

Course Information and Regulations

Philosophy 101
Dr. Martin Spear

Texts:

1. Immortality: The Quest to Live Forever and How It Drives Civilization

Author: Stephen Cave

ISBN: 978-0307884916

Publisher: Crown (2012)

2. The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity

Author: Toby Ord

ISBN-13: 978-0316484916

Publisher: Hachette Books (2020)

List Price: \$30

3. The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Master and Man

Author: Leo Tolstoy – Ann Pasternak Slater (Translator)

ISBN: 0375760997

Publisher: Modern Library; (2004)

(Since “The Death of Ivan Ilyich” is out of copyright, a free PDF file of a standard translation will be posted in the first week’s Module. You can decide which to use.)

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In addition there will be several reproduced articles available online.

Requirements:

With only very rare exceptions, courses at CCP this term are conducted within an asynchronous framework, meaning that there are no class "meetings" of any kind. Students enter class activities on their own schedules, constrained only by the fact that course activities fall in weekly and bi-weekly packages.

Satisfactory Completion of Reading, Writing and Discussion Assignments

The activities of the course are Reading, Writing, and Discussing. The Reading activities are a precondition of success with the Writing Assignments, and for useful participation in the course discussion forums.

The online version of PHIL101 divides itself neatly into seven two-week modules. Each of the seven bi-weekly modules will be posted on Sunday morning of the odd numbered calendar weeks i.e. week 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, and 13. Due by the end of each session – i.e. by 11:59 PM on Sunday of the following even numbered week – will be a short formal essay posted in response to a question posed by the professor. These writing assignments each will be graded 0-10 points. The highest possible total for these submissions is 70 points, or 70% of the final grade.

Besides the short formal writing assignments, each student will participate in the bi-weekly discussion forums by reading and responding to posts from the class. At the end of the term each students will be graded holistically on the frequency and quality of their participation. The highest possible evaluation of participation in the discussion forums is 30 points or 30% of the final grade.

Grading

A = 90+ B = 80 - 89 C = 70 - 79 D = 60 - 69 F = 0 - 59

What to expect

The course will use Stephen Cave's *Immortality: The Quest to Live Forever and How It Drives Civilization* as the main text, although there will be a fair number of additional required readings which will be posted in the weekly modules. Toby Ord's *The Precipice: Existential Risk and the*

Future of Humanity will extend the discussion in the direction of the civilization's and the species's prospects. That sequence of activities will take us through most of the course. However the course will begin with reading and discussing Leo Tolstoy's novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*.

Each session – each two-week module – will see reading assignments, either from the books, or from the other materials – sometimes both. Accompanying the reading assignments will be **Reading and Discussion Questions**, which will guide you through the texts and raise various sorts of issues about them. These questions are designed to focus your attention on certain aspects of the texts. Usually they will be 'running questions' that essentially outline the texts by pointing in sequence to the issues pursued in those texts. They should not be read as "the questions which I have to answer"; especially the questions should not be read as exhausting what is worthy of attention in the reading for the week. The questions are meant to be helpful, and that is pretty much the end of it. **You are specifically not required to submit "answers" to the list of questions, although discussion of them in the student forums is a really good idea. A really good idea.**

For each session, a question will be posted as the session's required **Writing Assignment**. Each student is required to post a formal response to the assignment. The length of such response should be substantial: somewhere between 400-600 words. Please remember that these responses are formal submissions and hence must be presented with all the appropriate care such things require.

Criteria for evaluation of the weekly assignments are very straightforward:

The first criterion is "Appropriateness of Presentation". **This course has no oral component, and consequently demands higher than usual levels of achievement with reading and writing. It is entirely conducted by the written word.** "Appropriateness of Presentation" covers the mechanics and rhetoric one would expect in a formal college-level paper for which students have at least several days to prepare, to revise and to edit. The perfectly ordinary minimal expectation is that assignment submissions will be mechanically clean and rhetorically appropriate.

The second criterion is “Mastery of Relevant Material”. The writing assignments presuppose that students understand the assigned texts and the issues being pointedly questioned, and any theorist being invoked in his/her response. The writing assignment submissions should clearly display that understanding, or at least not display serious misunderstanding or – worse – lack of familiarity. A serious breakdown in understanding is a serious problem.

The third criterion is “Responsiveness to the Question.” The questions posed for the weekly writing assignments raise particular issues rather than others, and it is absolutely essential that your response be open to being reasonably construed as responding to that question, rather than using it as a launching pad to do something quite different from answering the question. Of course, even on-point responses may be more or less pointed, clear, comprehensive, subtle, and theoretically astute. But the ordinary minimal expectation is that responses be on-point of the question being asked.

