write, then we'll accept and reward a written question late, with a note from the health clinic.) Also, if you miss class, please check with a classmate for notes, and feel free to meet with one of us with any questions you might have about the reading whose discussion you missed.
There are 28 sessions after the first day. It is possible, then, to earn 103 points for preparation and participation, and it possible to earn 89 points without speaking in class.

**Three Essays** (100 points each)
Everyone is required to submit three essays during the course of the semester: Essays A, B, and C. There will be three sets of topics, with three distinct due dates, for Essay A, two sets of topics, with two distinct due dates, for Essay B, and again two sets of topics with two distinct due dates, for Essay C. For each essay, choose the option that suits your schedule and interests best, so that you can dedicate enough time to do your best work.

The essay topics will be distributed on Blackboard (bb.wustl.edu), and the essays should be uploaded there, too.

**Your essay should have your student number but not your name on it.** We will grade them anonymously, to minimize the effect of implicit bias that infects all of us, according to an impressive body of social-scientific research. (Fairness is important to us, but so, too, is individual instruction. So please do not hesitate to seek out our help on your essays, even if that help might threaten the anonymity of your submission.)

Each essay should be between 1000 and 1300 words in length and will be assessed in accordance with the guidelines appended to this syllabus.

There are **no excuses for tardy submissions.** Any essay that is late will be penalized by 10 points for every 24 hours or fraction thereof. (That is, if the essay is due at noon on September 8, it will be penalized by ten points if it is uploaded at 12:01 pm on September 8, by ten points if it is uploaded at 12:00 pm on September 9, and by twenty points if it is uploaded at 12:01 pm on September 9.)

**Revised essay** (optional 100 points)
Everyone is permitted to revise one of their essays that earned a grade of less than 94 points.

The revised essay is due **exactly one week after** the marked up original is uploaded on Blackboard. The other procedures are exactly the same: the essay should be anonymous, the essay should be between 1000 and 1300 words, and it will be penalized for tardiness.

Revised essays will be assessed exactly as the other three essays are, in accordance with the appended guidelines, but for one difference: revised essays will be penalized for failing to try to correct a problem noted in the original.

The grade for a revised essay counts, even if it is lower than the original essay. Do not revise frivolously, but do, please, take advantage of this opportunity. If you revise
your first essay, you will be in a much better position to do well on your second and third essays.

The final grade for the course will be determined by a straight average of the four or five 100-point grades described above. Conversion to a quality grade will depend upon a scale at least as generous as this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>97-100</td>
<td>A+</td>
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<tr>
<td>94-96</td>
<td>A</td>
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<tr>
<td>90-93</td>
<td>A-</td>
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<tr>
<td>87-89</td>
<td>B+</td>
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<tr>
<td>84-86</td>
<td>B</td>
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<tr>
<td>80-83</td>
<td>B-</td>
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<tr>
<td>77-79</td>
<td>C+</td>
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</tbody>
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etc.

Pass/fail students must average at least 77 to pass.

SCHEDULE OF ASSIGNMENTS

Most of the readings come from five required texts that are available in the campus bookstore in Mallinckrodt:

*Plato on Love*, ed. Reeve (Hackett)
ISBN: 9780872207882

Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, tr. M.F. Smith (Hackett)
ISBN: 0872205878

Spinoza, *Ethics*, tr. Shirley (Hackett)
ISBN: 978-0-87220-130-9

ISBN: 9781606189849

*Murdoch, The Sovereignty of Good* (Routledge)
ISBN: 9780415253994

You are not required to purchase these texts from the campus bookstore, but you are required to purchase exactly these editions, so that there will not be confusion about translation or pagination.

In addition to those five works, we will read three shorter texts that you can find online and should print out. (Since electronic devices are not permitted in the classroom, you need to print these readings out to be able to refer to them in class. If you want to save paper by
printing out just one copy that you will share with your neighbor in class, you may arrange to do this. But you need access to these texts in the classroom.)

For Hesiod, we will use William Blake Tyrell’s translation, available at [https://www.msu.edu/~tyrrell/theogon.pdf](https://www.msu.edu/~tyrrell/theogon.pdf)

For Empedocles, we will use William Ellery Leonard’s 1908 translation. The cleanest online presentation is at [http://classicpersuasion.org/pw/empedocles/empalleng.htm](http://classicpersuasion.org/pw/empedocles/empalleng.htm)

For Ibn Sina, we will use Emil Fackenheim's translation, posted here: [http://www.muslimphilosophy.com/sina/works/avicenna-love.pdf](http://www.muslimphilosophy.com/sina/works/avicenna-love.pdf)

