Phil 150, First Day.

Welcome. In a moment I want to take some time to get us acclimated to Philosophy, to have a sense of what we’re doing in this course and what kind of things we might expect to cover over our 15 weeks together.

One of the things I want to try to answer, for instance, is what exactly philosophy *is* and so what kind of things you might expect to cover in a philosophy *class.*

Before we talk about what to expect about the *content* of this course, however, I want to give you a brief overview of my policies.

So let’s take a quick look together at the course Canvas site, which will be the main hub for this course.

Now, the first thing I want you to know is that my goal as your professor is to be as transparent as possible.

There are no mysteries in this class.

There are absolutely no surprises.

Everything you could ever want to know is on this website, and if for some reason it’s not, don’t ever hesitate to ask.

You’ll see right here on the homepage, for instance, I’ve give you info on where to find me, on how to book an appointment with a philosophy tutor, if you find yourself struggling in the course at any point, and I’ve even given you a brief description of the kinds of things we’ll be thinking about in this course.

We’ll come back to that in a moment.

First, however, I want to click down here and take a careful look at course requirements and policies, since you’ll be responsible for knowing and abiding by these policies as we move through the semester.

COURSE COMPONENTS:

Readings

Movies

Reading Guides

Midterm

Final paper

Final Exam

In addition to these requirements, attendance is required. Note that attendance in this class technically counts for a very small proportion of your grade, but I promise you cannot pass without it.

That has a lot to do with the fact (and you should know this in advance) that *philosophy is really hard*.

In fact, it is *misleadingly* hard, since we’ll be asking big, broad questions like What can I know, and What does it all mean, and most of us have hunches or opinions about these already.

But philosophy is also a *technical* discipline about what arguments are and how they are constructed, and we’ll be doing a lot of close, technical work.

So the short of it is: We have to *work at it*, and that’s what we’ll be doing in class.

In fact—this is why I said it’s *misleadingly* hard—we’ll be working really hard at things we think we already know how to do—like reading, and formulating questions, and *answering* basic questions.

My goal, however, is to try to make that process as easy as possible. I do this in two ways.

First, I try as much as possible to make my lectures *clear* and straightforward, and one of the things I try to do is to take really difficult really complicated readings and try to distill them so that they are a little bit clearer than they seemed at first.

I make note of this because if you find yourself really frustrated at home with the difficulty of the readings, you shouldn’t be discouraged. I promise you that that’s normal.

Nevertheless, and this is the second point, I expect you to put in serious energy and effort to puzzling through these texts.

One way I’ve tried to help you *at home* is to build reading guides for each assignment that help you navigate the text and ask you to reflect on it as you’re reading.

These are a major component of your grade, and I expect them to demonstrate thoughtful engagement with the text.

Before I ask you to get to work on those, however, we’ll have just a bit of practice reading Plato together next week, and my hope is that our discussion will help give a nice model of how I want you to interact with the text.

Now, there is one more point I want to make about attendance, which is this: attendance means being here the old fashioned way, with nothing but your reading, printed out, and some paper and a pen.

I realize that a lot of us are used to using laptops, or reading on iPads or whatever, but philosophy is an old-school discipline and we do things the old-school way.

So make sure you come to class not only *having read the text*, but with a hard copy of the text that you can keep in front of you, refer to, write on, and so forth.

This is a requirement, so write it down: you must bring a physical, printed-out copy of each reading with you to class for each meeting.

Now, all of the work we do reading through and marking up our texts will be practice for your written final project.

I’ll say more about that as we get closer to the middle of the course, but the final project is something you’ll work on it in many, short pieces, with lots of feedback at each stage.

This final project is your chance to show that, after all of the hard work we do here together, you can learn to *think like a philosopher.*

And really, that’s the big thing I want to stress to you today:

This is a class about learning to think hard and think critically and to figure out how to make sense of *really complicated* texts.

And the reason I’m so invested in everyone really putting in the work is that I truly believe that if you can get to the point, by the end of this semester, where you can sit down in front of a difficult, maybe *boring*, really *dense* piece of philosophical text and figure out what’s going on—I think you can do *anything*.

That’s not me being corny; I really believe that.

So, I’m asking a *lot* of you, but I do it because I am trying to give you as many chances to excel as possible at something I think is really *important*.

In other words, I truly believe that what you learn here isn’t useless stuff—it will help you in every other one of your classes and in your jobs and in your own lives.

So, before I say a bit more about why I think that, are there any questions coming right off the bat?

Ok, let me work through one more bit of housekeeping before we jump into the big question.

SYLLABUS

2. What Is Philosophy? (20 mins.)

Let’s shift gears for a second. This is a philosophy class, and it’s the *intro* class, so I imagine most if not all of you have never taken philosophy before.

What is philosophy? What do philosophers think about?

*Generate ideas.*

How about the word itself? What does the *word* philosophy mean? *love of wisdom*.

So if we were to go to our dictionaries it might say something like “philosophy, meaning love of wisdom” is the study of XXX.

Here’s a problem with this: I think that’s a really unhelpful definition.

*Why* is it unhelpful?

