



PHILOSOPHY at RICE UNDERGRADUATE COURSES Spring 2021

HUMA 125: What is the Meaning of Death? (Vida Yao) TTh 9:40am-11am. It is part of the human condition to experience and encounter death: our own deaths, the deaths of our loved ones and strangers, and the deaths of cultures and traditions. In our current climate, we may also wonder about the death of the planet and the human race, as a whole. How have philosophers, both contemporary and historical, reacted to the persistent fact of death? And how might we draw from these philosophical perspectives in ways that may help us face these facts in better, or worse ways? In this class, we will explore how philosophical reflection, supplemented by humanistic thinking more generally, may influence our experience and understanding of the significance of death -- while at the same time, arriving at a deeper understanding of ourselves.

PHIL 100: Introduction to Philosophy. (Uriah Kriegel) TTh 11:20am-12:40pm. This course is designed to give you an acquaintance and an understanding of philosophy at two levels: a theoretical appreciation, on the one hand, of what philosophy is about, and a more lived understanding, on the other hand, of what it's like to actually do philosophy. The course is divided into four modules: two in "active mode" and two in "passive mode." In the passive mode, I will give you a thematic panorama of the various areas and branches of philosophy (Module 2), as well a historical panorama of some of the greatest philosophical ideas there have ever been (Module 4). In the active mode, we will struggle ourselves, together, with two of the deepest philosophical questions: the problem of the existence of the external world (Module 1) and the problem of happiness and the meaning of life (Module 3).

PHIL 130: The Sciences of the Mind. (Tim Schroeder) MWF 8:30am-9:25am. An introduction to the scientific investigation of the mind, with special attention to topics of particular philosophical interest. We will ask four big questions: How should the mind be studied? What is consciousness? How can we understand each other? Do we have free will? There are lots of competing answers to these questions, and we will give close attention to a few. Computer science, linguistics, neuroscience, philosophy, and psychology will all be represented in our thinking.

PHIL 160: Moral Problems. (Gwen Bradford) TTh 3:10pm-4:30pm. What does it take to be a good person? What we eat, what we buy, and how we choose to live our lives are all moral choices -- from eating our vegetables to sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Should we consider the lives of the animals we eat? Is abortion morally permissible? Should drugs be legalized? How should we treat other people? This class examines current moral issues and life choices as they affect others, ourselves, and the world around us. We learn from moral theories and discuss how these theories help us handle the pressing issues that confront us every day.

PHIL 283: History of Philosophy II. (Brian Miller) MWF 2:45pm-3:40pm. An introduction to the early modern period. Philosophers studied will include Descartes, Locke, Hume, and Kant.

PHIL 289: History of Eastern Philosophy. (Tim Schroeder) TTh 1:30pm-2:50pm. A first survey of the history of eastern philosophy, emphasizing Chinese philosophers such as Kongzi (Confucius), Laozi, and Zhuangzi. The moral and political philosophy of these thinkers will take center stage, but we will also give some attention to their ideas about the nature of reality and our knowledge of it.

PHIL 310: Mathematical Logic. (Brian Miller) MWF 1:30pm-2:25pm. Logic is the study of forms of argument, the main goal being to distinguish correct from incorrect forms. In this course we develop formal languages and mathematical methods for assessing correctness in both formal and informal languages. This requires facility both in manipulating the languages and higher order thinking about them. Along the way we prove important strengths and limitations of the formal languages, and, by translating back and forth into English, learn a lot about the logical structure of English. Not recommended for freshmen. Distribution Group III



PHIL 318: Philosophy of Language. (Waisan Ng) TTh 4:50pm-6:10pm. Philosophy of Language is an essential branch of philosophy, closely related to Metaphysics, Epistemology, Logic, Philosophy of mind, and also Ethics. This is no accident: Due to the tight connection of language to logical reasoning, cognition, judgment, and actions, our language affects our understanding of the world and our reaction towards it – As speakers of English, many of us seem to think that “snow” refers to one kind of thing. But would we still think the same if we were Eskimos who have 50 words for what English speakers call “snow”? “Same-sex marriage” was once considered by some courts as contradictory, for it was said that “marriage” was, by definition, arranged between couples of different sexes. But what if we have assumed a different definition? What decides the choice of a definition? In this course we will consider how much truth is there in the hypothesis that a language affects its speakers' world view or cognition. We will also give a closer looker at how the ambiguities and vagueness of natural languages lead to many conflicts and arguments outside the philosophy classroom. Applications of philosophical analysis to institutional languages will be discussed.

