



Philosophy 111
PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONS

Fall 2021
Amherst College

Professor: Rafeeq Hasan
Email: rhasan@amherst.edu
Meetings: Tu/Th 10:00-11:20am

Office Hours: W 10:00am-Noon; Th 3:00-5:00pm
Office Location: Cooper House 209
Class Location: Webster 220

Course Description

Socrates famously claims that “the unexamined life is not worth living.”¹ In the 20th century Stanley Cavell describes a philosophical education as “an examination of myself by an attack upon my assumptions.”² Philosophy is the thoughtful interrogation of some of life’s most fundamental questions: e.g., How should I act? What is good? What is the nature of reality? What is it to have a mind? Can I be sure that I know anything at all? Philosophy approaches these questions through reasoned argumentation and analysis of the arguments of others, both living and dead. Philosophy’s answers often challenge common sense.

Three particularly unsettling figures reoccur throughout the history of philosophy. The nihilist denies that there is any objectively right and wrong way to behave. The skeptic denies that we have knowledge of the external world. The fatalist denies that we are free to act and choose as we will. The goal of this course is to see if we can refute the nihilist, skeptic, and fatalist. We proceed via engagement with written work in the Western philosophical tradition.

Required Texts

¹ Plato, *Apology*, in *Five Dialogues* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), 38a.

² Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 25.

No books have been ordered for this course. All the assigned readings are contained in a course reader, which I will distribute to all enrolled students.

Philosophy is not best read from a computer screen, or while checking email, reading the news, etc. Please make sure that you bring the reader to every class.

Assignments/Grading:

First Essay 1100-1200 Words (~4-5 double-spaced pages)	Due: 10/1	20%
Second Essay 1100-1200 Words	Due: 11/12	20%
Third Essay 1100-1200 Words	Due: 12/16	20%
Homework Assignments		20%
Attendance/Class participation		20%

Policies/Requirements:³

1. Academic Honesty

Upon entering Amherst College, you each signed a pledge to uphold the honor code. According to the Honor Code's Statement of Intellectual Responsibility, "the College considers it a violation of the requirements of intellectual responsibility to submit work that is not one's own or otherwise to subvert the conditions under which academic work is performed by oneself or by others."⁴ I expect you will honor the pledge you signed. Therefore, everything you turn in should be *your own work* and *in your own words*. If your discussions of class topics with your friends, parents, etc., are helpful, cite them. Credit all sources appropriately, even (especially) Wikipedia and anything from your Googling bounty.

Please also consult the information contained in 'Intellectual Responsibility and Plagiarism' on the Dean of Students website: <https://www.amherst.edu/offices/student-affairs/community-standards/intellectual-responsibility-and-plagiarism>. Particularly helpful is: <https://www.amherst.edu/offices/student-affairs/community-standards/intellectual-responsibility-and-plagiarism/using-sources>

If questions remain about what constitutes academic honesty or dishonesty, please ask me.

The penalty for plagiarism in my course is failure, absolutely no exceptions

2. Deadlines

Late policy. Three principles guide my late policy:

1. Work should be assessed on its quality and on whether it demonstrates learning.
2. Each assignment has a purpose; that purpose can only be fulfilled within a certain timeframe.
3. Deadlines allow us to organize our time and learning and to meet our goals.

Homework Policy: In light of these, late homework assignments will not be accepted for credit. The goals of these assignments include: reading comprehension, preparation for class discussion, and honing the skills needed for philosophical essay writing. These goals are defeated if you do not complete the assignment on time. **If you have an excused absence, you must bring the homework assignment to the following class.**

³ Some of what follows is borrowed from syllabi from two friends and colleagues, Katia Vavova (Mt. Holyoke) and James Wilson (University of Chicago).

⁴ https://www.amherst.edu/academiclife/dean_faculty/fph/policies/sir

Essay Final Version Policy: If you find that you are unable to complete the essay by the deadline because of a crisis or emergency, you must contact me no less than 2 days before the due date. I MAY be able to grant a slight extension. Papers that are submitted late and without an extension will be marked down .3 down (see #9 for grading scale) for every day of lateness. This means that even one day of lateness turns a B+ into a B.

Essays received late may not receive full comments. This is not about punishing you for getting in late work. It's about enabling me to schedule my time.

Finally, keep in mind first, that I am here to help. Get in touch if you're worried about anything.

Second, when it comes to assignments, late > never > plagiarized.

3. Communication

Important announcements and assignments will sometimes be communicated to you via email. It is your responsibility to make sure you are up to date with the latest news. Get in the habit of checking your email at least once daily and don't miss class. If you do miss class, check with your classmates.

Of course, you are always welcome to email me with any questions. But please keep in mind that there are a lot more of you than there are of me and modern email demands are crazy-making. To stay sane:

- I do not answer emails in the evening (after 5pm) or on weekends.
- I respond as promptly as I can, but not always on the same day.
- I can't guarantee a response to emails about assignments that are due within 24 hours of the email.

