PHL 375M: Interpretation and Meaning

Description: Communication consists of two aspects: what the speaker means by her utterance and what the audience understands by it. While most philosophers of language have concentrated on the speaker's side, there is increasing interest in the audience's side. This seminar focuses on understanding or interpretation, especially on the interpretation of texts. Meaning will be discussed as necessary.

Our main goal will be to figure out what interpretation is and what properties a good interpretation has. This goal requires that we understand what a person brings to a text and what means she has to understand it.

Our views about meaning and interpretation will be tested against important and controversial texts in various genres: literary, religious, historical, political, legal, and philosophical. Principles of interpretation will be evaluated according to how useful they are in understanding these texts.

Readings include works by Donald Davidson, H. P. Grice, E. D. Hirsch, W. V. Quine, John Searle, probably Quentin Skinner and Leo Strauss, and others.

PHL 325C

This is a class on environmental philosophy focusing on both ethics and the philosophy of the environmental sciences and associated problems in epistemology. The first half of the course will be spread evenly between environmental ethics and epistemology. The insights gathered during this period will be applied to a variety of environmental projects during the second half including biodiversity conservation, ecological restoration, sustainability. Topics covered will include climate change, species’ extinctions, indigenous peoples’ rights, the role of wilderness and national parks, intrinsic values, and the land ethic.

PHL 305 and RS 305: Intro to the Philosophy of Religion

Description: This course investigates four different attitudes that have been held about the relation of humans to God. First is an ancient view according to which God's existence is presupposed and all events are interpreted as expressions of God's will. Second is a medieval view according to which the existence of God and his various attributes are suitable subjects for proof and argument. Third is a modern view according to which God exists but little is known about him through reasoning. Fourth is a contemporary view according to which God is assumed not to exist and it is asked whether anything has any value and whether human life has a meaning.

610QB: Problems in Knowledge & Valuation
This will be a continuation of our study of some classic texts in the history of western philosophy. Our focus in the spring will be more heavily (though not exclusively) on issues in moral and political philosophy. We will study Kant’s ethics, Locke’s and Marx’s political thought, Mill’s moral and political thought, James’ pragmatism, and possibly some of Nietzsche’s ethics. The more specific issues considered will include moral obligation, political freedom, rights and property, exploitation, communism, free expression, utilitarianism, and the nature of truth. (With the latter, we will revisit some of the issues in epistemology addressed in the first semester.)

TC 301: Values in the Philosophy & Fiction of Ayn Rand
(Plan II Only)

This course will examine Ayn Rand’s work in two of the “value” branches of philosophy, ethics and aesthetics. We will read Rand’s major work of fiction as well as several essays of her non-fiction in order to understand the arguments beneath her controversial positions and to assess their strengths and weaknesses. To distinguish the precise sort of moral theory that she espouses — “rational selfishness” — we will also study two other philosophers associated with somewhat different brands of egoism, Aristotle and Friedrich Nietzsche.

While the course spans the study of literature and philosophy, its primary orientation will be philosophical, thus students will be introduced to the methods of philosophical analysis as well as to some of philosophy’s fundamental questions. In ethics, for instance: what makes certain actions morally right and other actions wrong? What does the whole idea of some things being “valuable” rest upon? How tenable is the brand of egoism that Rand commends? What virtues, if any, does it require? What are its implications for charity, or benevolence, or friendship, or love? In aesthetics: What is art? How can we distinguish good art from bad art? How can we distinguish art from non-art? How crucial are an artist’s intentions to the meaning of his work? What role does an individual’s subjective psychology play in his response to works of art? (While we will not devote extended attention to Rand’s political thought, we may outline the most basic implications of Rand’s moral theory for her view of the nature and purpose of government.)

We will also consider Rand as a novelist. What features make her fiction so compelling for some readers and so “over the top” for others? How important is the fiction to her presentation of her philosophical views? Is it propaganda? Is it realistic? In what sense should fiction be realistic? How does Rand’s fiction reflect her views about aesthetics? And how does it relate to the aesthetic views of Aristotle and Nietzsche?

Overall, the course is designed not only to offer students an in-depth examination of this particular author’s work, but to introduce certain perennial philosophical issues and to begin training students in the methods that can be most fruitful for addressing them. To that end, we will be critically alert, throughout the term, to aspects of Rand’s method that seem more and less constructive.

PHL 610QB

Problems of Knowledge and Valuation, Second semester: Descartes and Hume;
knowledge and mind.

The aim of this semester is to introduce topics in epistemology and metaphysics, initially through the works of two major philosophers, René Descartes (f. 1670) and David Hume (f. 1750). They will serve to introduce two main themes: the nature of knowledge and skepticism; and the nature of the human mind and action.

