

# PHIL 1120: THE GOOD PLACE

TR 1:15-2:30•Lafayette L108

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Teaching assistants:

Office hours: xxxxx in 70 S. Williams (Doggett)

Xxxxxx in 70 S. Williams (Cuneo)

and XYZ on Microsoft Teams (Doggett and Cuneo)

This is an introduction to philosophy through *The Good Place*, Michael Schur's TV show about the afterlife. We will take up only a few of the many philosophical topics the show discusses but will cover them in more detail (and with less humor) than the show does.

When you have finished carefully reading this syllabus in its entirety, please send Professors Cuneo and Doggett an email letting them know you did so.

## Goals

By the end of the term, we would like you to:

1. Appreciate that there are multiple, sophisticated, often powerful ways of thinking about the nature of the ethical life, free will, and personal identity.
2. Understand some philosophical arguments regarding the nature of human goodness, moral rightness and moral wrongness, honesty, friendship, free will, and personal identity.
3. Be able to evaluate how compelling some of those arguments are.
4. Understand some basic philosophical terminology such as 'deontology,' 'consequentialism,' 'pro tanto,' 'valid,' etc.
5. Be on your way to being competent at discerning arguments in texts.
6. Be on your way to being competent at writing clearly, precisely, and concisely.

## Readings and Episodes

All readings will be posted on Brightspace. Episodes are available on Netflix, Apple TV, and various other streaming services. A boxset of DVDs is on reserve in the library.

A provisional reading schedule is on Brightspace. We will probably update it as we go. All updates will be posted on Brightspace.

### Block 1: Good People

1. C. Miller, Chapters 1 and 2 of *The Character Gap*
2. L. MacFarquhar, "The Children of Strangers"
3. L. MacFarquhar, "The Bodies of Strangers"
4. S. Wolf, "Moral Saints"

Relevant Episodes: "The Trolley Problem," "Existential Crisis"

## **Block 2: Normative Ethics**

1. R. Shafer-Landau, selections from *The Fundamentals of Ethics*

Relevant Episodes: “What’s My Motivation,” “Jeremy Bearimy,” “Category 55...,” “Somewhere Else,” “Don’t Let the Good Life Pass You By”

## **Block 3: Honesty**

1. J. Rachels, “Kant and the Categorical Imperative”
2. Selection from Kant, *Groundwork* (on lying)

Relevant Episodes: “What We Owe to Each Other,” “Janet and Michael,” “Rhonda, Diana, Jake, and Trent”

## **Block 4: Friendship**

1. Aristotle on friendship (selections from *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bks 8 and 9)
2. N. Badhwar, “Why It Is Wrong to Always Be Guided by the Best,” Sections 1-3
3. L. Thomas, “Friendship”

Relevant Episodes: “Most Improved Player,” “Rhonda, Diana, Jake, and Trent,” “The Eternal Shriek,” “Janet and Michael,” “Derek”

## **Block 5: Moral Luck**

1. T. Nagel, “Moral Luck”

Relevant Episodes: “Chidi’s Choice,” “Derek,” “Somewhere Else,” “The Book of Dougs,” “Don’t Let the Good Life Pass You By”

## **Block 6: Free Will**

1. R. Kane, selections from *The Significance of Free Will*

Relevant Episodes: “The Worst Possible Use of Free Will”

## **Block 7: The Afterlife**

1. W. Hasker and C. Taliaferro, “Afterlife”
2. M. Johnston, selections from *Surviving Death*

Relevant Episodes: “Patty,” “Whenever You’re Ready,” “You’ve Changed, Man”

## **Block 8: Personal Identity**

1. J. Perry, *Dialogue on Personal Identity*

Relevant Episodes: “Janets,” “Pandemonium,” “A Girl from Arizona, Parts 1 and 2”

## Assignments and Grades

1. Watch all of season one by the end of the first week of school. Try to finish the show over the next couple weeks. You will not be graded on whether you do this, but, really, if you are taking a class about *The Good Place*, you should watch *The Good Place*.

2. Three exams. We will hammer out the details together.

3. Eight (or so) brief writing assignments. Expect one at least every other week. These will be pass/fail. Any missed or late assignment gets an F.

So long as you don't fail more than two writing assignments,

- 20% of your final grade will come from your first exam
- 40% will come from your second
- 40% from your final

If you fail more than two writing assignments, your grade will initially be calculated in the same way, then we will deduct a third of a grade for a third failed assignment, a third for the fourth failed assignment, etc.

The writing assignments will usually just be questions about the week's reading. They will be posted on Brightspace each week.