These rules are here so that I can manage to respond promptly to questions that do need to be answered via email.

4. Attendance

You should attend class regularly, on time, and well-rested. If you need to miss a class because of illness or family emergency, or some other pressing matter, please let me know ahead of time by email.

I couldn't make it to class the other day. Did I miss anything important? Of course you did. To learn what you missed, contact your classmates, check Moodle for handouts, and make sure you get caught up. After you've done all that, feel free to schedule an office hours appointment with questions and comments on the readings.

Of course, things happen. But *you are expected to attend every class.*

5. Participation

In order to get full credit for attendance/participation, you must also regularly *participate* in class. Be ready to explore ideas critically, boldly, and creatively with others, both in your small groups and in our collective meetings.

Your participation grade turns on the quality, not the quantity of your contributions, and the extent to which you exhibit the respect and care necessary to promote good discussion. Contributions do not have to be in the form of "answers" or completed "theories" about a text or position—thoughtful questions are highly encouraged, and you will certainly not be penalized for a spirit of humility. While good contributions obviously vary immensely, I especially value comments and questions that pay close attention to the relevant text and those that build on, and reflect attention to, others' contributions.

Why do I have to participate in class? Philosophy is a communal activity, and you've chosen to join our community this semester. Don't talk just for the sake of talking, but also don't wait for brilliance or insight to hit you before raising your hand. Shy? Nervous? Me too. Participation is more difficult for some of us than others, but writing papers, understanding the readings—these too are more difficult for some of us than others. And all of these are skills we must work on. If you have trouble speaking in class, please see me and we will work on it together—just as we would on any other aspect of the class that you find difficult.

Attendance/participation will count for 20% of your grade. There will be a .2 reduction in your overall participation grade for each day missed without a medical excuse.

Office hours: I will hold regular office hours from 10:00am-12:00pm on Wednesdays and 3:00-5:00pm on Thursdays (EST). **You can schedule an appointment with me at rhasan-1.youcanbook.me. I have it set up so that you can schedule up to 10 days in advance.** Again, since there are many more of you than there are of me, I ask that you please do not schedule more than one meeting with per week unless we've made prior arrangements. Office hours will be held via Zoom at least until September 13th. At that point, I will re-assess based on official College guidelines. I hope we can have office hours in person (Cooper House 209).

I also hope you schedule an office hours appointment with me often! Just a few minutes of one-on-one discussion can often help clarify a lot of issues. Please don't feel as if you have to have something brilliant to say (or, alternatively, some burning problem or question) to come and talk to me; feel free to come without any real agenda at all. You are not intruding by coming by.

Can we meet outside office hours? If you can't make my office hours because of a class or work conflict, or if all the spots are full, then by all means send me an email early in the week with a list of times when you are free to meet, and I will try my best to find an alternative.

6. Reading

This is a course about making, analyzing, and evaluating arguments. Many of these readings are dense, and several are written in outdated language. Leave yourself ample time to complete the readings.

Take the reading process seriously: read actively, doing your best to think about, and respond to, the works you are reading. Active annotation (e.g., underlining, tabbing, note-taking) will help you track down important passages when you come back to them later, such as in class or when writing a paper.

I repeat: philosophy is not best read from a computer screen. You will have a very hard time comprehending the readings if you are also checking email, reading the news, chatting with friends, etc.

Some reading advice: 1. When I give you reading questions, use these to help focus your attention on what is most important. 2. If you encounter a passage that you don't understand, re-read it a few times. If you still don't understand it, pass over it! Try to get a sense of the whole instead of getting lost in the part. 3. Jot down any questions or confusions you have about any particular passage or argument and raise them in class. (Note: if you're nervous about speaking up in class, having a prewritten question on hand can help.) 4. Skim over the reading again after class discussion. It should be much easier to understand at this point. 5. If you're still unclear about something, get help: ask other classmates, schedule office hours, etc.

7. Homework

I will often give written homework assignments. These may include: short answer responses to reading questions, reconstructions of arguments in the readings, drafts of parts of an essay assignment, etc. **These are never busy work** (see #2 above for the goals). These assignments will be graded on effort. If you put

thought and care into them, you will do well in this part of the course!

8. Essays

When will my essay be graded? I aim to return essays within two weeks of the date they were submitted. I realize it's hard to wait, but it's also hard to grade. I want to give your work the care and attention it deserves.

Can I send you a draft to read? I'm happy to help you on your essay, but I don't read complete drafts. Feel free to schedule office hours with questions, an outline, a paragraph you've written, an argument you're considering, etc. We can talk through your ideas and questions. Don't forget also that you can visit the Writing Center with drafts. This is a great resource. To schedule an appointment, visit

<https://www.amherst.edu/academiclife/support/writingcenter/makeappointment>

What sources should I use for writing my paper? You **do not** need to read any additional material beyond the assigned reading—and I don't encourage it. However, if you do consult outside sources, you must remember to *always* cite your sources.