Descartes is known for two highly influential ideas. His skepticism arises from his reflection that we might be deceived by an “evil demon” who makes it seem as if our ordinary world exists whereas in reality there is nothing. Although Descartes hoped to defuse skepticism, it has lived on, inspiring not only generations of philosophers, but also leaving its mark in such movies as Matrix and Solaris. Descartes’ dualism is his view that mind and body are entirely distinct. This view has been supported by religious thinkers, by many philosophers impressed by the distinctive character of consciousness, and by some defenders of free will.

Hume’s Enquiry is famous for supposedly arguing for a form of skepticism that Descartes did not explicitly consider: skepticism about whether the future will resemble the past. His discussion of this issue is closely intertwined with a remarkable theory of causation, a theory which led him to hold that an action can be free, and so can merit praise or blame, even though it is causally determined.

**PHL 356: Yoga as Philosophy and as Practice**

This course will begin with an examination of the YOGA-SUTRA by Patanjali and the classical commentary by Vyasa. We shall look at the text both as expressing a metaphysics and as a ``how-to book'' on yogic practice, focusing on certain bridge psychological concepts and theories. We shall also look at scholarly attempts to reconstruct the origins of yogic practice in early Indian civilization, and we shall read closely passages concerning yoga in the Upanishads and BHAGAVAD GITA. The appropriation of yogic techniques by other classical outlooks (Yogacara Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta, and so on) and by religious sects will concern us, but we shall focus on a set of claims common to classical advocates of yoga. For these, we shall look at classical and modern defenses and criticisms, especially of alleged metaphysical and psychological underpinnings of the practices. No Sanskrit or previous background in Indian philosophy is necessary, but students with no previous course work in philosophy or in psychology should contact the instructor.

**PHL 327
CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY**

We will examine recent work in philosophy that is written from a Christian point of view or that examines philosophical questions that arise within the framework of the Christian faith.
The issues to be covered include the relationship between faith and reason, the possibility of demonstrating the existence of God, the problem of evil, the problem of reconciling divine foreknowledge and sovereignty with human responsibility, and the relation of God to time. Special emphasis will be placed on the relevance of Christian philosophy to foundational questions concerning reality, knowledge and ethics.

Prerequisites: no prior work in philosophy is expected. Non-majors are encouraged.

**PHILOSOPHY 301: INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY**

An introduction to the basic problems of philosophy by way of an examination and discussion of the writings of some great philosophers.

**PHL 304 CONTEMPORARY MORAL PROBLEMS**

An introduction to ethics by way of an examination of a number of contemporary moral problems, including problems of abortion, sexual morality, capital punishment, and pornography and hate speech.

**The Search for Happiness in the Middle Ages**

*Course number: WCV 303/PHL 306*

Developments in and interactions among Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions, as revealed by close reading of philosophical, literary and religious texts from 250 through 1650 AD.

**PHL325K – Ethical Theories**

*Substantial Writing Component*

This course will consider three classic moral theories in detail, those of J. S. Mill, W. D. Ross and I. Kant – otherwise known as Utilitarianism, Intuitionism and Kantianism. We will do this by studying one classic text by each author in detail.

**Philosophy 366K**

*Existentialism*

“Existentialism” was hardly a philosophical movement in the traditional sense, for few of its major figures would have described themselves as existentialists. And yet the existentialists do represent a movement in the sense that they sharing certain concerns, such as emphasis on how reflective thought relates to our actual lives, skepticism regarding reason, reevaluation of traditional approaches to ethics, and insistence on passionate engagement as essential for a meaningful life. Among the figures we will consider are Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, and Simone de Beauvoir.
PHL375M: ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY (EARLY GREEK PHILOSOPHY)

The beginnings of science and the beginnings of philosophy are intertwined in the historical period we shall be investigating: 6th and 5th centuries, B.C.E. The earliest of the "pre-Socratics" addressed cosmological questions such as these: How did the universe begin, and what is its present structure? What is the shape of the earth? What is the nature of celestial bodies, and how do we account for both the regular and the seemingly irregular motions observed in the heavens?

In attempting to answer these and related questions, these pioneers in cosmology were led to develop and to deploy most of the fundamental concepts of metaphysics (e.g., types of change, unchanging reality, causal regularity) and epistemology (e.g., reality vs. appearances, what is evident vs. what is theoretically posited, types of knowledge). Then, early in the 5th century, philosophy becomes remarkably abstract, reflective, and critical. Parmenides of Elea asks: what should properly count as "the real" or as "what-is"?

Drawing on Parmenides' austere criteria, the last of the pre-Socratic cosmologists construct comprehensive and complex systems, such as the four-element pluralism of Empedocles and the brilliant — and ultimately highly influential — atomic theory of Democritus.

