**Class Participation Grade: Details and Advice**

**Introduction to Ethics**

*Summer Session A*

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Class time: T/Th 9 am-12:15 pm

Location TBD

Office hours: T/Th 2-4 pm and by appointment

Location: Bass Library cafe

**WHY I GRADE PARTICIPATION QUALITATIVELY**

One of the benefits of philosophical training is an improved ability to discuss highly abstract material in a productive, charitable, dispassionate manner. So, some of the goals of this course include (see syllabus for list):

9. Verbally deliver original thoughts

10. Respond to interlocutors

11. Practice the principle of charitable interpretation

Since participation is so important both to one’s philosophical training and to the goals of the courses, it seems natural to grade it. This gives you feedback about how you’re doing and provides a stronger incentive to improve on it.

**HOW IT WORKS**

When I grade your papers, I will also give you a participation grade, with feedback about your participation during that period of the course. **Only the final participation grade will count towards your overall grade**. This allows you to spend the first two-thirds of the course building up your participation skills. Though your first two participation grades don’t count, it’s crucial that you use this period to practice and experiment with philosophical discussion.

Your final participation grade counts for 20% of your overall course grade.

**PERFORMANCE ANXIETY**

When I first started academic philosophy, I suffered from serious classroom anxiety. I’m acutely sympathetic to those who find speaking in class difficult. This is one of the reasons why only your last participation grade counts towards your overall course grade.

If you find yourself struggling to speak, please come see me in office hours so that we can discuss strategies to help you feel more comfortable in class. You can also look at my tips at the end of the document.

**WHAT I’M LOOKING FOR**

An “A” student in participation excels (compared to other beginner students) in at least one of the following domains. At the level of beginner students, excelling means that you’re using these domains to *advance the discussion forward in helpful ways*.

For example, you’ll find that most or all of what you say is inaccurate (or not completely charitable or whatever), but many not-totally-inaccurate-but-not-totally-off-the-map questions or objections can be very helpful for advancing the discussion.

**Preparedness:** Preparedness means that you’ve spent time at home thinking about the core questions of the class and you’ve developed thoughts, opinions, suggestions, and questions about them. A good way to do this is to discuss the course material outside of class with a “study buddy” (or two or three…) outside the class.

The textbook reading for this course is (intentionally) very difficult, so don’t worry too much about understanding all of it.

**Accuracy:** Philosophical accuracy (my term) means that you understand the main terms of the debate and that you’re able to correctly draw inferences about the debate. A student who struggles with philosophical accuracy might: raise objections that are not actually problems for the view or claim that a view is committed to something that it is not in fact committed to.

Accuracy is very difficult, even for established philosophers. Everyone says inaccurate things all the time. That’s how we learn. Accuracy is an ideal to strive towards, not an expectation “from the get go.”

**Charity:** The principle of charity (common philosophical term) means something like: Give your opponent as much credit as you can. The best way to practice charity is to frame your objections as attempts to solve problems for the target theory or to understand the target theory better.

**Responsiveness:** A responsive speaker listens to what others say and tailors what she says so that she is in dialogue with her interlocutors. Responsive speakers care about the discussion as a collective enterprise and want to help their interlocutors refine their philosophical thought. They don’t just want to defend their own positions or go on rambling monologues. They don’t always raise objections. Sometimes they ask questions, give elaborations, or help their interlocutors strengthen their positions.

**Flexibility:** A flexible speaker is someone who isn’t afraid to modify or change her position in response to criticism. This doesn’t mean that she sometimes *doesn’t* stand her ground. She stands her ground when she thinks that her interlocutors’ objections or questions are inaccurate or unconvincing. But she doesn’t stand her ground as a matter of principle. She knows that responding to criticism is often the best way to advance and refine her ultimate philosophical view.

**Curiosity:** A curious speaker is always seeking to refine a view, or understand a view’s consequences, or find the explanatory scope of the view. She really wants to *understand* the philosophy. She asks others to clarify their terms, to show the work a theory does, or

**Tips on How to Engage in Class**

These tips are just suggestions, based on things that I found helpful when I was working on improving my class participation.

**1. Have fun**

It might sound counterintuitive, but the more you focus on trying to impress me or your classmates, or focus on making an awesome philosophical point, the harder it will be to accomplish any of those things. The best philosophy happens when you are totally relaxed. Try to have fun. Laugh. Think of the class as engaged in a collaborative activity. If you need an adversary, treat me, the instructor, as your adversary—not your fellow students.

**2. Think of “inaccurate” questions or “failed” objections as successes**

I used to be terrified of speaking in class because I was terrified of being wrong. This is a terrible approach, because philosophers are *constantly* wrong about *everything*. Yes, even professional philosophers at Yale make error after error after error. (Ask any of my advisors!) Instead of treating an inaccurate question or failed objection or problematic theory as a failure, think about it as a success. You tried some philosophy! That’s the only way to get better at it. And remember that even an “A” student in participation will almost always be wrong about everything.

To be a good boxer, you have to learn to “take hits”—to absorb hard blows and not let it deter you. Think about your participation as learning to “take hits.” The more comfortable you get “taking a hit,” the better philosopher you will become.

**3. Prepare**

Maybe this is obvious, but the more you think about the puzzles from class *outside* of class, the better off you will be *in* class. Try to draw out the implications of a theory, or object to a theory, on your own. Imagine what responses I or your classmates would give and see if you can counter them.

**4. Simple is good**

Often the best philosophical questions are the simplest and most obvious. Don’t be afraid to ask questions like, “What does that word mean?” or “How does that work? or “What does that explain?”

**5. Focus on understanding, not objecting**

All philosophical theories ultimately fail, which means that there are *always* objections to a theory. But it can be overwhelming to try to find objections to a really convincing theory. If you focus on trying to understand the theory, seeing how its nuts and bolts work, you will eventually find a place where the theory starts to breakdown. This is inevitable. It’s just the way philosophy works. So if you’re having trouble objecting, try to focus on understanding first.

**6. Cooperative questions are extremely helpful**

Don’t be afraid to be cooperative. You can say, “One of the reasons that I like what you said is *x*.” Or, “A related point is *y*.” This can feel less overwhelming than objecting, and it’s often more helpful and productive than straightforward objecting.

**7. Nobody is keeping score**

I don’t keep a logbook in which I write things like, “John asked one good question today and two bad ones.” Even though I’m grading you, it’s a holistic grade, and I’m looking *for* reasons to give you a good grade, not reasons *not* to give you a good grade. If you make one good point and six bad ones, what matters to me is that you made one good point.