

# Philosophy 180: Great Issues in Philosophy

Fall 2006

Dennis Beach, osb

1-3-5, 1:00 – 2:10, Quad 349

Office hours, Quad 362C: 1-3-5: 2:15 – 4:00 PM

2-4-6: 2-4-6: 11:00 AM-noon; 1:00-3:00 PM

or by appointment

evenings: after 8 PM in Mary 229 (call 2871)

## What it's about:

Is the way things appear to us the way they really are? If not, do we have any access to the way things really are? How? And if we don't, how could we ever know or even suspect that the way things appear to us *isn't* perhaps the way they really are? These questions have been with philosophers ever since humankind began to wonder about themselves and the world they live in. And when the questions change from "What is true about the physical nature of the world?" to "What is beauty?" "What is goodness or virtue?" or "Is there a God and can we know anything about this God?" the problem becomes yet more urgent.

We will explore the relation of our knowing to the world first through a contemporary introduction to the problem, and then by looking at the stands taken by representative philosophers on the question of human knowing: Plato and Socrates, Rene Descartes, Bertrand Russell, and José Ortega y Gasset.

## What we'll read:

- Norman Melchert, *Who's to Say? A Dialogue on Relativism*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994.
- Plato, *Five Dialogues*. 2nd ed. Translated by G.M.A. Grube. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2002.
- Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*. 4th edition. Translated by Donald A. Cress. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1998.
- Bertrand Russell, *Problems of Philosophy*. 2nd edition. New York: Oxford UP, 1997..
- José Ortega y Gasset, *Some Lessons in Metaphysics* (photocopy packet). Translated by Mildred Adams. New York: W.W. Norton, 1969.

Note: Reading for philosophy classes generally makes up in density for what it lacks in length. That means that an adequate job of reading the assignments will perhaps require a slower, more thoughtful and questioning pace.

## What we'll aim for:

- 1) To gain a critical understanding of the arguments that the author is presenting and their implications. A *critical* understanding implies an ability to make defensible judgments about these arguments, including understanding how and why some opinions are less worthy of belief than others.
- 2) To be able to *think the thoughts* of the major philosophers we will study. This is not the same as knowing what the conclusions of the philosopher are, nor even the major arguments the philosopher uses to support his or her conclusions. *Thinking* is an active and transitive verb here, and it involves being able to think the philosopher's thoughts from the inside, so to speak
- 3) To pursue our own thoughts in extension of or as a challenge to the issues and the thinkers in question. Note that this does not mean offering summary opinions or judgments, but *thinking our way* from the inside out beyond the texts we are studying.
- 4) In sum, we'll try to learn to become *careful, generous and thoughtful* readers and philosophers in our own right.

## What I'll expect you to do:

Philosophy is a *participatory exercise of thought*. That means that you can't do well in the course unless you participate actively in the reading and discussion. I will often give daily assignments to prompt reflection on our reading, such as outlining the arguments in a section of the text, etc. The questions and tasks will vary from requiring simply thoughtful preparation for discussion to written notes or a post to the public folder discussion. These daily assignments will count as one-sixth of your grade (16.7%). Because they affect class on the day they are assigned, they cannot be made up if missed. There will be 2 significant papers (3-5 pages), one at the end of the introductory text and one in the second half of the semester. There will also be three exams. The first paper and exam will determine mid-term grades for First-year students.

The dates of the exams are: **Exam 1: Tuesday, October 3; Exam 2: Thursday, November 2 and Final Exam: Wednesday, December 20 (8:00 - 10:00 AM – Final Exam period.)** Missing an exam will result in a grade of zero that cannot be made up.

## "What happens if I miss?" (Attendance Policy):

*Regular* and *active* class attendance is expected. If you have to miss class because of illness or some other valid reason, I expect you to contact me about it *before* the absence. Voice-mail and e-mail make it fairly easy to leave a message. Missing class because you are leaving early for the weekend or Easter Break or for an interview or non-emergency doctor's appointment are not considered excused. Absences will affect your participation grade; *more than one unexcused absence* will occasion a meeting to discuss your continued enrollment in the class, and further unexcused absences will result in loss lowering of grade one full level for each unexcused absence.

## How your grade will be determined:

Each of the major exams and major papers will constitute one-sixth of your grade; daily assignments, including public folder entries constitute the final one-sixth. Your participation grade will act as a "ceiling" for your overall grade. In other words, it will determine the highest grade you can receive for the course, no matter what grades you may have received on tests and papers. If you earn an "A" on exams and papers but do no more than sit like a desk potato in class, your final grade will be a "C." If your participation is strong, this may raise your grade one-half grade level (e.g., BC to B, B to AB) especially if your test and paper average is on the borderline.

## Initial Reading Assignments:

August 29 (T) Introduction.

August 31 (Th) Melchert, *Who's to Say?* First Conversation. See web schedule for other tasks.

September 4 (M) Continue discussion of First Conversation. Electronic Discussion posting due. See Public Folders on Outlook; near the bottom on the left-hand taskbar or folder list. All Public Folders-Academic-Philosophy-Dennis Beach-PHIL180-[unit].

6 (W) Melchert, *Who's to Say?* Read the Second Conversation. Further instructions on Web Schedule.

Further schedule information, as well as assignments, Public Folder Discussion and this syllabus are to be found on our course web pages: <http://faculty.csbsju.edu/dbeach/phil180/>. Bookmark it!