Summer 2021 Course Descriptions

*Dept. of Philosophy*

All sections are online, 3-credit

101: Logic, Reasoning, & Persuasion

All sections: Development of skills in reasoning. Consideration of what an argument is, how arguments go wrong, and what makes an argument valid. Application of techniques for clarifying meaning; evaluating and constructing arguments.

103: Introduction to Philosophy

All sections: Examination of fundamental philosophical issues such as the meaning and basis of moral judgments, free will and determinism, theism and atheism, knowledge and skepticism, and consciousness and the brain.

105: Current Moral & Social Issues

B1: Application of moral theory to selected contemporary issues. Possible topics include abortion, infanticide, euthanasia, punishment, equality, sexism, racism, affirmative action, privacy, obligations to the world's needy, treatment of animals, drug use, and the meaning of life

H1: What are my moral obligations? How do I know what’s right? When do I have the right, or even obligation, to intervene? Other people have moral views that I find offensive, and yet they are sure they are right too. We live in a confusing, maddening world of conflicting ideologies, violence, and injustice. Children crossing borders are separated from their parents, thrown into internment camps, and force-fed tranquilizers. Civilians are secretly arrested, thrown into prisons, and subjected to “enhanced interrogation techniques.” Planes and drones drop bombs on enemy targets and lay waste to foreign civilizations. Companies spew chemical waste into our environment, despoiling the planet, killing animals, and poisoning life. Racism, sexism, and assault flourish in our societies. Holding aloft their sacred or profane moral doctrines, people murder other human beings in the name of goodness, freedom, and truth. Some clash over immigration, others over abortion, still others on what the facts are. Some even cry for the censorship of free speech, in the name of protecting freedom and democracy. It can be dizzying and infuriating. In this class we will survey contemporary moral issues and consider a diversity of perspectives, engaging in serious scholarly investigation as we exchange ideas freely and philosophically.

107: Introduction to Ethics

B1: Exploration of basic issues in ethical theory and metaethics. Topics may include consequentialism, deontology, virtue theory, constructivism, value relativism, the objectivity of values, value skepticism, free will, and the nature of the values and practical reasons.

H2: This course aims at helping students to think about the moral dimensions of  
human existence by exposing them to (1) theoretical and (2) practical issues  
in ethics. Some of the questions we will ask are: how should we conduct our  
lives?; how can we be morally righteous and virtuous?; what kinds of ethical  
theories are there to help us make right decisions?; what if there are  
conflicting moral recommendations from different theories?; how are we to  
resolve differences of moral opinions?; what is the distinctive nature of  
moral judgment?; why should I be moral in the first place?; to what degree  
does religion play a role in ethical decisions?; how is ethics related to the  
diverse areas such as law, health care, or politics as practiced in today's  
society?, and so forth. (There is no prerequisite to this course, except a  
curious and rigorous mind.)

109: Introduction to Formal Reasoning and Decision-making

B1 & H6: Fundamentals of logical, probabilistic, and statistical thinking, as well as the basic principles of rational decision-making. Reasoning through data (and rhetoric) encountered on a daily basis using elementary principles of deductive logic and inference.

H1: Resolving differences of opinion isn't always impossible. Figuring out what you should believe isn't just a matter of checking what's true. Deciding what you should do doesn't have to be left up to your whim. Formal tools have been (and continue to be) developed that enable us to talk very precisely about the strength of arguments and of evidence, the rationality of beliefs we have, and the value of choices we make. This course will introduce students to some of those formal tools—specifically: logic, probability, and decision theory—focusing on their application, but also looking at the limits to their application and their potential for expansion and sophistication. Assessment in the course will based on a mixture of exams, discussion posts, and quizzes.

201: Introduction to Logic

B1:  This course is an introduction to symbolic logic. Logic is the study of correct reasoning and symbolic logic studies reasoning using formal languages. We will begin with propositional logic.

Propositional logic will enable us to represent various connective terms that will allow us to evaluate various inferences. We will focus on determining the validity of arguments and the processes involved in derivations. Then, we will turn to predicate logic. Predicate logic subsumes propositional logic but affords us additional tools to both represent terms such as “something” and “everything” and evaluate inferences.

B6: The objective of the course is to augment students’ analytical and critical thinking through the study of formal logic. The students will learn philosophical concepts and introductory tools for valid reasoning and proof in modern logic.

H2: Introduction to formal logic, covering truth, functional propositional logic, and quantification theory. Emphasis on developing symbolic techniques for representing and evaluating arguments.

