

Philosophy 1 Spring 2000 Syllabus

This syllabus is going to be a little different from most of the other syllabi you may have read, perhaps because the study of Philosophy is a little different from other studies. Showing you how it is different from, but intimately related to, all of the other disciplines and, more particularly, whatever most interests you have would go a long way toward explaining why the syllabus is as it is, but doing so here would, I think, be putting the cart before the horse: syllabi are supposed, among other things, to introduce courses and not the other way around.

Yes, this syllabus will contain the usual information (though perhaps not in the usual format), as it is important that the prospective student feel some familiar points of reference at the outset. But as it seems to me more important in an introduction to help you see a little bit of what philosophy is all about and what this course will, in general, try to do to get there than it is to inform you about the nuts and bolts (i.e., how many papers/tests, scoring etc.), we may have a small problem: what you may want, maybe even need, to hear first is not exactly what I want to tell you first, and what I want to tell you is not exactly what you want to hear ('why' will become more obvious as you read). so ...how to proceed: I could just "give the people what they want", but I don't think that doing so would give a very accurate picture of the course, and some of you might go or stay based on a misconception, or I could just forge ahead and say what I want to regardless of whatever you feel and again some of you might decide to go or stay based on a misunderstanding.

so . . . what to do? I think that I will do a bit of both.

Yes, there will be three texts for the course: Jostein Gaarder's *Sophie's World*, Plato's *Meno* and Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, all of which are presently available in the book store, all of which together will set you back about \$50 (new), and which you will need to purchase in that order. You will need to have read the first assignment (i.e., the first two chapters(i.e. through p.17 of the Gaarder) **before** the first meeting of the second week.(Please purchase the hardback version or at least the 'quality' (i.e. larger) paperback as they have the same pagination while the smaller paperback does not)

Yes, there will be three 5+ page papers and yes, each of the readings (e.g. the above assignment is 'a reading') will appear on at least one quiz of which there will be approximately 12, and yes, there will be some (i.e. approx. 6-8) collected 1 page "home work" assignments and all of this paper work collectively will make up either 1/3 or 2/3 rds of your grade; it depends on . . . but more of that later. "What," you might very well ask, "will the other 2/3 or 1/3 of the grade consist in? attendance? bribes? interpretive dance? or the dreaded 'class participation'?" Well yes, sort of, at least to the first and last of that list.

But before I elaborate let me first say a little about what a typical class might look like: I assign a text for discussion for the next period, usually a selection from or about one of the big names in Philosophy. You go home, read (and, I hope, re-read) that text, and the next class I give you a small quiz on some relatively straight forward (i.e., one I think I have an answer to) point in the text. As I collect the quiz, I give what I think would be a reasonable answer to that question or ask you what you think a good answer to the question I just asked would be. Then once (if) we've

INSTR. Name
Grade Scale
Attendance
DPR date

gotten some agreement on that question, I next try to ask what I hope is a related but, at least to me, relatively less straight forward (i.e., one I don't think I have the answer to) version of the first question. And the rest of the class would be devoted to an open discussion of that and any ensuing questions. I call the first question a 'phoney' question because, though it sounds like a question, it isn't really, at least to my mind, because, don't you see, I think I have the answer. I call the second question 'real' because to me that is what it is: one to which I don't have the answer and one which I hope to explore along with you. Of course sometimes what I think of as a phoney question turns out in class discussion to be more real than I had thought. . . .

Yes, yes I'm pretty sure of at least two things some of you are going to say at this point (well, you probably won't actually *say* them, but you might either 'walk' or choose to lay low while thinking: "Oh great, a bullshitting class." ("I can do that" or "Who wants to do that?"), or, if you are slightly more charitable, "Oh, it's an opinion class; but how can he grade us on our opinions, and base maybe up to 2/3 rds of my grade (!) in a course that I need (!!) on such a subjective standard!?! " Both of the above questions seem to me to be good ones . . . if they are 'real'. That is, if they are real, honest questions asking for information and not merely the phoney ones, ones to which the asker thinks the answer is obvious. It would be great to pause here and have a discussion of Kerry Walters' *On Bullshitting and Brainstorming*.

