TIPS FOR WRITING A GOOD PHILOSOPHICAL ESSAY

• When I ask you to **present a view**, you should state the view as it appeared on the board in class.

• When I ask you to **explain a view** you should do two things. First, define any of the key terms that appear in the view. (A good rule: if we wrote a definition up on the board or took time to discuss the meaning of the term in class, you should explain it in your essay.) Second, restate the thesis in your own words, perhaps using examples from class. In general, you need to show me that you understand the view under discussion.

• When I ask you to **present an argument**, you should reconstruct the argument as it appeared on the board in class. Ideally, this will involve writing out all of the numbered premises and the conclusion.

• When I ask you to **explain an argument**, you should do two things. First, define any key terms that appear in the argument (see above). Second, say what the reasoning is behind the argument in your own words. Ideally, this will involve going line-by-line and explaining the justification for each step.

• **Special note**: just about every argument in this class will have a premise of the form *If _____, then ______*. These are called *conditionals*. Conditionals require special explanation. In order to explain a conditional, you need to say why the thing that appears in the second blank is supposed to follow from what appears in the first blank. So, for example, if a premise in the argument says *If evil exists, then God does not exist*, you should say why the presence of evil is supposed to conflict with the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly-good God.

• When I ask you to **evaluate an argument**, you should say whether or not the argument is successful. In some cases, this will involve discussing objections that we made in class (e.g., *the argument is invalid because…* or *premise (2) is questionable because…*). In other cases, this will involve stating your own opinion (e.g., *I think the argument fails to establish its conclusion because…* or *I found the argument persuasive because…*).

• **Special note**: We will often raise more than one objection to an argument in class. You should address all of the objections. If I write it on the board, I will be looking for it in your essay.

• **In general**: your primary goal is to show me that you understand the material we discuss in class, whether or not you agree with the relevant arguments or conclusions. Once you have accomplished that goal, you are free to state or defend your own views on the matter. *Giving your own reaction or response to an argument will never hurt you and it can help you.*