249: Bioethics

B1: This course will be an introduction to the sub-branch of applied ethics known as bioethics. Bioethics deals with moral questions raised by advances in the biological and medical sciences, especially when it comes to issues surrounding the creation and termination of human life. Throughout the course, we will read and discuss a wide range of essays written by empirically informed philosophers and philosophically minded scientists. Specifically, we will deal with the following topics: natalism, abortion, euthanasia, ectogenesis, genetic engineering, vaccine ethics, the creation of human-pig chimeras, and de-extinction.

Here are just some of the questions that we will raise and try to answer:

❖ Is there a moral obligation to have children?

❖ Are fetuses persons? Is it morally permissible to have an abortion?

❖ When (if ever) is it morally okay to help someone die?

❖ To what extent should we genetically modify humans?

❖ Should certain vaccines be made mandatory to reach herd immunity?

❖ Should we create human-pig chimeras for the purpose of readily available organ transplants?

❖ Should we ever resurrect extinct species?

260: Philosophical Ideas in Literature

B1: Whence truth? Whence reality? Why does truth have such a quiet breast? If philosophers debate the criteria for epistemic justification, the poets compare truth to wisps of cloud and black vespers pageants. If philosophers explicate conditions of virtue and ethics, poets rather show us monstrosity and cunning evil. Where philosophers establish arguments for human will or causal constraint, novelists paint characters driven by passion, rage, and despair. They illustrate and evoke images of evil, ambiguity, and confusion about reality, self, and death, the grave and constant in human sufferings. This is why Nietzsche could say that Dostoevsky was the only psychologist from whom he had anything to learn, why C.S. Lewis could say that literature enriches and adds to reality, why Putnam could say that literature presents human predicaments with such vivid diversity. Literature confronts us with striking quandaries and struggles with good and evil, questions about the self and reality, the quest for meaning, whether we have the will to make decisions or whether we are governed by myriad causes and events. In this class we will read some classics and provocative works of literature to stimulate philosophical reflection and contemplate ideas from unanticipated perspectives.

302: Plato & Aristotle

H1: Major work of Plato, such as the *Republic;* Aristotle's critical reaction and alternative theories in metaphysics, psychology, logic, ethics, and politics.

308: Hume, Kant, and the 18th Century

B1: In understanding our era, in the various ways we do — as postindustrial or postmodern, as an information age or the Anthropocene, and so on — we’re struggling to understand the human condition, generally speaking, as it’s organized naturally, and as we organize it socially in turn. It’s a struggle that takes a fascinating series of interwoven turns during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, which, taken together, we know as the early-modern and modern periods, or the Enlightenment and its immediate aftermath. To understand them better, and the eighteenth century’s contributions in particular, on the part of its philosophers and philosophically minded more specifically still, is to understand better the twentieth- and now twenty-first-century continuation of the struggle. To see this, we need look no further than our own version of a “republic” as an interpretive legacy of John Locke’s, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s, and Immanuel Kant’s successive perspectives on what a well-working social contract should look like.

Building on the perspective developed in “Descartes, Locke, and the Seventeenth Century,” and anticipating the one developed in “Nineteenth-Century Philosophy,” our goal will be to develop together a systematic perspective on the eighteenth century’s philosophical traditions, through the lens of a variety of notable debates involving a variety of notable figures and perspectives. In the process, we’ll be as participatory as possible, in deference to the idea that philosophy’s best done this way, generally speaking. In addition to anticipating being actively involved in a semester-long conversation, participants should anticipate a mandatory writing project, and an optional extra-credit writing opportunity.

329: Mind, Machines, and Persons

B1 & H1: Comparison of the nature of the human mind and that of complex machines. Consequences for questions about the personhood of robots.

330: Ethics of War & Conflict

B1: Exploration of moral issues raised by collective violence through critical examination of the traditional theory of just war. Topics may include foundations of the right of self-defense, notion of a just cause for war, preventive war, humanitarian intervention, distinction between legitimate and illegitimate targets of attack, basis of moral liability to attack in war, proportionality in the consequences of war, terrorism, interrogational torture, and relation between the morality of war and the law of war.

369: Buddhist Philosophy

*Religion is the primary dept.*

A1: Interdependence, impermanence, relativity; suffering; path to liberation; meditation; karma as cosmic justice; death and rebirth. Compassion as central ethical value. Theravada, Mahayana, and Tibetan Buddhism.