Philosophy is a funny discipline, it seems to have such difficulty making any progress; its proponents have been asking virtually the same questions (read the table of contents), or at least any attempt to have a philosophical discussion seems to start out with the same basic questions, for at least 2500 years that we know of. It's odd that when the arts and sciences seem to be always taking such large steps forward that philosophy seems always mired in the same old questions and stuck with answering the same old charge, "Well, that's just your opinion." And yet isn't it strange that all of the other disciplines don't ever really want to disown their mother (for that is, historically, what she is); note for example that the highest degree awarded in any field is a PhD, that is, a doctor (D) of **Philosophy** (Ph), with an *emphasis* in math or in English or business, and isn't it funny that when they want to check their own results it is to logic, a branch of philosophy or aesthetics or epistemology or ethics, all branches of philosophy, which they appeal?

But what does this little discussion on Philosophy have to do with the computation of your grade, specifically the charge that if I make 1 to 2 /3rds of your grade depend on class participation the grading must be somehow subjective (read "unfair") and dependant on your agreeing with my opinion? Simply this: It's not the opinion in itself that counts so much as the quality of its defense and their connection, or non-connection, to each other and to other opinions; the quality or lack of quality of the defense of an opinion is not, at least in philosophy, a popularity contest: it is, it must be, demonstrable. Of course we will be arguing over just what constitutes a good demonstration the whole semester and that is good: to do so is to enter into the realm of philosophy.

I am sure that some of you right now want to say, "yeah, but in the end his is the only opinion that matters; he gives the grades" or, perhaps more charitably, "well, if *he* doesn't know, and *we* don't know the answers to these questions then' who's to say', and how would we even know the right

answer if we ran across it, and HOW IN THE WORLD WILL HE GRADE US?" Well, to those charges, and strong ones they are indeed, I can say little more at present than it is **the** job of any body engaged in the philosophical endeavor to avoid them, and I would ask your forbearance at least until after we have read the Meno wherein those topics are discussed; the little that I can say now is this: if in the end the only way answers can be checked is if somebody already knows *the* correct one, then how does any new knowledge ever get into the world? How does any scientist ever discover anything that his or her professor hadn't already taught him or her? (Of course such *original* work must then be checked to see if it is also *good* work, but how that is done is another topic....)

As to why I use that variable $\frac{1}{3}$ to $\frac{2}{3}$ written, $\frac{1}{3}$ to $\frac{2}{3}$ oral grade break down? Well, both are important, but some people are better at one than the other, and, as I am looking for the way to find some evidence that you deserve an "A" rather than some evidence that you deserve an "F", I want to weight what you do best most heavily. Please notice, however, 'no' participation in class or its equivalent during office hours will be extremely damaging to your grade as will any missing assignments; the worst grade bad work can get you is "F", 50%; 'no' work on an assignment (and coming to class not only prepared to talk but actually talking *is* part of the assignment) is a 0%. No, you don't have to talk every class, or say something just to get the air moving, but if week six starts to roll around and you haven't felt compelled to say *some* thing about what we've been reading then perhaps you are in the wrong class; no, you don't have to get in every written assignment, but those 'zeroes' do add up. . . .

Which brings up the subject of attendance and missed due dates: When you sign up for this class you are signing up to be a member of a discussion, an on going discussion, and we need you here every day to keep the discussion "on going". The school standard, with which I reluctantly abide, is two weeks of missed class sessions, $\frac{1}{9}$, 11%, of the class time. A discussion group is a single entity, a joint endeavor, and each absence diminishes not just your experience but everybody else's. I cannot stress this point too much: a missed discussion is just that, missed; ***it cannot be made up and it is a drag on the group when you are not carrying your own weight.*** We don't have time to catch you up on points you missed. If you do miss a class my office hours are or can be virtually any time that I am not in class, and I expect to see you **before** the next meeting. I start counting attendance on our third meeting. (The first week is just too much of a zoo to be held against any one.) This year my attendance will be computerized but only tabulated at the end of the semester so **don't** expect to get dropped from the class if you miss five counted classes; if the 5th miss occurs after the drop date you will get an "F" if you take no action: I let virtually any body back in (with some conditions and exceptions), but you **must** ask, and yes, you must keep track of your own absences. While, as I said above, my office hours can be virtually any time that I am not in class, I would prefer that you meet me in HE 54 (phone: 3274) during my normal hours: Thurs 11-2. I can be available at other times; just ask. My home phone is 222-8638; please call between 7 am and 7 p.m. I have tapes on both machines.

I hope that this somewhat odd format is not totally off putting. I will give you all of the "information" in it at least twice orally during the first two weeks. If you are in anyway unclear about what is expected of you at the end of that time please see me.

