**How Should We Live?**

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*Co-Constructed Exams*

First, a word on how I think about exams. I think that exams are one of the most misused features in education. Usually, students just dread them; almost no one is excited by the possibility of an exam. This is unfortunate, and I want us to rethink it. As an analogy, think about an exam like a performance of musician, actor, or athlete. When, say, a violinist performs a piece of music, she will most likely feel a sense of great excitement and anticipation; she will dedicate herself to performing to her highest ability. When she is finished, if she has indeed performed well, she will feel great swell of proud and elated bubbling up from her performance. *That* is how I want us to think about exams. Like scoring a winning goal or perfectly performing a piano concerto, exams are accomplishments. They are opportunities to perform well, to show me what you really can do.

To use a music analogy, the organization of a class is like orchestral performance. I have orchestrated this class so that while there is a clear and precise structure to the class, there are also includes vast, open spaces in which students can improvise, experiment, and passionately perform lines of philosophically inquiry. The variety of ways in which each of you can move from the distinct points I have already established in the overarching class structure is, I hope, clear and fresh. These open spaces are designed so that your voice can be heard clearly and distinctly. The reasoning for this, to be honest, is partially selfish. In previous classes, my least favorite part of the teaching experience was grading. But then I had an idea: maybe this was not a fault of the students, but a fault of mine. If I want to not simply not dread grading exams, but instead actually look forward to them, even eagerly anticipate them, then I should organize the class so that students are provided the space, delimited by a precise overarching class structure, to perform to your highest abilities. I thus developed the following orchestration.

Again, this is a class on “we,” the community. As such, I would like us not only to read about the concept of “community” but, in an important sense, to *enact* community, to *become-community*. Your exams are designed so as to initiate one form of practice as a community: decision-making. Exams are a very tricky operation, and I think they have been misused or perhaps used ineffectively. Think about it: *what is the purpose of an exam? What is an exam for?* If exams are intended to evaluate learning, and if students learn differently, then the form of an exam should not be imposed on a class but instead agreed upon by everyone involved. Your exams will thus have two parts.

First, we, the community all decide on the form of your exam. While I will have final approval of the form, I am open to most suggestions. Remember: you will be graded on the form of the exam you construct. If you construct a poor exam, then your grade will reflect that poor performance. But if you construct an innovative, challenging, thoughtful, and meaningful exam, your grade will reflect such success. The goal is to construct an exam that truly captures evidence of every one of your learning processes. This will not be an easy process, I assure you. One difficulty is that we all must work together, as the community, to decide on the form. Since each student learns differently, the exam we develop must be attentive and respectful to everyone’s learning style. Another difficulty is that we have to consider the length and difficulty of the exam. There will be four exams in this class, so we should do our best to construct an appropriate form. The only restriction on what kind of exam we construct is that it should embody some fundamental philosophical virtues, e.g., it must require careful and critical thinking, it must show aptitude for posing a deep and inspiring questions and demand following those questions to their furthest point of implication, it must demonstrate a genuine understanding of the issues we covered in class and read in the texts in light of the overarching question of the course (*How should we live as a community*?)

Second, once we, the community, have decided on the form of the exam and constructed it, then you will take the exam. This will be the second part of the exam grade. This will most likely be closer to the common expectations of an exam. If we want, we can even determine the distribution of points for the class. (Total points for the two exams: 400 points or 40% of the grade.)