

Course Content

Catalog Description: A critical and constructive examination of some of the basic problems of philosophy. Significant systems of thought will be examined as they bear on the basic problems of human life such as the nature of reality, the basis of human knowledge, and the search for moral aesthetic, and religious values.

Course Format: Our time will be about equally divided between looking at historical writings, and contemporary writings. Classes will consist of lecture mixed with discussion, formal debates, and in-class assignments. As the course title implies, the approach will be problem-oriented. We will focus on classical philosophical problems, such as the following:

- a. Epistemology: What is knowledge, and how is it best gained? Can we know anything with complete certainty?
- b. The Problem of Free Will: Do we have free will, or are all events and actions pre-determined?
- c. The Mind - Body Problem: What is a mind? Is it merely the brain, or is it something more?
- d. The Problem of Personal Identity: What constitutes 'being me'? Is there such a thing as a self? Which of my features are essential to me, and which are not?
- e. Problems Involving Truth and Meaning: How does language relate to the world? What is it for a sentence to be true? What are concepts?
- f. The Problem of Causality: What is the nature of causality? Must a cause precede its effect in time?
- g. Ethics: What is ethical relativism? What are the alternatives to it?
- h. Reason: Is it better to be rational than irrational?

Readings

Tao Te Ching, by Lao Tzu. This ancient Chinese work is different from the other works we will read, in a number of ways: It contains clear recommendations for how to live. It also combines ethics with non-ethical issues, such as metaphysics and epistemology, in an interesting way.

"The Trial of Socrates," by Plato (pp. 2-8). This selection, taken from the Platonic dialogue "Euthyphro" shows the Socratic techniques for testing knowledge and exploring concepts in action.

"Obedience to Authority," by Stanley Milgram (pp. 24-30). This shocking experiment, conducted in the early 1960s showed just how easy it is for authority figures to coerce people into doing things they would normally consider unethical.

"Where Am I," by Daniel Dennett (pp. 71-80). This thought experiment, described by perhaps the best-known contemporary philosopher, is intended to push the author's claims that both mind and self can be captured in a computer program.

Chapters 1 and 2 from Minds, Brains, and Science by John R. Searle. (In xerox form)

Chapter 1 contains Searle's solution to the mind/body problem. Chapter 2 contains Searle's highly controversial attempt to prove that computers cannot understand, think, or have any such 'intentional state'.

"Meditations," by Rene Descartes (pp. 267-276). Descartes attempts to get at the foundation of our set of beliefs by eliminating everything even remotely doubtful. He then attempts to reconstruct our system of knowledge in a new and completely certain way.

"Freedom and Determinism," by Richard Taylor (pp. 225-236). We believe, on the one hand, that everything is determined by state of the physical universe, and on the other hand that we are free to do or not do what we choose. Do these two beliefs contradict; how can at least the apparent contradiction be resolved?

"The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn," by Jonathan Bennett (pp. 620-627). Bennett uses writings from Mark Twain to pose a debate between two sources of ethical knowledge, which may sometimes conflict: Explicit knowledge of what to do, learned from one's culture or society, and ethical intuition or 'ethical emotions'.

"The Myth of Gyges' Ring," by Plato (pp. 636-640). Do you do the right thing because you are an ethical person, or merely because you are afraid of getting caught and punished? If you had a ring that made you invisible, this would remove the threat of punishment. Then how would you act?

Other Topics

1. Critical Reasoning. How to distinguish good reasoning from bad reasoning. The deductive/inductive, necessary/contingent, a priori/a posteriori distinctions.
2. Paradoxes. Including the Liar Paradox, the Paradox of the Unexpected Examination, and the Barber Paradox. These as yet unsolved riddles threaten the foundation of reason and logic.