As for my expectations on writing, David Foster Wallace put it well in his own syllabus:

"If you want to improve your academic writing and are willing to put extra time and effort into it, I am a good teacher to have. But if you're used to whipping off papers the night before they're due, running them quickly through the computer's Spellchecker, handing them in full of high-school errors and sentences that make no sense, and having the professor accept them "because the ideas are good" or something, please be informed that **I draw no distinction between the quality of one's ideas and the quality of those ideas' verbal expression**, and that I will not accept sloppy, rough-draftish, or semiliterate college writing. Again, I am absolutely not kidding. If you won't or can't devote significant time and attention to your written work, I urge you to drop... and save us both a lot of grief."⁵

9. Grading

You will be given both a number grade and a letter grade for each assignment. Only the numerical grade is taken into account in determining your final grade. Numerical grades correspond to letter grades as follows: A 10-9.5; A- 9.4-9.0; B+ 8.9-8.7; B 8.6-8.3; B- 8.2-8.0; C 7.9 or below

10. Accommodations

This course is open to all students who meet the academic requirements for participation. Any student who has a need for accommodation based on the impact of a disability should make an appointment to speak with an Accessibility Services Staff Member. In order to receive reasonable accommodations for a disability, you must register with the *Office of Accessibility Services* at Amherst College (even if you are a 5-College student). (<https://www.amherst.edu/offices/student-affairs/accessibility-services>). This office will provide a letter describing the appropriate accommodations. Once you have this letter, set up an appointment with me and we will discuss how to accommodate you.

11. Summary of Requirements

1. Don't plagiarize.
2. Do all required readings.

⁵ <http://alasophia.blogspot.com/2008/09/david-foster-wallaces-syllabus.html>

3. Do the homework assignments. Bring hard copies to the relevant class.
4. Don't miss class without a legitimate excuse.
5. Participate in class discussion (be alert and responsive).
6. Write 3 1100-1200-word essays.

Reading Schedule

Note: This schedule is not a contract. It is entirely provisional. We may speed up, slow down, skip readings, or add readings, depending on where our discussion leads and the interests of members of the class.

The Nihilist: Does my life have meaning? How should I live?

Week 1:

- | | |
|---------|---|
| Tu 8/31 | Introduction to the course |
| Th 9/2 | Read the entire syllabus; Susan Wolf, "The Meanings of Lives," pp. 1-10 |

Week 2:

- | | |
|--------|--|
| Tu 9/7 | Susan Wolf, "The Meanings of Lives," pp. 10-16 |
| Th 9/9 | Plato, <i>Apology</i> |

Week 3:

- | | |
|---------|---|
| Tu 9/14 | <i>Apology</i> (continued) |
| Th 9/16 | Plato, <i>Crito</i> ; Essay 1 Assigned |

Week 4:

- | | |
|---------|---|
| Tu 9/21 | Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" |
| Th 9/23 | Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" |

Week 5:

- | | |
|---------|---|
| T 9/28 | "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" (continued) |
| Th 9/30 | Larissa MacFarquhar, <i>Strangers Drowning</i> (selections); Amia Srinivasan, "Stop the Robot Apocalypse" |
| F 10/1 | Essay 1 Due by 9pm Eastern |

Week 6:

- | | |
|---------|---|
| T 10/5 | Judith Jarvis Thompson, "A Defense of Abortion" |
| Th 10/7 | "A Defense of Abortion" (continued); Don Marquis, "Why Abortion is Immoral" |

(selections)

Week 7:

- Tu 10/12 Mid-semester break day
- Th 10/14 Thomas Nagel, “War and Massacre”

Week 8:

- Tu 10/19 “War and Massacre” (continued)

The Skeptic:
What do I know? Who am I?

- Th 10/21 Descartes, Meditation 1

Week 9:

- T 10/26 Meditation 1 (continued)
- Th 10/28 Descartes, Meditation 2; **Essay 2 Assigned**
- Th 10/28 Optional Event: Professor Anthony Appiah (NYU) in conversation with Professor Adolph Reed (Penn) about reparations and racial justice (7:30pm)

Week 10:

- Tu 11/2 Descartes, Meditation 3
- Th 11/4 Andy Clark and David Chalmers, “The Extended Mind”

Week 11:

- 11/9 Anthony Appiah, “How to Decide if Races Exist”

The Fatalist:
Am I free? Am I responsible for what I do?

- Th 11/11 Baron d’Holbach, “The Illusion of Free Will”
- F 11/12 **Essay 2 Due by 9pm Eastern**

Week 12:

- T 11/16 Harry Frankfurt, “Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility”
- Th 11/18 “Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility” (continued)

Thanksgiving Break: 11/20-11/28

Week 13:

T 11/30 Susan Wolf, “Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility”

Th 12/2 “Sanity” (continued); **Essay 3 Assigned**

Week 14

Tu 12/7 Wrapping Up

Finals Week

Th 12/16 **Essay 3 Due by 9pm Eastern**