PHIL 320: Metaphysics. (Uriah Kriegel) TTh 3:10pm-4:30pm. Different sciences study different objects: physics studies particles and atoms, chemistry studies molecules, biology studies tissues and organism, and so on. Each science has its own objects it studies. But who do you go to if you want to know what is an object as such, what makes any chunk of reality “an object”? The answer is that you go to the metaphysician. Metaphysics studies being qua being, and one aspect of this is the study of objects qua objects. In this course, we will use some of the most important pieces in modern metaphysics as a springboard to try and develop our own critical perspective on the issue of what makes something an object.

PHIL 353: Philosophy of Biology. (Alex Morgan) TTh 11:20am-12:40pm. In this course we'll address some of the following questions: How did life first emerge, and what does "life" even mean? Living organisms are made of the same atoms as inorganic objects like rocks and rivers, yet organisms seem fundamentally different: they actively resist death. What explains this? As organisms evolve and adapt to specific environments through natural selection, they seem to become better 'designed' to operate within those environments. But how can we make sense of the notion of design without an intelligent designer? Darwinian evolution is traditionally explained in terms of shifting gene frequencies, but can selection operate at different 'levels'? An example might be the emergence of multicellular organisms from coalitions of unicellular organisms, a transition that seems to have opened up new evolutionary possibilities. Are there any other 'major transitions' in evolution like this? Is the emergence of mind one of them, or can all organisms be understood as 'intelligent' to some degree? Perhaps genes play a special role in evolution because they encode developmental information. But what does this mean? Can the contributions of genes in development be sharply distinguished from the contributions of the environment, or is the concept of innateness deeply problematic?

PHIL 354: Philosophy of Medicine. (Peter Zuk) TTh 3:10pm-4:30pm. The biomedical sciences, the practice of medicine, and health care policy employ concepts of health, disease, disorder, and disability in explanatory accounts, potentially intermixing factual claims with moral and other values. This course explores the interplay of facts and values in the formulation, justification, and application of medical claims.

PHIL 360: Ethics. (George Sher) MWF 1:30pm-2:25pm. This course will deal with the philosophical questions that are raised by claims about how people should act, about what's good for them, and about what sorts of people they should be. We'll discuss theories of right action that focus on the consequences of acts, theories that emphasize duties, and theories that put character and virtue first. We'll also discuss different theories of human well-being, as well as a number of more abstract questions about the objectivity of values, the relativity of values to social norms, and our ability to acquire knowledge about what's right and good. Many of the readings will be recent, and we'll discuss work by major contemporary figures such as Christine Korsgaard, Thomas Scanlon, and Thomas Nagel as well as original works by Kant, Mill, Bentham, and Ross.

PHIL 362: History of Ethics. (Vida Yao) TTh 11:20am-12:40pm. What is it to be a good person? Our current moral discourse might suggest that the very idea of being a good *person*, as something irreducible to performing the right actions or having the right political views, is incoherent, badly outdated, or hopelessly parochial: only intelligible given, for example,



explicitly religious or non-liberal conceptions of value and human psychology. Moreover, we may be tempted to conclude that we are morally determined by aspects of our lives that lie outside of the content of our characters: for example, by the values we happen to grow up with, or by our relative privileges or disadvantages. This course will focus on conceptions of the good or excellent self or soul throughout the history of western philosophy, using this intellectual tradition to see whether ethical discussions of the self can be rehabilitated in a modern, liberal, secular society. We will read from Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, and Kant. We will then consider a critical rereading of the history of “western ethics” through the lens of racial domination, offered by contemporary philosopher Charles Mills.

