Philosophical Perspectives on Truth and Value
PHI 006 4
Fall 2008
Dr. Christian Hoeckley
X 6158, hoeckley@westmont.edu
Office Hours: M 4 – 5 Kerrwood Modular A, Room 3; W 11:30 – 1 Dining Commons

Goals for the Class
A philosophy class can make an important contribution to meeting some of the central goals of a liberal arts education, especially to the development of foundational intellectual skills that you will use in many contexts. Among these are:
• reading
• writing
• creative problem solving
• analyzing
• developing cogent arguments
• recognizing the plausibility of competing views
• revealing tacit assumptions
• making discerning judgments
People with these skills are equipped to make powerful contributions to whatever communities they are a part of, professional, civic, or religious.

A philosophy class can help you better understanding discussions in other disciplines, for example:
• discussions of social constructs in the social sciences;
• discussions of modernity and post-modernism in theology;
• discussions of human rights in political science;
• discussions of the relationship between science and faith; and many others.

A philosophy class addresses issues at the very heart of our existence, even regardless of their importance for other disciplines, issues like:
• Who am I? What is it to be a human being?
• What is real? The world of material objects seems real enough. Is that all there is?
• What can be known? Do all these academic fields really produce knowledge? Or is knowledge not even what we’re after? Can I know that the core claims of the Christian faith are true?
• How should we treat one another?
• How should we structure society and government?

A philosophy class can be extremely important for religious believers since many critiques of religious beliefs and ways of life and many defenses of them rest on understanding of central philosophical concepts.

My hope is that you will improve in these skills, be better able to engage in central issues in other fields, and wrestle with some of life’s fundamental questions, all to the purpose of serving God by contributing to a world very much in need of intelligent, creative, and caring people.

Class Structure
My expectation is to cover one topic per week. But each topic will bridge two class periods. We’ll typically introduce a new topic on Thursdays usually with some ungraded in-class writing and discussion of some lead questions, a brief lecture on the topic from me, and some set up of the week’s readings. You’ll read and take part in on-line discussion of the issues between Thursday and Tuesday. On Tuesday we’ll begin by addressing the reading, then I’ll give a wrap-up lecture/discussion.

Reading
Our textbook is: Philosophy: A Text with Readings, 10th Edition by Manuel Velasquez. This will be augmented by electronic resources. You will find links to these other resources on our Facebook group page.
Tests, Assignments, Class Contributions. (All work must be completed to pass the class. Students who miss more than four classes will be dropped from the class.)

Weekly posts to our Facebook discussion board—two or three paragraphs (200 – 300 words)—addressing the questions for reflection and discussion from the previous class. Your in-class written reflection may serve as a starting point for this, but the online post will need to reflect awareness of the points made during the discussion and lecture that follow the in-class writing. You are free to either start lines of thought on the topic or respond to others. Posts must be submitted by Friday at 7 AM. Additional posts can be submitted after that if people want to keep the discussion going.

This will apply 10 – 12 weeks. I will evaluate them all, but will count only your best eight. Each is worth 3%. So, each is a low-stakes task, and there is room for error since you can drop from two to four. I will evaluate these with +, √, or –. Minus means you’ve offered your thoughts but without contributing ideas or perspectives substantially beyond those already offered. A check means you’ve made a contribution that carries the discussion forward, offering original ideas and perspectives. (Note that it can be easier to be original when you contribute to the discussion early, though those who contribute later have the opportunity to carry the discussion forward by critiquing early contributions. Later contributions must show awareness of earlier ones.) A plus means you’ve contributed something that really stood out. Plusses may be uncommon. They translate into something beyond an A. But checks translate to something between a B and an A, so to get an A for this part of the class, you’ll probably need a couple plusses. The sum of these amounts to roughly one fourth of your semester grade. Don’t look for written feedback on these. There are too many, too frequently for that to be feasible. But by all means, if you have questions, come see me.

Class contributions. I will typically begin each class with questions asked of two or three students addressing major themes from the reading done for that day or from the previous class session’s lecture and discussion. You’ll typically be asked to explain a key concept, or perhaps offer a summary or critique of a line of reasoning. Over the course of the semester, each of you will be asked these opening questions three or four times. Your response should show a clear grasp of the material, without needing prompting, or qualifying or correcting. You won’t know when you’ll be asked, so come to class prepared. Prepared means not just having done the reading, but having understood it well enough to explain it to others. That can often take two or three readings. Just make this part of your expectation, and you won’t be frustrated at having to re-read. (I have to all the time!)

I will also be paying attention to your unsolicited contributions throughout the class. I expect each of you to contribute thoughtfully to discussions and to do so in a way that is respectful of others and inviting of their participation. (Too frequent contributions can shut others out, as can aggressive or combative contributions.) Your class contribution will be worth 15% of your semester grade.

Tests. There will be four tests over the course of the semester. The purpose of the tests is to evaluate your ability to continue thinking and learning about the issues and ideas you have encountered. That means testing your ability to understand, set in context, and critique new material on your own, applying what you’ve learned from our reading and discussion to this new material. The class period before each test I will make available two or three readings related to the topics we will have covered since the previous test. The day of the test, you will write on one of these readings (of my choosing). Each test will increase in value (10%, 13%, 17%, 20%) reflecting the fact that you should do better as you get more experience. Your tests will be worth 60% of your semester grade.

