

# PHILOSOPHY & *Harry Potter*

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*“But you know, happiness can be found even in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light.” J.K. Rowling*

## COURSE DESCRIPTION

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The world of Harry Potter enchants us in part because it is so different from our own. But beneath the surface, wizards and muggles are not so unlike. The story of Harry and his friends struggling to do right, to become good, to transform social structures, and overcome evils resonate with us because in many ways it is our story.

In this course we will investigate questions about living a good life and building just societies through reflection on Harry Potter novels and a range of related philosophical texts.

## COURSE GOALS

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The course is designed to help you cultivate the **critical reasoning and writing skills** so you can:

- Identify, explain, and evaluate arguments in a text
- Perform close and accurate readings of philosophical and literary texts
- Communicate ideas and arguments clearly in writing and dialogue with others

By the end of the course, you should have a better **understanding** of (or better understanding of what you don't yet understand regarding) philosophical views and arguments for them, including views about:

- Human well-being
- Virtue
- Justice

This class is a place for you to cultivate intellectual friendships with one another. My hope is that our class will develop into a community committed to reasoning together in pursuit of the truth.



## ASSIGNMENTS

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**Participation.** One of the goals of this course is to foster intellectual community and camaraderie. I will assess your participation based on the consistency and quality of your contributions in class and your thoughtful, respectful engagement with others.

I expect you to engage **thoughtfully**—giving me and others your undivided attention, preparing for class with thorough reading, being mindful of how often and long you speak relative to others, and communicating your thoughts clearly by choosing your words carefully in advance.

I expect you to engage **respectfully**—taking a posture of readiness to learn from me and others, listening closely to others' comments and questions, giving due recognition to your peers for their insights and ideas, and responding directly or incorporating the comments of your peers in your own comments and questions.

**Writing journal.** One of the best ways to improve as a writer is to practice regularly and frequently. In this course, you will be asked to spend **30 minutes a week** writing about the texts assigned that week and to keep a journal (hard copy, digital, or online) of your writing. I recommend that you break up your writing time into small chunks (e.g. three 10-minute chunks).

Your journal entries should take the form of a précis of the readings, an interpretation of an argument from the reading, a critical reflection on the significance of a philosophical problem the author tackles, an original argument responding to the author's idea, an objection to the argument, or a discussion of how the idea relates to another view held by the same author. These are all elements of the short and long paper assignments. I encourage you to use journal entries as a springboard for brainstorming and drafting pieces of your papers.

**Papers.** These writing assignments are designed to challenge you to do careful reading, present an author's argument and ideas accurately in your own words and in a clear and organized fashion, and to engage the ideas philosophically. I will assign a grade based on how well you motivate the question addressed in the argument, the clarity of your explanation of the argument, the accuracy of your interpretation, the philosophical quality of your engagement with the argument, and technical quality of the writing.

## READING SCHEDULE OVERVIEW *(subject to revision)*

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### Part I: Ethics



- A. Conceptions of the good life and well-being
  - i. Perfectionism: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 1; Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*
  - ii. Desire Satisfaction and Hedonism: Nozick's experience machine; Mill, Utilitarianism
  - iii. Shawn Klein, "The Mirror of Erised: Why We Should Heed Dumbledore's Warning"
- B. Moral Virtues: Temperance and Courage
  - i. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, selections
  - ii. Tom Morris, "The Courageous Harry Potter"
  - iii. Kant, *Doctrine of Virtue*, selections
  - iv. Hermione and Harry; Jennifer Hart Weed, "Voldemort, Boethius, and the Destructive Effects of Evil"
- C. Intellectual Virtues: Self Knowledge and Practical Wisdom
  - i. Gregory Bassham, "Choices versus Abilities: Dumbledore on Self Understanding"
  - ii. Robert Audi, "Self Deception, Action and Will" or Robert Solomon, "What a Tangled Web"
  - iii. Diana Hsieh, "Dursley Duplicity: The Morality and Psychology of Self Deception"
- D. Friendship
  - i. Aristotle, NE 8-9; Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*
  - ii. "Harry Gets by with a Little Help From His Friends" – Jennifer Mogg and Kendra Tully
- E. Mortality
  - i. Plato's *Phaedo*, *Apology* selections
  - ii. Kierkegaard, selections
  - iii. Charles Taliaferro, "Moral Regeneration through Death"
  - iv. "Why Harry and Socrates Decide to Die" Michael Austin
  - v. Seth Lazar, "Associative Duties and the Ethics of Killing in War"

## **Part II: Justice**

- A. Overview of Justice
  - i. Aristotle's *Politics*, selections
  - ii. Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, selections
  - iii. Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, selections
- B. Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism
  - i. David Miller, *Social Justice*, selections
  - ii. Andrew P. Mills, "Patriotism, House Loyalty, and the Obligations of Belonging"



C. Discrimination and Oppression

- i. David Williams and Allan Kellner, “Dumbledore, Plato, and the Lust for Power”
- ii. Iris Marion Young, *Five Faces of Oppression*, selections
- iii. Anthony Appiah, “Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections”
- iv. Laurence Blum, “I’m not a racist, but... the moral quandary of race”
- v. Anne Collins Smith “Harry Potter, Feminism, and the Power of Love”

**Part III: Philosophy through Literature**

- i. Travis Prinzi, “Harry Potter, Social Upheaval, and the Moral Imagination”:
- ii. Nussbaum “Moral Attention and the Moral Task of Literature”