**Weekly Schedule**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Reading</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>8-26</td>
<td>Introduction (no required reading)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>8-28</td>
<td>Hesiod, <em>Theogony</em>, lines 1-232 (online: see above) Empedocles, fragments (online: see above)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>9-2</td>
<td>Plato, <em>Lysis</em> 203a-213d</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>9-4</td>
<td>Plato, <em>Lysis</em> 213d-223b</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>9-8</td>
<td><em>Lysis</em> essay due at noon (A: option 1/3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>9-9</td>
<td>Plato, <em>Symposium</em> 172a-193d</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>9-11</td>
<td>Plato, <em>Symposium</em> 193d-212c</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>9-16</td>
<td>Plato, <em>Symposium</em> 212c-223d</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>9-18</td>
<td>Plato, <em>Phaedrus</em> 227a-243e</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>9-22</td>
<td><em>Symposium</em> essay due at noon (A: option 2/3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>9-23</td>
<td>Plato, <em>Phaedrus</em> 243e-257b</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>9-25</td>
<td>Plato, <em>Phaedrus</em> 257c-279c</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>9-29</td>
<td><em>Phaedrus</em> essay due at noon (A: option 3/3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>9-30</td>
<td>Lucretius I</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>10-2</td>
<td>Lucretius II</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>10-7</td>
<td>Lucretius III</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Thursday 10-9    Lucretius IV
Tuesday 10-14   Lucretius V
Thursday 10-16  Lucretius VI
Monday 10-20   Lucretius essay due at noon (B: option 1/2)
Tuesday 10-21  Ibn Sina, *A Treatise on Love* (online: see above)
Thursday 10-23 Spinoza I
Tuesday 10-28  Spinoza II
Thursday 10-30 Spinoza III
Tuesday 11-4   Spinoza IV
Thursday 11-6  Spinoza V
Monday 11-10   Ibn Sina / Spinoza essay due at noon (B: option 2/2)
Tuesday 11-11  Grouchy, Letters I-II
Thursday 11-13 Grouchy, Letters III-IV
Tuesday 11-18  Grouchy, Letters V-VI
Thursday 11-20 Grouchy, Letters VII-VIII
Monday 11-24   Grouchy essay due at noon (C: option 1/2)
Tuesday 11-25  Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection"
Thursday 11-27 NO CLASS — Thanksgiving
Tuesday 12-2   Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'"
Thursday 12-4  Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over other Concepts"
Monday 12-8   Murdoch essay due at noon (C: option 2/2)

*GUIDELINES FOR WRITING*
1. There is no excuse for typographical errors, orthographical errors, or grammatical errors. Nor is there any excuse for those errors of diction that are not easily ensnared in the nets of grammar and orthography. You can avoid most of these errors by sticking to words that you know very well in their written form, remaining on friendly terms with a good dictionary, and editing carefully. When you edit, you should look for the common errors of grammar and style that William Safire summarizes as follows:

- No sentence fragments. Avoid run-on sentences they are hard to read. A writer must not shift your point of view. Reserve the apostrophe for it's proper use and omit it when its not needed. Write all adverbial forms correct. In their writing, everyone should make sure that their pronouns agree with its antecedent. Use the semicolon properly, use it between complete but related thoughts; and not between an independent clause and a mere phrase. Don't use no double negatives. Also, avoid awkward or affected alliteration. If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times: Resist hyperbole. If any word is improper at the end of a sentence, a linking verb is.
- Avoid commas, that are not necessary. Verbs has to agree with their subjects. Avoid trendy locutions that sound flaky. And don't start a sentence with a conjunction. The passive voice should never be used. Writing carefully, dangling participles should be avoided. Unless you are quoting other people's exclamations, kill all exclamation points!!! Never use a long word when a diminutive one will do. Proofread carefully to see if you any words out. Use parallel structure when you write and in speaking. You should just avoid confusing readers with misplaced modifiers. Place pronouns as close as possible, especially in long sentences—such as those of ten or more words—to their antecedents. Eschew dialect, irregardless. Remember to never split an infinitive. Take the bull by the hand and don't mix metaphors. Don't verb nouns. Always pick on the correct idiom. Never, ever use repetitive redundancies. "Avoid overuse of 'quotation "marks.'" Never use prepositions to end a sentence with. Last but not least, avoid clichés like the plague.

Editing is tricky business, and you cannot trust computer software to do it right. Seek out a friend for a fresh perspective on your writing or the Writing Center in Eads Hall 111 (935-4981) for help in learning how to learn to edit.

2. Writing that is free from error is not yet good writing. Prose style is difficult to cultivate except by practice, but there are some general guidelines worth learning. Great prose is concise (it wastes no words), precise (it says exactly what it means), and concrete (it does not use hazy concepts whose meaning is contested). Several guidebooks provide helpful advice about how to achieve concise, precise, and concrete prose; in particular, Joseph Williams' Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace is worth reviewing periodically. Among the most broadly helpful pieces of advice are these:

- organize your sentences from old information (at the start) to new information (at the end);
- don't forget that verbs convey information, often more concisely than constructions built around a simple linking verb;
- be wary of abstract (Latinate) nouns and prefer concrete (Anglo-Saxon) words;
- shun jargon and technical vocabulary except where nothing less wieldy will do (and in these cases explain each term that you introduce);
- prefer simple constructions to more ornate ones; and

...
use similes, metaphors, and intensifying adjectives and adverbs (e.g., 'very') sparingly.

