PHIL 205: Ancient Philosophy

Syllabus

Winter 2009

MWF 2:40-3:55
OU 112

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Office hours: MWF 1:15 – 2:15, Tues 11:00 – 12:00
and by appointment, except on Thursdays
Note on email: I will be sending mail to the class alias, which only knows your K
email address. Make sure your K email is forwarded to whatever
email account you use regularly, if it's something else.

Texts: Christopher Biffle, A Guided Tour of Five Works by Plato: Third Edition
Robin Waterfield, transl., Plato's Gorgias
Robin Waterfield, transl., Plato's Republic
Christopher Biffle, A Guided Tour of Selections from Aristotle's Nicomachean
Ethics
Julia Annas, ed., Voices of Ancient Philosophy
Articles on Moodle

Course Description

This is a course on the works of ancient Western philosophers, focusing on central
writings concerning the self, meaning, and morality. The greatest of the ancients –
Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle – will be covered in the most depth; but we'll also read from
numerous ancient philosophers on selected philosophical topics.

Since this is history of philosophy rather than history, our subject concerns the ideas,
arguments, and theories put forth by ancient philosophers, rather than biographical,
cultural, anthropological, or historical issues about them or their time period. We will
largely try to understand what these thinkers were trying to say, and why they thought what
they did; and assess the merits of the various positions and reasons offered.

In this class, there will be high expectations in terms of careful and thorough reading.
You will be assessed on your grasp of the ideas and arguments studied, as well as on your
ability to reflect on those ideas and arguments and contribute your own reasoned responses.

Class Format

This class will consist of a combination of lecture and discussion. In general, I will
spend time every day taking your questions about the reading and the previous class's
material, and we will then go over and talk about the current day's material. I will
sometimes have you break up into pairs or groups to work on an in-class assignment or
discussion. Since philosophical learning is best done in an environment of discussion, attendance and participation are expected.

You should have done the reading, thoroughly, before class. In addition to exercises I’ve assigned, I will also expect you to have looked over any study guides I might have given you. Class time will not be spent merely repeating in lecture format what the readings have already said. Of course it’s to be expected that there will be aspects of the readings that you will need guidance with after the fact; for that reason, it’s best to read the material carefully so that you know what to ask for more explanation about. Lectures, discussion, groupwork, and in-class work will be done under the assumption that everyone has made a sincere effort to understand the reading. Doing so will make these activities much more fruitful for you and your classmates.

You should be aware that some of the readings in this course will most likely be quite challenging for you. Give yourself plenty of time to do these readings carefully. Those who want to truly excel in this class will most likely want to read each assignment at least twice, and take notes on the readings. You must bring with you to class whatever text(s) we are working on for that day, as well as from the previous day if we might have some wrapping up to do, along with any assignments due.

In this class, we will be discussing issues that most people find important, and on which many people have strong opinions. We will not be merely exchanging opinions, but will be seeking greater understanding and views that are better, stronger, and more likely to be right. In that spirit, everyone’s contributions will be both respected and open to thoughtful criticism.

**Course Requirements and Grading Scheme**

**Moodle participation and contributions: 25%**

I will expect about 4-5 contributions on Moodle from each of you a week. There can be weeks where you do fewer and others where you do more, but you should be doing at least some posting each week. At least a couple will be posts to forums visited by the other students in the class. The remainder can be either forum posts or in a “journal” type format that only I will see and evaluate.

You should be participating regularly in Moodle forums – this is hard to quantify, just like discussion in class. As a guess, I’d say three or so substantive posts a week (starting a thread or responding to others’ posts). Short posts, perhaps simply saying what you like about someone else’s post, or asking for clarification from someone, would be on top of your substantive post – but would count toward overall quality of Moodle participation, especially since they show that you’re looking at the forums regularly.

The general expectation for your Moodle and class contributions is that they engage with the material in a sophisticated way that shows genuine effort and comprehension, but in an informal format. Of course, sometimes your posts might just be basic questions or comments, which is okay. I might pose questions to focus your thinking, but there will be a good amount of flexibility in what you choose to post or say. I do not expect polished essays on Moodle, with things like thesis statements and conclusions – just provocative, insightful, helpful, or reflective comments and questions.

One purpose of the Moodle contributions is for you to be thinking about the material we’ve been discussing or reading in a personal way, either grappling with your own view on a topic or applying the ideas to things in your own life.
In-class participation and demonstrated preparedness (including Biffle exercises): 25%

Participation is expected in our meetings. In a philosophy class of this kind, discussion is absolutely essential, and may be the way you learn most about the material. I know that participation is difficult for some people, but you can consider this a safe place to practice contributing to a group discussion, which you will surely need to do throughout your life.

I will keep general track of your contributions in class. Keep in mind that contributions can take various forms, including asking for clarification, participation in group work, and giving helpful examples. Keep in mind also that more does not necessarily mean better: those who excessively dominate discussions, speak disrespectfully, or otherwise use their voices in a negative way may be penalized for doing so. If you are in doubt, or if you are interested in advice about how to participate more effectively or more easily, ask me.

Demonstrated preparedness includes evidence of your having read the assignments and readings carefully, thought about and tried to answer any study questions or tasks I've given, prepared questions or comments in advance of class, and kept up with ongoing work on terms and concepts, and on your final creative project. A major component of demonstrated preparedness is the exercises I will assign from the Biffle texts. I'll monitor how genuinely you are working at those exercises.

Again, if you want to know how you're doing on this, or want to talk about how to do this well, get in touch with me.

