

Honors Philosophy Seminar

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Malloy 411
Wednesday 12-3pm and by appointment

1 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. Rather, all texts and 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 will try to cultivate an ability to recognize philosophical moments in their nascence, we will work on nurturing them into coherent resolutions or profound mysteries, and we will practice articulating the results in discussion and composition.

2 Texts

I have chosen a few works from antiquity that our discussions will center around for the first weeks of the semester:

1. “Euthyphro,” by Plato
2. “Apology,” by Plato
3. “Crito,” by Plato
4. “Phædo,” by Plato
5. “Job,” from the Hebrew Writings
6. selected chapters from Chuang Tzu

In the second half of the semester, we will read some works from the modern era:

1. *Meditations on First Philosophy* by René Descartes
2. *On Certainty* by Ludwig Wittgenstein

3 Requirements

There are two 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, circulate preliminary drafts of your writing for others to comment on, present a text or idea from one of your other classes for our seminar to consider. 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 snippets of your thought and writing regularly, beginning soon. There are no formal requirements here in length or periodicity, but a good paradigm to follow is a page of informal writing every week. 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, but it is essential to think of your continuous, informal writing as valuable in its own right.

4 Grades

Your grade will be determined by your achievements in the two course requirements.

For the first requirement, insightful questions, helpful comments, and in class explanations of ideas that we encounter are all important. I won't work to keep track of how much any member of the seminar speaks, but I will effortlessly remember your valuable contributions to our discussions.

The second requirement will be graded according to the originality and depth of the views you articulate and your ability to express these views clearly, effectively, and thoroughly. I expect you to stumble upon ideas and questions that interest you and to put a good deal of time into developing your thoughts prior to writing your essays. It should be evident to anyone reading your essays that their theses are interesting to you, and it should be reasonably clear to me why other people would be interested in reading your paper twice.

5 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.

6 Important dates

October 8	no class	I'm away.
October 29	first essay due	
November 26	no class	Thanksgiving
December 10	second essay due	