In addition to collecting and reviewing advice, one who aspires to write great prose should cultivate taste for great prose. Make a habit of reading in The New Yorker, Harper's, or The Atlantic Monthly, and seek out the essays of past masters of English prose such as Orwell and E.B. White.

So much for prose style in general. Keep in mind that there are multiple successful prose styles. Good writing varies in its register or tone, its wit, its elegance, and its vigor. Careful writers will vary their style of prose to suit its function, from piece to piece and sometimes from section to section. So what is the point of your essay, and who is it for? In this class, you are not writing informative essays but argumentative essays, and you are writing for a formal occasion. So here are some upshots of that.

(a) Unless you hate your readers, your essay shouldn't sound pretentious and obscure, but because you are writing for a formal occasion, your essay shouldn't sound chatty, either. But it should definitely sound: prose style is best checked by being read aloud.
(b) Your prose will be rewarded for wit, elegance, and vigor, but not as strongly as it will be penalized for lacking concision, precision, or concreteness.
(c) Your audience is captive, so you do not need to draw us in with an anecdote or an arresting claim. Given that your words are limited, you shouldn't waste them on what you do not need.
(d) You might think that your audience is well-informed, but you should not take anything for granted. What we take to be obvious is not necessarily what you take to be obvious. These texts and the topics they involve are complicated, and language is frequently ambiguous in ways that can confound successful communication. There are many potential obstacles here. To make your case as clear and unlikely to mislead as possible, assume that we are ignorant and hostile.
(e) Your essays are short, so they shouldn't need elaborate directions to chart your course, or a summing up at the end.
(f) You are writing as an advocate for a position and not as a faceless journalist, so it is not at all inappropriate for you to use the first-person singular pronoun.

3. Since you are writing argumentative essays, the most important feature of your essay is its thesis. Your essay must advance a clearly formulated contestable claim, and it must be organized in the service of building a case for that claim. To arrive at a good thesis, try to find the question you mean to answer. You can sharpen the formulation of your thesis by considering alternative ways of formulating the question. (What exact question do you want to answer, and what questions do you want to set aside?) You can test the contestability of your thesis by asking whether a reasonable person could make a decent case for a different answer to your question. (If they couldn’t, your thesis is not contestable.) Be especially sure that the scope of your question and thesis is explicit. Make your thesis as narrow as it needs to be so that you can make a strong case for it in a short essay. (It sometimes helps to say what you are not arguing for.) There will be time enough later to fashion a broader thesis, with a larger supporting case. You need to master the skill of writing an argumentative essay before you write an enormous argumentative essay.
4. For all the importance of the prose as prose, and of the thesis itself, your essay will be primarily evaluated on the basis of the argument it offers for its thesis. (This is why your thesis is so important: if it is unclear, your argument cannot succeed. We do not care whether we find your thesis especially plausible or not. Make a good case for a clearly stated, contestable claim, and you've written a good argumentative essay.) Are the reasons you offer clear? How good are they? In particular, where your reasons depend on evidence, how well do you marshal that evidence? Do you confront potential objections to your reasons or potential alternatives to your interpretation of the evidence? Have you answered such objections? Do you consider counter-evidence to your reasoning, and do you show why such evidence does not undermine your case? Have you confirmed your case by comparing it to the best case for the most plausible alternative to your thesis?

If the prose is at least unproblematic; the thesis is explicit, precise, and contestable; there are well-organized reasons in favor of thesis, with well-handled evidence; and there is some clear engagement with another perspective (some objection, some counter-evidence, some counter-interpretation), then the essay meets expectations. That's a very good achievement, especially if you've never been asked to write an essay like this before. But because our sights are set high here, the essay that meets expectations earns a B+ (87-89).

Especially good prose earns a bonus point or two, as does an especially interesting thesis. But the bulk of the difference between a good essay that meets expectations and a very good one (A-, 90-93) or a great one (A, 94+) depends on the quality of the argumentation. How good are the reasons? How much evidence is marshaled, and how deftly? How thoughtfully are alternatives considered?

Conversely, problems with the prose, the thesis, the organization, the handling of evidence, or engagement with alternative possibilities will be noted, and points subtracted accordingly.

If there are problems, you will have the chance to revise once. Keep in mind that to revise an essay requires far more than cutting and pasting to correct its most obvious flaws. Because of the way the pieces of an essay are supposed to fit together, revision requires rethinking the entire essay from ground up. What exactly is the thesis? Do I have at least one good argument to support exactly this thesis? How would someone argue against my thesis, or object to my argument(s), and how can I answer them? With distance from one's essay, and with criticisms from another reader, one should recognize ways in which one can improve one's thesis, argument(s), or response to objections. The goal is not to minimize or maximize the number of changes one makes. The goal is, as it ever was, to craft a good argumentative essay.