Philosophy 232

Wesleyan University
Fall 2011

Course Information

Instructor: Sanford Shieh
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Course Content:
This course is a small seminar in which we will begin the study of philosophy by doing it—reading, discussing and writing about six sets of philosophical questions:

1. What is knowledge? Do we know anything at all? Do we know things by using our senses only? Or by using our reason only? Or both?
2. Who are you? What are you? Are you essentially a mind? Or a body? Or both? What happens when you die? Can you exist independently of your body?
3. What is time? How is it different from space? Can one travel backwards or forwards in time, just as one can travel to a location and then back to one’s starting point? Can one cause events in the past to occur?
4. What is God? Does it exist? What is its nature? Is it good? How can it be good if there is so much evil in the world? Is the existence of God compatible with our freedom to choose our actions?
5. Is it always possible to do the best thing in any given situation? Do our moral duties conflict with one another? If they do, can we still be blamed for acting contrary to some duties?
6. What is life about? Why should we live? Is there any meaning to our existence? Or is life no more than the random results of a meaningless sequence of events?

We will also watch and discuss seven films related to these philosophical topics:

- *Inception* directed by Christopher Nolan
- *The Prestige*, directed by Christopher Nolan
- *Los Cronocrímenes*, directed by Nacho Vigalondo
- *Primer*, directed by Shane Carruth
- *The Minority Report*, directed by Steven Spielberg
- *Unthinkable*, directed by Gregor Jordan
- *Another Woman*, directed by Woody Allen
Course Format:

The course is a seminar, consisting almost entirely of discussion. As a consequence it is necessary for everyone to be prepared to talk about the reading in every class meeting; the course requirements, to be discussed next, are designed to insure this.

Texts:

There are two sets of texts.

First, online texts, all of which can be accessed from both the Course Information page and the Schedule page of the course website.

From Olin Library’s online databases:

- René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, First Meditation
- Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*, Chapter 1
- Earl Conee, “Against Moral Dilemmas”
- Patricia Greenspan, “Moral Dilemmas and Guilt”
  
  Note that in order to access these databases you will have to be either using a computer on the Wesleyan campus network (this should be the case in your dorm room) or running VPN (Virtual Private Network) software off-campus. For instructions on using Wesleyan’s VPN, go to ITS on the Wesleyan website.

(Optional) from the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:

- Terrance McConnell, “Moral Dilemma”

From *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:

- Joel Hunter, “Time Travel”

From the *Philosophy Talk* website (these, alas, are no longer free; you’ll have to pay some $1.50 for each):

- John Perry and Ken Taylor, “The Ethics of Torture,” guest Nancy Sherman:  
  http://www.philosophytalk.org/pastShows/EthicsofTorture.html
- Perry and Taylor, “Utilitarianism”, guest Wayne Sumner:  
  http://www.philosophytalk.org/pastShows/Utilitarianism.html
- Perry and Taylor, “Moral Dilemmas and Moral Ambiguity,” guest Walter Sinott-Armstrong:  
  http://www.philosophytalk.org/pastShows/MoralDilemmas.htm

From the course website:

- Selections from G. E. Moore, “Proof of an External World”
- Richard Taylor, “The Meaning of Life”

Second, two books on sale at *Broad Street Books*: 
Course Requirements: Class Participation, 1 Class Presentation, Weekly Responses to the readings, and 1 Seminar Paper

Class Participation:

1. As mentioned above, since this class is a seminar, it is necessary for everyone to be prepared to talk about all of the assigned reading in every class meeting.
2. In order to insure this, 50% of your grade is based on the quality of your participation in the class.
3. The quality of participation is not determined simply by the amount of noise that you make during class.
4. Our class is a cooperative, not a competitive, enterprise, so please be courteous to others, especially if you disagree with what they say.
   a. Try not to cut people off.
   b. Try to understand other points of view; don’t dismiss anything that is said.
5. People have different styles of participation—some prefer to think a while before speaking, others like to jump in immediately. This will be taken into consideration in determining your grade.
6. If you feel, generally or just in this class, nervous about speaking up, or put off by the way the discussion proceeds, please talk to me as soon as you can. We will work out ways of making you comfortable with joining in the conversation.
7. All this said, however, I should also emphasize that,
   a. Since I’m not telepathic, if you say nothing, I cannot see how you participated, even if you had brilliant thoughts.
   b. If you can’t shut up and allow others to speak, then you will have diminished the overall level of the class, and that counts against the quality of your participation.

Class Presentation:

Class presentations are done in groups of two. There are two kinds of class presentations. First, you can lead the discussion after a film. The second kind of presentation takes place at the beginning of the seminar meetings when we are not watching a film, and consists of a discussion between two teams of two over one or more issues raised in the reading. I will provide you a topic unless you want to come up with one yourselves. Remember that the issue to be debated must be central to the reading.

Weekly Responses:

Every week I would like for you to write a short response to the reading for the class. They should be about a page in length, and they should be sent to me by e-mail attachment by noon of Thursday.

Paper:

VERY IMPORTANT POINT: SINCE IT IS ESPECIALLY DIFFICULT TO BE FAIR TO EVERYONE IN A CLASS IF I ACCEPT LATE WORK,
NO LATE PAPERS WILL BE ACCEPTED WITHOUT A MEDICAL EXCUSE FROM A DOCTOR. PLEASE PLAN YOUR SCHEDULE NOW.

Grading Breakdown:

Class Participation  50%
Class Presentation   15%
Weekly Responses     15%
Seminar Paper        20%