PHIL 373: Philosophy of Law. (Evelyn Keyes) TTh 3:10pm-4:30pm. What is law? What is justice? What is the relationship between them and to the state? Readings include primary legal and philosophical texts. We begin with the foundations of western political and legal philosophy in Plato and Aristotle. We then study the development of the common law legal system and the theory and structure of the constitutional republic. We move to the philosophical grounding of a just society under the rule of law. We explore legal reason and its use to decide cases justly and to further the common good. Finally, we analyze a small number of landmark Supreme Court cases that have shaped our national life. Students who participate fully should gain knowledge and skills important to them as thinkers, citizens, and future lawyers, public servants, academics, and more.

PHIL 381: Ancient Philosophy. (Victor Saenz) TTh 9:40am-11am. “For you see, don’t you, that our discussion is about this—and what would even a man of little intelligence take more seriously than this—about the way we’re supposed to live” (Plato, *Gorgias*, 500c). Plato is widely recognized as one of the most insightful, influential, and creative thinkers of Western philosophy. One of the core concerns of his philosophy is the question that much exercised Socrates, his teacher: “How should I live?” This course will focus on a close reading of several Platonic dialogues with a view to understanding his central arguments about this question. Throughout we will visit a variety of topics Plato thought relevant to thinking about these issues, such as: the nature of virtue, vice, pleasure, and human motivation; friendship, love, and beauty; how it is that we can know moral truths—or indeed, anything at all; whether we have reason to think we persist after we die, and more. We will also consider Plato’s legacy in the history of philosophy and what his relevance might be for us today.

PHIL 386: Continental Philosophy. (Steve Crowell) TTh 1:30pm-2:50pm. This course will introduce students to some of the main currents of Continental philosophy, including phenomenology, existentialism, French feminism, deconstruction, and post-metaphysical thinking. Among the topics covered will be the death of God and post-metaphysical religious thought, naturalism and historicism, embodiment as a philosophical problem, the nature of consciousness, the structure of moral and political responsibility, and the difference between knowing and thinking. At the center of each reading will be an examination of the role of language – everyday, scientific, and poetic – in philosophical writing. Readings will be from Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Levinas, Irigaray, Arendt, and Derrida.

PHIL 431: Advanced Topics in the Sciences of the Mind. (Charles Siewert) TTh 9:40am-11am. This semester the focus of the course is *consciousness*, in the sense of *subjective experience*. This topic, traditionally central in theorizing about the mind, has received increasing attention in recent decades. Some see its explanation as one of the most important outstanding scientific challenges facing us. But it can be difficult to identify the topic well enough to even get started. We’ll begin by examining different ways to say initially what consciousness is (e.g. by speaking of “what it’s like for one” to be in a state), and we’ll canvas different conceptions of the range of mental phenomena consciousness covers (sensory, cognitive, affective). We’ll move on to discuss some contemporary theories of consciousness prominent in psychology (e.g., the “global workspace” theory), and also explore questions about how widely consciousness is distributed in the universe (including the “panpsychist” view that finds it roughly *everywhere!*). We’ll also take a critical look at different views of the relation between consciousness and the mind’s capacity to represent itself—and relatedly, the role of introspection in the study of consciousness (specifically, in connection with vision and attention). Finally, we’ll take up some issues concerning consciousness and value: is consciousness in some way what makes our lives worth living? How does the moral status of a creature depend on what form of consciousness, if any, it has? The class will be conducted as a seminar. Each student registered for the course will be expected to do a research paper, and present work in class for peer feedback.



PHIL 450: Advanced Topics in the Philosophy of Science. (Alex Morgan) Th 3:10pm-5:50pm. This course will explore several questions in the philosophy of science concerning perception. What is the connection between perceptual psychology and our lived experience as perceivers? Is there such a thing as unconscious perception? How should we understand the nature of perceptual states? Should they be understood in terms of their relations to the objects in the world that we perceive, or in terms of the 'inner' causal and computational processes revealed by perceptual psychology? Is perception a natural kind? That is, is there a real 'joint in nature' between perceptual systems and other sensory or cognitive systems? Relatedly, what is the relation between perceptual psychology and 'lower level' sciences like neuroscience or biology? Biologists sometimes describe plants or bacteria as perceiving things. Is this merely a colorful use of language, or might it be literally true? How would we tell?