

PHIL 1200-003—PHILOSOPHY & SOCIETY  
FALL, 2011; HUMANITIES 125, 3:00-3:55 P.M., M-W-F  
SYLLABUS

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Note: All handouts, assignments, study guides, and this syllabus are available at this web site or on the CU Learn site for this course.

Office Hours: 4:00-5:00 P.M. M-W-F; Hellem 15 (in West Basement of Hellem).

**Course Description**

In this course we will take a philosophical look at various controversial issues that are of historical and contemporary political, social and/or moral importance in the United States. Classes during the semester will be a combination of lectures, group presentations, and discussions. Ideally, this course will: 1) enable you to acquire a better understanding of philosophical positions that have been advanced regarding many important social issues; 2) help you to become more proficient in the analysis and evaluation of arguments that arise in debates about such issues; and 3) provide you the opportunity to refine, rethink, or figure out your own views on such issues.

As so many philosophers have done, we can begin with the abstract question, “What is the relationship between the individual and society?” It is fair to say that one very important strand in the western philosophical tradition begins with Plato’s answer to this question. The complexity of his answer corresponds to the depth and difficulty of the many issues lurking beneath the surface of this innocent-sounding query. Philosophers who have struggled with it have produced a rather wide variety of answers. It is our aim here to read, discuss, and critically evaluate these answers, and simultaneously, to sort out our own thoughts about the problems buried in that simple question. Our aim is not so much to “solve” these problems, but rather to figure out what is relevant to the job of addressing such issues, whether and how a particular position can be defended, whether there are views that cannot reasonably be defended, and so forth. Our study will begin by looking at various philosophical formulations of the “ideal state”, from Ancient Greece to the theories of philosophers from the Enlightenment period in Europe to early democratic ideals of the United States to theories of communism and anarchism.

After discussing these theoretical writings, we will explore the legitimacy of the State through Ursula Le Guin’s novel *The Dispossessed*. This novel helps to illustrate alternative perspectives on the State, in particular those associated with types of anarchism. We will expand on the novel with a deeper study of anarchism, delving into the writings of some anarchist philosophers. On top of the anarchist challenge to the State, we will look at the importance of civil disobedience as a possible correction for certain faults, either inherent or transient, arising in the State.

In the last part of the course we will consider contemporary theories and descriptions of our society. In particular, we will be concerned with how issues of democracy, political participation, race, class, gender, citizenship, ethnic and political identity are played out in the United States.

**Course Objectives**

There are many fine reasons to study philosophy. I will not attempt to persuade you of these here, at the very least because many of the works we will read speak to this question more or less directly. But you should have some idea what I hope you will gain from our 16 weeks together. While there are many high ambitions lurking, here is a set of “least” ambitions for our time and efforts:

1. That you learn to identify arguments, the chief tool of philosophical work.
2. That you learn to express your thoughts clearly.
3. That you make progress in the fine art of assessing, analyzing and criticizing arguments generally, and begin to apply these skills in conversation with each other (not only with profs & GPTIs).
4. That you leave here knowing at least two answers that philosophers have given in the past to each of the questions we will address.

## Required Texts

John Somerville and Ronald E. Santoni (Eds.), *Social and Political Philosophy*, abbreviated [SPP].  
Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*, abbreviated (D).  
Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, abbreviated (PH).  
Reading materials available in PDF form on the CU Learn site for the course, abbreviated (PDF).

## Course Requirements & Percentage of Final Grade

(1) Attending/Participating in Class <sup>1</sup>	10%
(2) Presentations	30%
(3) Two 5-6 Page Papers	40%
(4) Final Exam (cumulative, take-home)	20%

## Extremely Generous Rewrite Option:

You may rewrite one of your papers, using my criticisms and suggestions as a guide, and then turn it in on the final examination date; the grade you receive on the revised paper will replace the grade you originally received.

## Notes on Course Requirements:

(1) The first paper will be on the any of the topics covered in the first six weeks of the course (so, Plato's theory of the state and the individual citizen's relation to it, Hobbes' alternative conception, Locke's alternative conception, or Jefferson's). The second paper, will be on any topic covered in the course (to be agreed upon with me 3 weeks prior to the due date). All papers and take home exams must be typed, and turned in by 5:00 p.m. on the due date either as a digital word processor file or on paper. Late papers/exams, other things being equal, are a Really Bad Thing. Submission of both papers is a necessary condition for passing the course.

(2) It is strongly recommended that before preparing your papers, you read very carefully the helpful hints for doing philosophy papers, the list of abbreviations used in grading papers, the model history-of-philosophy paper, and the very brief survey of informal logic (all to be found in the supplementary packet).

(3) The final examination will consist in a combination of extremely short answer (10%), short answer (60%), and long essay (30%) components. There will be an in-class review of the course to prepare for the final on the last day of class.

(4) Presentations. I will explain the nature of these presentations during our first class together.

## Clarifications, Rules of the Road, Regrettable Necessities & Errata

(1) What your grade means:

A: Superior work

B: Good work

C: Work with some strengths, balanced against clear weaknesses

D: Work with few strengths, many weaknesses

F: Work that brings CPR to mind

(2) Late written assignments are accepted in the event of civil emergencies, Ebola outbreak, or fits of generosity on my part. However, none are accepted without approval from me prior to the day on which the assignment in question is due.

(3) You are responsible for the entire reading assignment—not just what we discuss in class, and not only those assignments given to your group for consideration.

(4) Reading assignments in philosophy tend to be both challenging and time consuming. You might want to take this into account when planning your semester.

(5) Readings should be done prior to the class for which they are assigned.

(6) Total points possible: 100. No extra credit.

(7) What to expect from me: prompt and honest feedback, clear lectures, sufficient contact outside class (e.g., office hours, e-mail).

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<sup>1</sup>Not everyone is amenable to public speaking and discussion, but philosophy is a discussion sport. If you can bring yourself to speak, you will find it easier to understand the issues and arguments, largely because we often do not know what we think until we try to say it. However, I will not use class participation to decide a grade. Class attendance does count, and reaps an easy reward. Those who attend all but 2 classes or less get a 100 for this 10% of the course. If you miss *any* classes beyond 2, you begin to drop from 100 at the rate of 3 pts. per class day missed.

(8) Since students often do not pick up their final papers/exams, please let me know in advance if you would like detailed comments on yours. Those who wish to have their exams/papers mailed to them should include a self-addressed, stamped envelope when they turn them in.

(9) There will be a one-day "cooling off" period following receipt of grades on any given assignment.

(10) This syllabus is subject to revision.

### **Assignment Schedule**

To be Announced on the CU Learn Assignments Page and on the "Papers, Exams and Assignments" page on the website (available from my main home page or by links contained on the CU Learn site)

### **One Last Thing**

Since I find it very helpful to speak one-on-one with each of you at least once, there will be required, short meetings to get to know each other during the first four weeks of the semester. Let's try to get all of these out of the way by September 23 at the latest. I will hand around a sign-up sheet during the first week of class. If you cannot come during my normal office hours, I am usually able to meet students between 11 and 11:50, 1 and 2:50, and 5:00 and 6:00 on M-W-F if I know in advance that someone needs to see me and I know when they are coming. Please put your name at the bottom of the sheet so I know who cannot come during office hours, and then email me the day before you want to see me and propose a meeting time within those non-office hour periods just mentioned.

### **Disability Statement**

If you have specific physical, psychiatric, or learning disabilities and require accommodations, please let me know early in the semester so that your learning needs may be appropriately met. You will need to provide documentation of your disability to the Disability Services Office in Willard 322 (phone 303-492-8671).