

# Phil 97: Virtue

Instructor: David Thorstad

## 1. About this course

This is a writing intensive course. The course is designed to hone your ability to think, read, write, and talk about philosophy. We'll read (slowly!) a few key readings, with writing assignments given each week. Emphasis will be placed on the writing process itself and on the distinctive elements of philosophical communication.

To sharpen your philosophical abilities you'll need to have something to think, read, write and talk about. This course will focus on virtue ethics and virtue epistemology. If all goes well, by the end of the course you'll be able to:

- I Write clear, focused, and insightful philosophical prose.
- II Follow a structured writing process incorporating outlines, drafting, feedback, and revision.
- III Communicate philosophical views orally.
- IV Identify and explain the main approaches to virtue ethics and epistemology.
- V Locate philosophical discussions of virtue in historical context.
- VI Compare and assess similarities and differences between philosophical approaches to virtue in ethics and epistemology.
- VII (Live virtuously)?

## 1.1. Critical assessment

For each class meeting in which a paper (draft or revision) is not due, you'll be asked to write a critical assessment of one of the day's readings. The purpose of critical assessments is to hone your ability to reconstruct and engage with philosophical arguments as well as to guide discussion.

A critical assessment is not a traditional paper. It is a 1-2 page (double-spaced) piece which does each of the following:

- I Selects and precisely states a thesis which you take the author to be arguing for.
- II Briefly and clearly reconstructs one argument that the author gives for the thesis.
- III Gives and if necessary motivates 1-2 questions for discussion related to the thesis or the author's argument.

Each week, many of you will be called on to present your paper to the class and guide the discussion that follows. This will form the backbone of classroom discussions.

Grading will be based on the written assignment. Grading will emphasize clarity, brevity and accuracy in presenting and reconstructing arguments, although as always grading is holistic and all features of the paper are important. Presentations will not be graded; that's not because they're not important, but because I want you to feel free to relax and talk about philosophy with your peers.

## 1.2. Paper presentations

For each class meeting in which a paper is due, some of you will present your papers to the class. In total, each of you should present exactly once; you can sign up for presentation dates during the first class meeting.

The purpose of the paper presentations is to help you to critically reflect on, discuss and revise your ideas as well as to deepen discussion. They are not author-meets-critics sessions: if the discussion raises points that you had not considered or if you change your mind on some points, that is a very good thing.

Paper presentations will last about 30-40 minutes. The format is up to you, but you should make sure to convey the main ideas of your paper and to leave ample time for discussion. Visual aids (handout, powerpoint, etc.) are encouraged but not required.

## 2. Course structure

### 2.1. Assignments

I **Critical assessments:** See above.

II **Paper presentations:** See above.

III **Paper assignments:** You'll write three papers. Each will consist of a (full, polished) draft and a *substantial* revision. Word limits are firm. (**My promise:** Drafts returned 2 days after submission, i.e. end of day Friday).

i **Paper 1:** 4 pages, double spaced. Revision 4 pages.

ii **Paper 2:** 5 pages, double spaced. Revision up to 6 pages.

iii **Paper 3:** 8 pages, double spaced. Revision up to 10 pages.

### 2.2. Assignment submission

I **Submitting papers:** Please blind submissions. Canvas preferred. Other mechanisms OK but may hinder blinding.

II **Deadline and late papers:** All written assignments are due by the start of class. Ordinarily I do not accept late assignments. But you should feel free to ask for an extension if special circumstances arise.

## 2.3. Instructor availability

I ask a lot from you, so I try to be fairly available to help you in return. Office hours TBD (let's schedule these now). Meetings by request if office hours don't work; don't be a stranger.

## 2.4. Attendance

This is a small, intensive and discussion-centered course. Both you and your classmates will get the most out of the class if you are present for every course meeting. I don't grade on attendance, but I do expect you to attend all course meetings unless exceptional events arise. If you can't make it, please send me an email before the class meeting. I'll follow up by email if I haven't heard from you.

## 3. Course policies

### 3.1. Grading

I **Critical assessments:** 25%

II **Paper presentations:** 10%

III **Paper assignments:** 65%

i **Paper 1 (20%):** Draft 10%; Revision 10%.

ii **Paper 2 (20%):** Draft 10%; Revision 10%.

iii **Paper 3 (25%):** Draft 10%; Revision 15%.

IV **Grade drop:** The point of this course is to allow you to make mistakes. You'll be able to drop one grade of your choosing (i.e. one critical assessment, or one paper draft or revision). The final paper revision and the paper presentation may not be dropped. Remaining grades will scale proportionally to fill the nearest category.