Oral exams: 30% (15% each)

In week 5 and in weeks 9-10, I will conduct individual oral exams with each of you on Plato and Aristotle, respectively. These assess the depth of your comprehension of these philosophers’ views. You'll get a chance to specify ahead of time a couple of the main topics on which we'll focus. The idea behind the oral exam is not to check and see what you've memorized, or how well you can recall details "on the fly." The concept is a simple one: if you have carefully read the material, paid attention in class, participated in discussion, and thought about what we've been studying, you ought to be able to talk about what you've studied and what you think about it in an intelligent and informed way.

An oral exam will take the form of a conversation on the material in which I ask you questions designed to let you show me how much you have understood and considered. One model to think of in connection with the oral exam is a graduate school or job interview, in which the interviewers want to get a feel for how well you've thought about certain issues, and how well you could think about others.

I will give you more information about this as the time gets nearer.

Final creative project and presentation: 20%

You will design and execute a creative project, due 10th week, and present it to the class during our regular meeting times that week. The project should be something that illustrates your grasp and application of the material. This could be something artistic, something you organize as an event, a play or dialogue, fiction, or various other things - you'll need to check in with me for advice and approval. Unless it's contained in your project, you'll need to provide a short explanation of what you were trying to convey, show, or accomplish, and how you think your project did that (maybe a page or so). The project should in some way tie together various ideas, views, issues, or readings, and I'd like it to tie the course material to something in contemporary issues.

I'll post some examples of creative projects former students have done.
A note on reading: don’t succumb to the misconception that in order to read something you only have to move your eyes over the lines, or “read it out loud in your head.” What I expect is that you will read the material in a more sophisticated way, thinking as you go (the Biffle exercises will help you learn how to do this). You should be asking yourself the main points, making sure you understand the structure of the reading, thinking about how this reading relates to others you’ve done, and otherwise working to comprehend the material, not just to complete a technical “reading” of it.

Academic integrity and the Honor System
“It is always important to think of the intellectual world as a community of mutual dependence, mutual helpfulness, mutual protectiveness, and common delight. We take ideas from others and we give them to others. We are indebted to others, and others are indebted to us. In sharing and acknowledging the community, we define ourselves more certainly as individuals. The ability to describe our sources is also an ability to define our own originality and our own selves. All communities depend on generosity, trust, definition, and the proper use of sources is part of the mortar that holds the community of the mind together.”

- Richard Marius, Expository Writing Program, Harvard University

In this class, as in all classes at Kalamazoo College, we will be operating under the Honor System. It is important that you familiarize yourself with that system. You should also familiarize yourself with proper procedures for collaborating, doing research, and citing sources. I expect each of you to read the essay on the Moodle site called “Plagiarism and How to Avoid It.” Should you have any questions about citations, plagiarism, or honor system issues, please visit or contact me.

Any assignment you turn in that I find to violate academic integrity, either through dishonesty, plagiarism, lack of appropriate citations, or unauthorized collaboration, will receive a grade of 0. Any further instance of a violation of academic integrity will be punished by a failing grade in the class as a minimum sanction.¹

Special needs
If you have any special needs that I can accommodate, please let me know as soon as possible.

Office hours
My office hours are posted above. They will be conducted on a first-come, first-served basis, and by appointment, with appointments taking precedence. You should feel absolutely free to come to them and discuss the course, the material, the assignments, or philosophy.

I request that each of you take a few minutes to visit me during my office hours sometime in the first week or two of classes. It will be an opportunity for us to chat one-on-one for the first time, and to get to know each other a bit more.

¹ I owe some of the phrasing in this statement to Prof. Vaughn Maatman
Schedule of Readings

Any changes will be announced in class and by email. The reading assignments listed for each day must be completed before that class. All readings are found in your books or on the Moodle site as indicated.

**WEEK ONE**

M  Introduction to Class and Ancient Philosophy  
W  Biffle’s introduction to Plato (pages 1-6)  
    Plato: *Euthyphro* (Biffle)  
F  VAP Ch. 3, “Knowledge, Belief, and Skepticism,” A-C (131-166)

**WEEK TWO**

M  Plato: *Apology* (Biffle)  
W  Plato: *Crito* (Biffle)  
F  MLK teach-in day  
    *Apology* and *Crito*

**WEEK THREE**

M  MLK Holiday – no class  
W  Waterfield’s introduction to the *Gorgias*, pgs. ix-xxxv  
    Plato: *Gorgias*, part I (447a – 481b (pgs. 3-62))  
F  Plato: *Gorgias*, part II (481b – end (pgs. 62-135))

**WEEK FOUR**

M  Plato: *Republic* TBA  
W  Plato: *Republic* TBA  
F  Plato: *Republic* TBA

**WEEK FIVE**

M  VAP Ch. 1, “Fate and Freedom,” Introduction and Section A (3-34)  
W  VAP Ch. 1, “Fate and Freedom,” Sections B and D (35-43 and 56-67)  
F  VAP Ch. 5, “How Should You Live?” p. 297-304,  
    Aristotle: *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I (Biffle)

**WEEK SIX**

M  VAP Ch. 5, “How Should You Live?” p. 328-351  
W  VAP Ch. 5, “How Should You Live?” p. 351-370  
F  Review

**WEEK SEVEN**

M  *Nicomachean Ethics*, Biffle’s Introduction  
W  *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II (Biffle)  
F  No class

**WEEK EIGHT**

M  *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III (Biffle)  
W  *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books IV – VI (Biffle)  
    Confucius, from *Analects* (on Moodle)  
    St. Mathew, “Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount” (on Moodle)  
    Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, “The Four Noble Truths” (on Moodle)
WEEK NINE
M  Nicomachean Ethics, Book X (Biffle)
W  VAP Ch. 2 Sections A and B (pgs. 71-110)
F  Review

WEEK TEN
Presentations of creative projects