Final Grade
Weekly discussion posts 25%
Class contributions 15%
Test #1 10%
Test #2 13%
Test #3 17%
Final 20%
Evaluation
Letter grades represent the following evaluations:
F = did it, but inadequately
D = did it, but poorly
C = did it adequately
B = did it well
A = did it exceptionally well
Poorly (D) means it's incomplete, or reveals serious confusion about the basic issues, or is unclear to the point of being difficult to follow.
Inadequate (F) means it's all of these things. (Tests or assignments missed entirely receive a 0. A 0 has significantly more serious effects on your semester grade than an F.)
Adequate (C) means it's complete, it shows basic grasp of the issues, its point is clear, and the writing is grammatically and mechanically sound.
Well (B) means it meets the criteria for being adequate, and it demonstrates particular insight, or creativity, or cogency, or comprehensive understanding of the issues, and its point is especially clear and the writing is thoroughly clean.
Exceptional (A) means it is all of these things.

You might infer from these criteria that I am stingy with an A. This is not necessarily true. I don’t grade on a curve, so it's possible for everyone to do exceptional work as I've defined it. In addition, I love giving As because I love to read your outstanding work. But typically the work I receive over the semester isn’t always outstanding (it certainly wasn’t for me as a student) and it's important that I reserve As for the outstanding work, otherwise they lose their meaning and when you do outstanding work, there will be no way to distinguish it from work that is good but less than outstanding. You also lose incentive to raise the level of your work from good to great.

So read and listen carefully, take careful notes and copy them over after class, think things over thoroughly, demonstrate curiosity and insight as you contribute to class, experiment with a fresh take on the issues, try out your ideas with each other, write carefully and have someone look at your writing before you submit it, and never be bashful about coming to see me. Do these things and, whatever your grade, you will have been successful.

For the official Westmont description of the meaning of letter grades see: <http://cgi2.westmont.edu/publications/academic_policies/grades/>

Two Notes on Plagiarism:
1. Know what it is.
2. Don't do it.
Here's a brief version of Westmont's official position:
To plagiarize is to present someone else's work—his or her words, line of thought, or organizational structure—as your own. This occurs when sources are not cited properly, or when permission is not obtained from the original author to use his or her work. Another person's "work" can take many forms: printed or electronic copies of computer programs, musical compositions, drawings, paintings, oral presentations, papers, essays, articles or chapters, statistical data, tables or figures, etc. In short, if any information that can be considered the intellectual property of another is used without acknowledging the original source properly, this is plagiarism.

Please familiarize yourself with the entire Westmont College Plagiarism Policy. This document defines different levels of plagiarism and the penalties for each. It also contains very helpful information on strategies for avoiding plagiarism. It cannot be overemphasized that plagiarism is an insidious and disruptive form of academic dishonesty. It violates relationships with known classmates and professors, and it violates the legal rights of people you may never meet.

Please visit <http://www.westmont.edu/_academics/pages/provost/curriculum/plagiarism> for the entire policy.
Schedule of Topics (T is Tuesday, H is Thursday)

Why am I here? We'll look at three ways of asking this question (none as deep as you may be thinking, but all of them important). T Sep 2, H Sep 4

What is the relationship between moral principles and cultural difference? We'll ask the tough question about whether moral principles and values are relative to culture or historical era. H Sep 4, T Sep 9

What makes a wrong action wrong? It's often easier to agree on what is right or wrong than it is on why it is right or wrong. We'll consider different answers to the why question. H Sep 11, T Sep 16, H Sep 18 (test 1 articles)

Test #1 T Sep 23

How should things of value be distributed among members of a society? We'll consider what justice requires of us regarding how goods are distributed in a society. H Sep 25, T Sep 30

Can I support war? If so, in what circumstances? We'll join a centuries-long discussion among faithful Christians that remains as pressing today as ever. H Oct 2, T Oct 7

What is the state's role in helping form us into good people or restraining us from being bad? We'll address one of the great tensions in American political thought between freedom on the one hand and restraining evil on the other. H Oct 9, H Oct 16 (test 2 articles)

Test #2 T Oct 21

How does something continue to exist through change? We'll explore why we think there is stability in the material world and the implications of this question for our own lives. H Oct 23, T Oct 28

Is my body myself? We'll explore whether the brain can explain everything about thought, behavior, perception, and emotion, and what its relation is to the mind or soul or spirit. H Oct 30, T Nov 4

Where is God the midst of suffering? We'll reflect on how wickedness and suffering are possible if God is as powerful and loving as the Christian tradition teaches. H Nov 6, T Nov 11, H Nov 13 (test 3 articles)

Test #3 T Nov 18

What should we believe? Who should we believe? How should we believe? We'll ask how we come to beliefs we can be confident in. H Nov 20 7, T Nov 25

Is the world really as we perceive it? We'll inquire into one of the most fundamental of our beliefs—that our senses are giving us reliable information about reality. T Dec 2, H Dec 4, T Dec 9

Wrap up. H Dec 11 (final exam articles)

Final Exam T Dec 16