

PHIL 250: Ancient and Medieval Philosophy (Fall 2007)

Dr. Eric Wilson

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Office: 711 Emory Street

Office Hours: Mondays 1:45-3:00, and by appointment

Course Description

This course presents a survey of (primarily) Western philosophy from ancient Greece through late antiquity and the early medieval period. We will explore a number of major philosophers and schools of thought. Topics to be examined include: the theory of knowledge; competing explanations of change in the physical world; the nature of the soul, and the relation between reason and the emotions; changing conceptions of the good life, virtue, and happiness; the nature and purpose of philosophy; freedom and choice; the relation between reason and religious faith; changing conceptions of death; and the relation between the human and the divine. Special efforts will be made to track what is involved in the large-scale shift from the pagan to the Christian worldview. We will also focus on the understanding that ancient and early medieval philosophers had of the nature and value of philosophical inquiry, drawing attention to the ways in which this understanding differs from that of the moderns.

Required Texts:

Plato, *Five Dialogues* (Hackett)

Plato, *Protagoras* (Hackett)

Aristotle, *Introductory Readings* (Hackett)

Augustine, *On the Inner Life of the Mind* (Hackett)

Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy* (Hackett)

- The above books are available at the campus bookstore. You must purchase the editions selected for this course. Other readings will be on E-Reserve.

On Reserve:

Kenny, *An Illustrated Brief History of Western Philosophy* (Blackwell)

- This text is not required. However, we will be reading several chapters from it, so you may find it worthwhile to purchase your own copy.

Course Requirements:

- Eleven reading quizzes (100 points total)
- Three take-home exams (100 points each)
- Attendance, participation, and overall progress will also factor into your final grade, particularly in borderline cases.

Course Expectations:

- Many of the readings for this course will be quite demanding. You should expect to devote at least two hours to each reading assignment. (Some background in philosophy will be helpful, but it isn't required or assumed.)
- You *must* bring the assigned reading to class each day.
- Though there will be a mix of lecture and discussion, the emphasis will be on the latter. Therefore, I expect you to participate.
- Even when not participating, you should be *engaged* during class. I expect you to eliminate all distractions, such as laptops, cell phones, iPods, crackberries, and other electronic devices I'm too old to know about. If you must bring these into the classroom, turn them off.
- Daily reading questions, announcements, assignments, etc. will be posted on the LL conference. So it is your job to check the conference on a daily basis.
- In addition to the essay exams, there will be opportunities in and out of class to practice writing and to increase your grasp of the material through writing about it. These no-pressure assignments will not be graded, but I expect you to complete them to the best of your ability.

Course Goals

- Our central aim will be to improve your skills in the following three areas:
 - *Interpretation*: Are you able to understand the meaning of complex texts? Can you situate particular claims in context and master an author's terminology? Can you decipher metaphor, irony, and other figurative uses of language?
 - *Logic*: Are you able to recognize and analyze important arguments? Can you identify the main conclusion of an argument? Are you able to grasp how an author's conclusion depends upon his or her premises? Can you grasp the connections among a complex series of thoughts? Are you able to supply missing premises in order to fill in the gaps of an argument?
 - *Communication*: Are you able to express yourself with clarity, precision, and style? Can you organize an essay coherently around a central point? Can you help guide an intelligent conversation by asking salient questions, offering clear suggestions, and listening closely to others?
- At this point your answer to most of these questions may be "no" or "sort of, but..." Don't worry. The goal is to work hard and improve in these areas as we go along. No one is assuming that you have *already* mastered these skills.
- This course has one additional, and rather lofty, goal. Whether you know it or not, you already think about philosophical problems and ask philosophical questions. Our course aims to enrich your understanding of these problems and questions by teaching you how to situate your thoughts within a conversation carried on by philosophers for more than two thousand years.

The Details

- There is no attendance *requirement* for this course. However, you should consider the following:
 - First, most people do not do very well in courses they don't consistently attend.
 - Second, as stated above, attendance and participation will factor into the final grade.

- There will be a total of eleven short quizzes. These will be based on the reading, and will test your understanding of the basics. Only *ten* of the quizzes will count towards your final grade, so you may miss or drop *one* of them. No make-ups (except in cases of documented emergency).
- There will be three take-home essay exams. These will give you the chance to work through your own understanding of the material and put it into written form.
- Exams will be assigned letter grades. Please see the grading system below for details.
- My policy regarding *late papers* is simple: they drop one letter grade per day.
 - If a burdensome schedule requires negotiating the due-date, please see me in advance. I'm open to reasonable requests. I'm not open to negotiation after the deadline, however.
- You are free to contest grades you feel are unjust. But you must do so in accordance with the following policy. All complaints must be registered in writing. Complaints must be typewritten and may not exceed 250 words. They must take the form of an argument designed to persuade the teacher that his evaluation of your work is mistaken. Please attach a photocopy of the graded assignment to your complaint. I will respond to either in writing or by discussing the grade directly with you. Under no circumstances will I discuss grades before the above procedure has been followed.
- **You are obligated to abide by the Student Honor Code of Oxford College.** I encourage you to work together and discuss your ideas, but *plagiarism will not be tolerated*. Whenever you use another person's words or ideas, you must give him or her credit. This applies to conversations with friends and class discussion, as well as anything you read (whether in print or on the Internet). Unfortunately, it is sometimes easy to fall into plagiarism without realizing it. When in doubt, cite the work that is influencing you. But if you have questions about a particular case, please ask me before it is too late—that is, *before* you hand in your essays. This policy goes for *all* writing assignments and quizzes. No exceptions.

THE GRADING SYSTEM:

- Reading quizzes will be scored on a numerical basis. Each quiz question will be worth 1 or 2 points, depending on the length of the quiz. (Quizzes will be combined to yield a total score out of a possible 100 points. This total will be worth the same as one take-home exam.)
- Each take-home exam will consist of three short essay questions.
 - Individual essay questions will be graded on a block scale. This means no plusses or minuses. The letters correspond to numerical values in the following fashion: A = 95, B = 85, C = 75, D = 65, F = 55. (Exams not turned in will receive a 0.)
 - The numerical values will be averaged together to yield a final grade for the exam, which *may* include a plus or minus—depending, of course, on how the numbers turn out. The numerical values correspond to letter grades as follows: 95 = A, 92 = A-; 88 = B+, 85 = B, 82 = B-; etc. etc.
- For example: let's say you get two A's and one B on the first exam. This averages out to 91.66, which rounds up to 92. This would give you an A-.
- FINAL NOTE: I'm giving you the details in the interest of eliminating the mystery. I want you to understand exactly how grades get calculated for this course. But I do not want you to fixate on them. Please just do your work and try to learn as much as you can. The grades will take care of themselves.