## Requirements and Recommendations

1. Do all the assignments.
2. Do all the reading. Strong recommendation: do it at least twice. (While the reading load is not heavy for this course, the readings can be dense.)
3. Take notes while you watch the show. These notes should be about which philosophical issues are being raised, which arguments different characters are (or the plot is) raising, and how compelling those arguments are to you.
4. Check the Brightspace site and your email daily. We will regularly post information about the course on the BB site and will regularly email you about the course. There is a discussion board you should post to.
5. If you have a learning disability or think you have a learning disability, please let us know ASAP. We are happy to help. More generally, if you need accommodation due to your learning style, please let us know. In the words of the philosopher Shelley Tremain, "Your well-being and success in this course are important to me. I recognize that there are *multiple* ways to learn and that this multiplicity should be acknowledged in the design and structure of university courses and the evaluation of their participants. Thus, I encourage students registered in the course to discuss their learning styles and comprehension requirements with me during my office hours or... at another arranged time. Every student is entitled to a meaningful and stimulating learning experience."  
([http://philosophycommons.typepad.com/disability\\_and\\_disadvanta/2015/08/what-are-accessibility-statements-for-and-what-do-they-do.html](http://philosophycommons.typepad.com/disability_and_disadvanta/2015/08/what-are-accessibility-statements-for-and-what-do-they-do.html))

6. Relatedly, if you wonder whether you have a learning disability or just a learning difference, be in touch with the ACCESS office: [www.uvm.edu/access](http://www.uvm.edu/access)
7. Also, if due to disability, religious commitments, or extracurriculars, you would like us to structure the class in a way that makes it more accessible to you, please let us know in writing within the first two weeks of class. Similarly, if due to one of these conditions, you'll need to miss certain classes or assignments, please let us know in writing within the first two weeks of class.

#### *Is attendance required?*

No, attendance is not required. There are excellent reasons to attend class. It is hard to accomplish our course's goals without coming to class. It is hard to learn philosophy without coming to class. So we *want* you to come to class, but we also want you coming to class because you are interested in coming rather than because you feel compelled. If you don't come to class, no doubt you'll miss out on a lot. Much material we would like you to learn will come up only in class. Still, you don't have to come. If you aren't feeling like it or are sick or bored or..., don't come.

If you come to class, you have to pay attention: no texting, no sleeping, no bathroom breaks (we are not monsters about this), no emailing, etc. You must turn your phone off. No using your computer in class without having a particularly good reason for doing so. Wanting to take notes on your computer is not a good reason. If you need to take notes on your computer, get an accommodation about that.

Also, if you come to class, we expect you to have done the reading. If it seems to us like you haven't, you have to leave. Coming to class without doing the work is free-riding on us and your peers who've done the work—that's not okay.

Finally, if you come to class, you have to arrive on time. If you are going to be more than a few minutes late, don't bother—we will kick you out.

- **NB:** Whenever we have followed this attendance policy, there hasn't been a single student who missed many classes and got a grade in the A-range. The worst grades in the class—Ds and Fs—all went to students who missed many classes.
- **NB:** First-year students who skip a lot of classes have never done better in this class than a C. They typically do much worse.

#### *Is class participation required?*

Class participation, like being nice to people and animals, is something you should engage in, yes. But, like being nice to people and animals, it is not something we grade you on.

We strongly encourage you to ask questions. It is very hard to learn philosophy without doing so. If you are uncomfortable asking questions or defending ideas in class, email one of us or meet with one of us to discuss your ideas or questions. (In your email that confirms you read this syllabus, please include the word "ataraxia.") We will regularly give you opportunities to email us questions if you are too shy to take the initiative.

We also strongly encourage you to engage with your peers and with us. We expect you to do so respectfully. It is entirely fine if you say that one of your peers is wrong or that one of us is wrong. People are wrong in philosophy class much of the time. We will be wrong the most. However, you shouldn't be a jerk when you point this out. (You should keep in mind that people are wrong in philosophy class much of the time.) You should also show respect by not being dismissive. Or boorish. Or by running your mouth in class. However, running your

mouth over email to us is fine. In fact, we encourage it to some extent: It helps you get ideas out and gives you a place to run your mouth.

Showing up for class is not participating. If you show up every day but never say a word, never email, etc., that is not participating.

## Provisional Schedule

Weeks	Topic	Readings	Assignments
Weeks 1-3	Block 1: Good People	Miller, MacFarquhar, Wolf	
Weeks 4-6	Block 2: The Big 3 Ethical Theories	Shafer-Landau	Exam #1 DATE
Week 7-8	Block 3: Friendship	Badhwar, Thomas, Aristotle	
Week 9	Block 4: Honesty	Rachels	
Week 10	Block 5: Moral Luck	Nelkin	
Week 11-12	Block 6: Free Will	Kane	Exam #2 DATE
Week 12-13	Block 7: Personal Identity	Perry	
Week 14	Block 8: The Afterlife	Hasker and Taliaferro, Johnston	
Week 15			Exam #3 DATE of final

## **Goals Again**

Our goals are important. So remember: By the end of the term, we would like you to:

1. Appreciate that there are multiple, sophisticated, often powerful ways of thinking about the nature of the ethical life, free will, and personal identity. Doing the readings, watching the show, coming to class, and doing the writing assignments will subserve this.
2. Understand some philosophical arguments about the nature of human goodness, moral rightness and moral wrongness, honesty, friendship, free will, and personal identity. Doing certain readings, watching certain episodes, and coming to class will subserve this.
3. Be able to evaluate how compelling some of those arguments are. (In your email that confirms you read this carefully, please include the word “reincarnation.”) Coming to class, doing the weekly writing assignments, and doing the exams will subserve this third goal.
4. Understand some basic philosophical terminology. Coming to certain classes and doing certain readings will subserve this.
5. Be on your way to being competent at discerning arguments in texts. Doing the reading, the weekly writing assignments, and the exams will subserve this.
6. Be on your way to being competent at writing clearly, precisely, and concisely. Doing the weekly writing assignments and your exams will subserve this.