**Example: Dropping Paper 1 draft:** Revision counts for entirety of Paper 1 grade (20% of total).

### 3.2. Laptops

Research suggests that laptop use may hamper your (and other students') learning during class. See the powerpoint "Laptops.pptx" on the Canvas site for details.

On this basis we'll adopt the following policy. Laptops are not permitted during course meetings except for use during paper presentations, on the first day (to check Canvas site), or in case of special educational needs. Please print readings and bring them to class. E-readers and other flat screens are fine, but you might consider giving paper a try.

### 3.3. Accessibility

If you require any special arrangements, please don't hesitate to reach out. By university policy, requests for accommodation should be made through Accessibility Services.

## 4. Resources

I **Departmental writing fellow:** This is a philosophy PhD student who is paid to help you with your writing. I cannot stress how lucky you are to have this resource available and strongly recommend that you use it. This year's writing fellow is Noel Dominguez. His website is

<https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/phil-dwf>.

II **Guides to philosophical writing:** Long and medium-length guides by Elijah Chudnoff and short guide by Jim Pryor linked on website. Highly recommended.

III **Harvard college writing center:** Worth a visit, but when possible see the departmental writing fellow for philosophy-specific writing help.

<https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/>

IV **Me!** Don't be shy about reaching out for help of any kind.

V **Departmental colloquia:** Highly recommended for a glimpse at what philosophy is like in the wild. Many Fridays, 3-5PM (Emerson 305). Schedule here.

<https://philosophy.fas.harvard.edu/calendar/upcoming>

## 5. Schedule

Readings are listed on the day when they will be discussed.

### 5.1. Virtue ethics

January 30: Course introduction

**Readings:** None.

**Due today:** None.

**Assignments distributed:** Critical assessment 1.

February 6: Motivations for modern virtue ethics

**Readings:** Foot, "Utilitarianism and the virtues." Stocker, "The schizophrenia of modern ethical theory."

**Due today:** Critical assessment 1.

**Assignments distributed:** Critical assessment 2.

February 13: Greek virtue ethics

**Readings:** Aristotle, *Nicomachean ethics* (selections). Irwin, “The virtues: theory and common sense in Greek philosophy.”

**Due today:** Critical assessment 2.

**Assignments distributed:** Critical assessment 3.

February 20: Neo-Aristotelian (eudaimonist) virtue ethics

**Readings:** Hursthouse, *On virtue ethics* (selections).

**Due today:** Critical assessment 3.

**Assignments distributed:** Paper 1 draft due next week.

February 27: British sentimentalism and agent-based virtue ethics

**Readings:** Slote, *Morals from motives* (selections).

**Due today:** Paper 1 draft.

**Assignments distributed:** Paper 1 revision due next week.

March 6: Nietzsche and targeted-centered virtue ethics

**Readings:** Swanton, “A virtue ethical account of right action,” and ch. 6 of *Virtue ethics: a pluralistic view*.

**Due today:** Paper 1 revision.

**Assignments distributed:** Critical assessment 4.

March 13: Criticisms of virtue ethics

**Readings:** Doris, “Persons, situations and virtue ethics.” Prinz, “The normativity challenge: cultural psychology provides the real threat to virtue ethics.”

**Due today:** Critical assessment 4.

**Assignments distributed:** Critical assessment 5.

## 5.2. Virtue epistemology

March 27: Moralized virtue epistemology

**Readings:** Zagzebski, *Virtues of the mind* (selections).

**Due today:** Critical assessment 5.

**Assignments distributed:** Paper 2 draft due next week.

April 3: Applications to contemporary epistemology

**Readings:** Baehr, *The inquiring mind*, Chs. 4-5.

**Due today:** Paper 2 draft.

**Assignments distributed:** Paper 2 revision due next week.

April 10: Virtue, competence and knowledge

**Readings:** Sosa, *Knowing full well* Chs. 1, 4.

**Due today:** Paper 2 revision.

**Assignments distributed:** Critical assessment 6. Final paper draft due in two weeks..

April 17: Case study - humility and the virtues of ignorance

**Readings:** Driver, “The virtues of ignorance.” Whitcomb et al, “Intellectual humility: owning our limitations.”

**Due today:** Critical assessment 6.

**Assignments distributed:** Final paper draft due next week.

April 24: Case study - epistemic justice

**Readings:** Fricker, *Epistemic justice* (selections).

**Due today:** Final paper draft.

**Assignments distributed:** Critical assessment 7. Final paper revision distributed. Deadline TBD (as late as the registrar will allow).

May 1: The unity of virtue

**Readings:** Penner, “The unity of virtue”.

**Due today:** Critical assessment 7.

**Assignments distributed:** Finish final paper revision and have a great summer!