Because it reinforces an idea that I think has been especially damaging, which is the idea that philosophy is *passive* and *impractical* and only deals in abstractions,

In other words, it reinforces the idea that philosophers sit around in our comfy chairs at home and think really hard about things that don’t have any implications for our lives—that we wait for truth to descend upon us.

If that’s all philosophy is then you could be forgiven for saying: I don't want to waste my time on that; I need to get a job, and pay my bills, and get through my week and maybe learn something *useful*.

Maybe people have told you that: don’t major in philosophy! It’s a bunch of nonsense written by rich, dead white dudes. Worry about the real world.

Of course, I’m biased, but I think that warning is deeply misguided (and I’ve tried to make sure we don’t only read dead white dudes!).

I think philosophy is the most valuable subject you’ll ever learn, and my job this semester is to prove it to you.

So, why is this negative image so persistent?

Well, one answer is that it’s *half* right: philosophy *does* involve asking biiiiiig questions like “what does it all mean!”

It means asking: “how do I know that I know?” and asking “why is there something instead of nothing?”

What the perspective misses, though, is the *other* half, which is that knowing *how* to ask these questions and knowing why they *matter* takes a specific set of skills that are incredibly valuable.

This is what I meant when I said that what we’re doing is a *technical* discipline.

So, starting today, I want us to try to think of philosophy differently.

What I want to try to show you over the course of this semester is that philosophy is not a set of questions—who am I? why am I here?

1. philosophy is an *activity*; and
2. philosophy is an *attitude*, specifically, a *critical and reflective attitude*

It’s an attitude, most importantly, that we have to *practice* (that’s the bit about hard work). Even so, however, it’s an attitude you’ve probably *already* encountered.

When your alarm rings in the morning and you get out of bed and eat your breakfast and get in your car and you’re on the freeway on your way to class and all of the sudden you look out the window and think, wait, *why do I do this?* That’s philosophy.

Or, here’s a different way to put it:

when we adopt the stance of thinking critically and reflectively about ourselves and our place in the world,

including holding up for critique *all the things we think we know and take for granted*, we are doing philosophy.

And so the *skill* of philosophy is in part learning how to take those *why* and *what does it all mean* feelings and formulate them into genuine questions, to figure out what’s going on when we ask them.

Even more than that: philosophy is about *using* that skill to examine all the things we think we know, all the things we take for granted—to see that there are questions where we didn’t even notice them before.

This means that philosophy is sometimes about realizing, *there are basic things in my life I thought I was sure about and now I’m* not *so sure*.

And *that* means that if you really, truly, learn to adopt that philosophical attitude, it will *ruin your life* and that’s the best, most liberating thing in the world.

Here’s why I’m telling you this:

because even if you don’t find great value in the *questions* that philosophers think critically about—though I happen to think they are pretty important questions—the *skills* you develop in thinking philosophically are just about the most valuable skills you can develop.

And if we do our job right this semester, you’ll start to notice that every other discipline, from biology to business to math, already involves some register of thinking *philosophically*.

Now, here’s the bad news: this stuff is really hard.

The readings are difficult (though I have structured the class to keep them short);

And they can also be enormously *frustrating*, because sometimes philosophers spend so long trying to figure out the right *questions* that they never get around to the answers.

And also—let’s he honest here—sometimes the readings are *boring*. So I need you to trust me—trust me that sometimes asking totally kooky off-the-wall questions like “how do I even know I exist?” or “what is a person?” are essential to understanding ourselves and our place in the world.

So, in light of all of this, I want to offer you a word of advice, and then I’ll send you on your way.

The advice is this: Spend the first couple of weeks of this class really learning how to read.

That seems like pretty weird advice; we’ve all known how to read for quite some time.

Probably a lot of your classes in high school focused on various strategies for reading *well*—find the theme, find the conflict, find the thesis and look at the topic sentences; where’s the support?

And you’ll need those skills to read philosophy, for sure. In fact, we’ll use them next class!

But most of us have gotten *good* at a *certain kind* of reading:

you pick up the text, you read it from beginning to end, maybe jotting down some notes and reminders along the way,

and by the end you have a good enough gist of what’s going on to come into to class to fill in the gaps by listening to the lecture.

That’s generally a pretty good strategy. But it won’t work here. That much I can *promise* you.

Because philosophical texts—despite being words on a page that look a whole lot like your other readings—are more like puzzles that stories.

Write that down! Puzzles not stories: if you forget that, you’ll forget how and why to read philosophy.

And *as* a puzzle: Not only will the pieces not fit together on your first reading, you might not even know what the pieces are or what the pieces *mean* until the 3rd or 4th read.

I’ve assigned you all texts I’ve read maybe a hundred times, and there’s something new for me each time.

*That’s* why I kept the readings short!

So, I want to warn you that you can’t read these texts the way you read anything else. You have to approach them the way you’d approach a puzzle.

What does that mean? Well, who here likes jigsaw puzzles?

Now imagine that you found an old jigsaw puzzle in your attic, but it was missing the *picture* on the box that tells you what the puzzle will look like when it’s done.

What’s the first thing you might do when you try to solve a puzzle?

DISCUSS. Figure out what you know.