

Honors Philosophy Seminar

CONTACT INFORMATION

cfranks@nd.edu; Malloy 411; W 12:30–3:30pm

THIS COURSE

Stanley Cavell has described philosophy as “being awake when everyone else is asleep.” This is my favorite description of philosophy. Philosophy is not a body of knowledge, and it is not a method for acquiring it. So one cannot go look it up in a registry of facts. Philosophy is not the study of any particular subject matter, nor is it constrained to any special group of topics. So one can’t be told in advance where to turn to acquire it. All phenomena can be approached philosophically. Philosophy begins when, in thinking about some matter or another, something about it that previously seemed ordinary or not particularly important suddenly seems extraordinary, crucial, or unfathomable. These moments of “wonder” can resolve because a close investigation lays everything bare, and the landscape appears ordinary again, though richer and better understood. At other times, nothing resolves, mysteries compound, and one loses sight of how things ever could have appeared to be ordinary. In both cases, we start where we are least inclined to start, where we are most tempted to be asleep, where everyone around us is.

In this seminar we try to cultivate an ability to recognize philosophical moments in their nascence, we will work on developing them into coherent resolutions or profound mysteries, and we will practice articulating the results in discussion and composition. We will not be interested (as you might expect us to be) in studying the philosophical systems of great thinkers from the past or in getting acquainted with perennial philosophical problems. Instead, we turn to the details of things we are already familiar with—the laws of physics, ordinary human behavior, biological mechanisms, legal decision making, and storytelling—and try to see them in new ways.

TEXTS

Our seminar will focus on these texts and the ideas they put forward:

1. *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, and Phædo*, by Plato
2. *The Evolution of the Social Contract* (2nd Ed.), by Brian Skyrms
3. *Quantum Mechanics and Experience* by David Z. Albert
4. *Pale Fire* by Vladimir Nabokov
5. *Patterns of Culture* by Ruth Benedict
6. *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding* by Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela

Readings for each seminar session will be determined as we go, according to the interests and emphases of seminar participants.

REQUIREMENTS

There are three requirements for this course.

The first requirement is to be engaged in the class through regular attendance and contributions to our discussion. There are ways to fulfill this requirement consistent with all personality types: make a short presentation, present a text or idea from one of your other classes for our seminar to consider, interrupt me and ask for clarification, answer others' questions or pose your own. Be creative. Contribute in ways that are helpful to your classmates and in ways that are enjoyable for you.

The second requirement is to compose two essays of philosophical significance. This is an on-going project that you should not expect to fulfill simply by "writing a paper" one day about something that you understand very well. It takes time to uncover a subtle observation that is truly your own, it takes patience to present that observation clearly in written form, and you will have to do both of these things twice. I will advise you continuously as you work on this. I do not expect the process to be the same for every student, and I have no general advice for producing philosophical writing. Rather, I expect to get to know something about your own inclinations and to assist you individually, according to the type

of observation that you are prone to make and according to the style of expression that is appropriate for your tasks.

Philosophical thought and philosophical writing each come in a wide array of forms. In order for me to steer you appropriately, I will need to see bits of your writing regularly, beginning soon. To that end, as a third requirement, I require you to hand in a piece of writing every two weeks or so (we will establish a class schedule for this). These will be circulated to the entire seminar who will read what you have written and share their accolades, misgivings, and advice. **The purpose of this is not for you to compose drafts of your essays**, but to practice formulating philosophical questions, explaining conceptual distinctions, and suggesting textual interpretations. It is natural for this continuous writing to inspire your formal essays, even to evolve into parts of them, but it is essential to think of your continuous, short writing exercises (and your comments on others') as valuable in their own right. **The purpose of these exercises is also not to share "reflections" on or opinions about our readings**, but rather to make practice making precise observations and claims and to compose them in short and effective prose.

NOTE

Please be aware of the University's policies regarding academic honesty, anti-discrimination, and access to education for students with disabilities.

Here is the web-page of the office for students with disabilities:

<http://www.nd.edu/~osd/NEWHOME PAGE.htm>

Here is the Philosophy Department's web-page devoted to academic honesty, with links to information about plagiarism and the University's honor code:

<http://philosophy.nd.edu/undergraduate-program/honesty/>

In addition I am someone you can approach if you have concerns about discrimination or proper scholarly behavior, whether or not the concern is related to this course.

IMPORTANT DATES

October 4	no class	(Rosh Hashanah)
October 11	no class	(Erev Yom Kippur)
October 25	no class	(Shemini Atzeres)
November 1	due date	first essay
December 1	due date	second essay
December 8	last meeting	
December 14	due date	revised essays

SUBMISSION SCHEDULE

August 30:	1, 2, 3
September 1:	4, 5, 6
September 6:	7, 8, 9
September 8:	10, 11, 12
September 13:	13, 1, 2
September 15:	3, 4, 5
September 20:	6, 7, 8
September 22:	9, 10, 11
September 27:	12, 13, 1
September 29:	2, 3, 4
October 6:	5, 6, 7
October 13:	8, 9, 10
October 27:	11, 12, 13
November 3:	1, 2, 3
November 8:	4, 5, 6
November 10:	7, 8, 9
November 15:	10, 11, 12
November 17:	13, 1, 2
November 22:	3, 4, 5
November 29:	6, 7, 8
December 6:	9, 10, 11
December 8:	12, 13