

**First year seminar:
“Philosophy at work”
Curtis Franks**

CONTACT INFORMATION

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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.

Good ideas have an impact that crosses disciplinary boundaries. This is especially true of philosophical ideas. The texts we will read in this course range from U. S. Supreme Court decisions to explanations of physical theory. We will read a work of fiction, a treatise on Christian mysticism, an introduction to evolutionary game theory, and sundry other things. We won’t read anything that is primarily an explicitly philosophical tract. By steering away from ideas that appear confined to philosopher’s tomes, we will learn how to look at all aspects of our culture—law, science, art, etc.—philosophically, and we will encounter some of the best philosophical ideas from recent years, ideas that influenced the way science and law are practiced and the way art and life are experienced today.

TEXTS

We will discuss the following texts, all from the last Century, in the basically chronological order depicted here, during our regular seminar meetings. I cannot say in advance what text we'll be discussing on any given day. Everything listed here is available in books for purchase at the Hammes Bookstore or can be accessed easily, for free, on-line. It does not matter to me where you acquire the texts, but in the case of those unavailable in the books being held at the bookstore, I have provided one link.

1. "The reflex-arc concept in psychology," by John Dewey. Available at:

http://my.ilstu.edu/~jsjorda/DEWEY_03.HTML

2. "The path of the law," by Oliver Wendell Holmes.
3. "The theory of legal interpretation," by Oliver Wendell Holmes.
4. Holmes' opinions in *Lochner v. New York*, *Olmstead v. United States*, *Gompers v. United States*, *Schenck v. United States*, *Springer v. Philippine Islands*.
5. *The Meaning of Relativity*, by Albert Einstein.
6. *Patterns of Culture*, by Ruth Benedict.
7. "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction," by Walter Benjamin. Available at:

<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>

8. *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, by Thomas Merton.
9. "Death of the author," by Roland Barthes. Available at:
<http://www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/threeEssays.html#barthes>
10. *The Sea, the Sea*, by Iris Murdoch.
11. *The Evolution of the Social Contract*, by Brian Skyrms.

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.

The second requirement is to compose four short essays. These compositions are on-going projects that you should not expect to fulfil 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 *a few times*. 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. The essays should be three to six pages long and should be topically distinct.

The third requirement is to select one of your essays, to re-write it in a longer and more developed form, and to submit this as your term paper.

GRADES

Your grade will be determined by your achievements in the three course requirements. We’ll talk about specific expectations as we go.

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

February 2	first essay due	
February 23	second essay due	
March 23	third essay due	
March 30	no class	Passover
April 6	no class	Passover
April 20	fourth essay due	
May 4	class, essay due	10:30am