Parallel to these late developments, and in reaction to them, we have the "Sophistic movement," which shifts attention from such categories or themes as "truth" and "reality," to those of "will," "choice," "appearance," "convention."

We shall explore this glorious "Part I" in the history of western philosophy through study of the preserved fragments of the pre-Socratic natural philosophers and Sophists, plus the relevant ancient testimony, and with the help of modern reconstruction and interpretation.

The course will be conducted as a seminar, in discussion format, with a minimum of lecturing by the instructor.

PHL329L, Early Modern Philosophy: Descartes to Kant

The 17th-18th century philosophical development covered in this course constitutes the source and foundation for nearly all themes of 19th and 20th century of philosophy; but it is also a remarkably self-contained segment in intellectual history generally.

Major topics: our knowledge of the external world, rationalism vs. empiricism, the nature of substance, concept of the self, causality, freedom, God, philosophy and the emergence of Newtonian science.

We shall concentrate on Descartes, Berkeley, Hume, and Kant.

The course is required of philosophy majors; but it can also serve very well as an introduction to philosophy for upper-division students. No prerequisites.
Socrates and the Examined Life

Socrates—the Ancient Greek we suppose the ultimate philosopher—seems almost never to have called himself a philosopher. He certainly was appalled at being thought wise. He considered himself instead a lover of talking, and a lover of people (with whom he might talk). He thought that conversations about all sorts of things—whatever things might be of interest to the young and old he ran into—was the best way for them all to spend their time. While he encouraged others to investigate with him into matters of grave concern—education, democracy, respect, happiness, friendship, and all the other deep issues of human living—he didn’t think they would come to learn about these matters by any other way than mutual discussion. He didn’t treat scientific inquiry, or reading in books, or sitting in solitary meditation, as the highest pursuit. The way to care that one comes to live well, and that one’s city does best, is to try to answer, as honestly as possible, the questions your friends pose you.

The major goal of this small, seminar-style class is to understand the curious value of this “endless chatter” in which Socrates’ neighbors thought he engaged. Socrates thought he was wise only in that he knew he knew nothing, but others disagreed: they thought he was a sage, an intellectual, a very clever man. How did his inspections of others’ views lead him to get this unwanted reputation? Socrates may have suggested that with knowledge comes all moral goodness and virtue: what is this remarkable knowledge, and how could we try, simply by working through issues with our friends, to get it?

For your grade you will primarily be assigned regular writing assignments of the most diverse sort. There will also be two written-and-oral exams. We will use class-time to have free-wheeling conversations about Socrates, modes of philosophical inquiry, ways to read closely and seriously, and methods of writing useful for your own understanding. Our conversational approach makes this seminar suitable for all levels of students, with or without previous work in philosophy or classics. Our texts are all, themselves, casual and conversational, and thus eminently accessible while also being central to the humanistic, liberal arts tradition.

PHL 322: Science and the Modern World

Scientific discoveries have profoundly altered the way we see the world and our place within it. Three branches of science that have dramatically changed the way humans see themselves are cosmology, the science that deals with the large-scale structure of the universe, quantum theory, which deals with the small-scale structure, and evolutionary biology.

In this course we will accomplish two main goals. First, we will learn the history and content of a few of the most revolutionary theoretical developments in human history. Second, we will consider aspects of the broader philosophical significance that these developments are supposed to have.

The first part of the course will concentrate on general philosophy of science issues. Then we will study the Copernican Revolution, how it came about and some of its explosive consequences.
We will then briefly describe the revolutionary implications of Einstein’s theory of relativity. Next will be an overview of the bizarre discoveries about the basic nature of matter, quantum theory. We will study various relevant historical developments, and think about different interpretations of the theory that have been proposed. A fundamental question will haunt us in this part, the question whether we are doomed to ignorance about the ultimate nature of reality.

Next we will consider the work of a physicist who attempts to explain why, and in what sense, science as we came to know it did not develop anywhere except in Europe. His view is that the ancient Greeks invented the sort of logical, systematic thinking that science requires. Relevant facets of Chinese culture, Hebrew culture and others will be examined and contrasted with Greek and later European cultures with respect to their fostering scientific developments.

The second half of the course will focus on evolutionary biology since the nineteenth century. We will first read some of Dawkins’ and then Dennett’s summary of the conceptual core of modern evolutionary theory, from their own compelling, if perhaps disturbing, perspectives. Then we will spend time on more recent developments and controversies that have swirled around evolutionary theory.

The matters that we will deal with in the course are fascinating at a purely intellectual level. But these are not merely intellectual curiosities; they provide pictures of how we humans ‘fit into the cosmic scheme’. Since matters of fundamental importance hinge on a proper understanding the universe and our place in it, no thinking person can afford to neglect to examine these pictures with care.