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 play a crucial role in 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 important 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.
Schedule of Topics

WEEK 1-2 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).

WEEK 2-3 How does a thing 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.

WEEK 3-4 Is my body myself? We'll explore whether the brain can explain everything about behavior, perception, emotion, and thought, and what its relation is to the mind or soul or spirit.

WEEK 4-5 Where is God the midst of suffering? One of the most difficult challenges for religious belief, we'll reflect on how wickedness and suffering are possible if God is as powerful and loving as the Christian tradition claims.

WEEK 5-6 How do we gain knowledge? How are intellectual pursuits and my faith related? We'll ask whether the ways we know things about the natural world or human behavior and societies apply to claims about God.

WEEK 6 (second half) What is the purpose of academic work? Scholars from across the disciplines will discuss the relationship of their work to the pursuit of knowledge or the search for truth.

WEEK 7 (First half) Midterm exam

WEEK 7-8 Is the world really as we perceive it? We'll raise some questions about one of the most fundamental of our beliefs—that our senses are giving us reliable information about reality.

WEEK 8-9 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.

WEEK 9-10 What is it that 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 think about different answers to the why question.

WEEK 10-11 What reason do I have for doing the right thing? We often know perfectly well what's right and choose not to do it anyway. We'll explore different rationales for being moral.

WEEK 11-12 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.

WEEK 12-13 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.

WEEK 13-14 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.

WEEK 15 Final Exam
Class Structure
My expectation is to cover one topic per week. But each topic will bridge two class periods. We'll introduce a new topic in the second half of class 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 online discussion of the issues during the week. We'll begin the next class by addressing the reading, often with a very brief essay quiz, then with guided discussion of the reading by a student team, and finally a wrap-up led by me. Then we'll take a break and move to the next topic in the second half of class.

Reading
Our textbook for this class is: Philosophy: A Text with Readings, 10th Edition by Manuel Velasquez. This will be supplemented by electronic resources. You will find links to these resources on our Facebook group page.

Tests, Assignments, Papers, etc.
Weekly posts to our Facebook discussion board—one to two paragraphs (100 – 200 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 it will want to show awareness of the points made during the discussion and lecture that follow the in-class writing, and perhaps the reading to be done that week. You are free to either start lines of thought on the topic or respond to others. Posts must be submitted by Monday at 7 AM. Additional posts can be submitted after that if people want to keep the discussion going.

This will apply 13 weeks. I will evaluate them all but will count only your best seven. So you may choose to submit only seven, or you may wish to submit more out of interest in the topic or so that you have some cushion. Each is worth 3%. So, each is a low-stakes task, and there is room for error since you can drop as many as six. I will grade these with +, √, or −, corresponding to A, B, and C or D, respectively. The sum of these amounts to roughly one fifth of your semester grade.

Short (250 - 350 words) in-class essays over the readings. Each week that there is reading assigned, be prepared to start class with a brief writing task drawn from that week’s reading. Each is worth 4%. Your six best will be counted, totaling roughly one quarter of the semester grade. The key to success on these is to do all of the reading and, typically, do it more than once, taking careful notes each time.

Guided class discussion of the readings, led by your small group. Each of you will join a team of four students to lead a 30-minute class discussion of the material in the readings for one of the weeks. Your goal is to ensure that the class understands the reading and can analyze and critique it. You have the teaching role—make it count. Your grade for this task will be made up of evaluations by me, by your fellow team members, and by the rest of the class. It will represent 15% of your final grade.

A brief (1000 – 1200 word) essay developing one theme from the reading you will be teaching. These will be due by class time the week following your presentation. This paper will represent 15% of your semester grade.

A midterm exam (Oct 19) and a final exam (Dec 12) representing 10% and 15% of your semester grade respectively.
Final Grade

Weekly discussion posts  21%
In-class reading quizzes  24%
Class discussion project  15%
Accompanying paper  15%
Midterm  10%
Final  15%
Class participation Movement up or down across a grade threshold in more pronounced cases.

Evaluation

Letter grades represent the following evaluations:
F = didn't do it, or did it inadequately
D = did it, but poorly
C = did it adequately
B = did it well
A = did it exceptionally well

Poorly means it's incomplete, or reveals serious confusion about the basic issues, or is unclear to the point of being difficult to follow. (Inadequate means it's all of these things.)
Adequate means it's complete, it shows basic grasp of the issues, its point is clear, and the writing is grammatically and mechanically sound.
Well 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 means it is all of these things.

You might infer from these criteria that I am stingy with A's. This is not necessarily true. I don't grade on a curve; it's possible for everyone to do exceptional work as I've defined it. And I love giving A's. I'd love to give all A's to everyone all the time. But that's because I would love to read outstanding all the time. Unfortunately that's not always true (it certainly wasn't for me as a student) and it's important that I reserve A's for the outstanding work, otherwise they lose their meaning and when you do outstanding work, there will be no way to distinguish it from less than outstanding work. You also lose incentive to raise the level of your work form good to great. So read and listen carefully, think things over thoroughly, 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 you'll do okay. And never be bashful about coming to see me.

If your grade is near a threshold between two grades I reserve the right to use my evaluation of your classroom participation to shift your grade over the threshold either up or down.
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.