Although each writing assignment will be formally evaluated inside the Canvas environment, **you should not expect detailed individual responses to your posting from the professor as a matter of routine.**

Instead, at the end of the session, the instructor will post a global response to the various submissions, calling attention to various features of those submissions. The point of this process is for students to try out strategies of interpretation, understanding, and presentation, appreciate the alternative strategies used by other students, and learn how such strategies are interpreted by a philosophy professor.

Also for each session the professor will post discussion questions to the **Discussion Forum**. These questions are often drawn from the “Reading and Discussion Questions” for the week’s readings. Although formal responses to any particular question is not required, this forum is designed to initiate discussion of particular important aspects of the reading assignments. **Students are strongly encouraged to use this forum extensively, not only to reply to the questions but also to thread discussions of the issues. It is especially valuable to engage your classmates in discussion. Indeed, the other students in the class are a very very important resource for coming to understand some difficult material.** The professor will not allow students to circle around the student forum to consult directly with him unless the

issue has already been thoroughly aired in the Discussion Forum. The professor will not interfere with it, or evaluate individual postings – except when it is necessary to moderate, or remind posters of the ordinary rules of academic exchange e.g. one writes in formally correct English and always in a courteous tone. Occasionally, if it seems helpful, the professor will post additional questions for consideration, or suggest reformulations of problems or redirection of discussion that seems dead-ended. **The Discussion Questions the professor posts are supposed to be helpful only as a beginning. If you just go into those forums occasionally, to post a quick reply to one of the professor’s questions and don’t engage more fully, that would be only a very meagre contribution to the class.**

The Discussion Forums are a major component of your participation in the course, and consequently figure importantly in your final grade. If it helps, you can think of this in the familiar terms of ‘class participation’. The evaluation of such forum participation is holistic and made at the end of the term by an overall review of the student’s contribution. However, there is nothing mysterious about it and indeed you should be able to evaluate your own participation in the forums easily enough.

These are the dimensions of participation in the Discussion Forums:

1. Frequency and word count.
2. Substance i.e. contributions that deepen or further analysis of an issue. “Non-substantive” posts would be things such as “Good analysis” or “I agree with Tom.”
3. Interactivity. Progress in philosophy flows from mutual criticism and mutual analysis. It is more helpful to be carefully critiquing, and amending what classmates offer than to proceed as if everyone’s very first thoughts are golden. Here’s how it would work: Bill makes an offer (perhaps in response to a question raised by the professor.) Jill responds to Bill, raising issues about his analysis, and perhaps amending it to work better. Harry responds to Bill and Jill in the same vein. Bill modifies, or amends his original position, or explains how it can meet the challenges posed by Jill and Harry. And on it goes.

To repeat: Questions the professor posts in the Discussion Forum are for the purpose of initiating discussion only. Students are not required to respond to all of those, nor any of those, since discussion may go in very different directions. The course requirement is to participate responsibly in the Discussion Forum as described above. That participation ought not take the form of dropping in for a while on Sunday night and tossing in a quick few “answers to the questions”. Join the discussion over the course of the entire session, at least several times. As the term proceeds the Discussion Forum should loom larger and larger for you. After all, it’s what replaces the classroom discussion in a regular lecture class. **Several hours per week would seem the right level of commitment to the Discussion Forum.**

The Discussion Forum Participation is evaluated holistically at the end of term based on the criteria described above.

Excellent = 30 points. (Frequent, Substantive, Interactive)

Good = 20 points. (Less Frequent, or Less Substantive, or Less Interactive)

Marginal = 10 points (Infrequent, Less Substantive, Non-Interactive)

Unsatisfactory = 0 points (Non-participation)

An additional “**Private Student Discussion Forum**” will be made available for discussion of whatever topics students find interesting, or for class exploration of any questions they may have. This forum will not be read by your professor at all; the point is to provide a vehicle where you can discuss without worrying about professorial eyes peeking over your shoulder. **The professor will not even look at these postings except in response to specific charges of abuse (something which has never yet happened.)**

Here is a sample grading pattern for a hypothetical Student.

Grades in Bi-Weekly assignment:

Week 1 – 9 points

Week 2 – 8 points

Week 3 – 7 points

Week 4 – 8 points

Week 5 – 10 points

Week 6 – 10 points

Week 7 – 8 points

Total from Weekly assignments = 60 of possible 70 points

Now add in the Discussion Forum:

If the student performs at the “excellent” level that’s 30 points for a total of 90, or an A.

If the student performs at the “good” level that’s 20 points for a total of 80, or an B.

If the student performs at the “marginal” level that’s 10 points for a total of 70, or an C.

If the student performs at the “unsatisfactory” level that’s 0 points for a total of 60, or D.