

PHI-1000-014 Knowledge, Reality, Self Spring 2014

Instructor: Christopher P. Noble, M.A

Philosophy is an art of asking questions. The question we will ask throughout this seminar is: “What are we?” Although this question might not always be explicitly posed, I want you to have it in mind always.

We will engage the question of “what are we?” both by examining answers given in selected texts from the history of Western Philosophy as well as by looking at certain contemporary problems such as those posed by certain significant scientific and technological advances. We will simultaneously discuss what these texts and problems tell us on their own terms as well as construct our own image of what we are.

Philosophy has several main branches – the ones that will be most relevant to our course are:

Ontology – the study of what is/what types of things really exist

Epistemology – the study of knowledge/how and what human beings can know

Ethics/Moral Philosophy – the study of what we ought to do/how to live a good life

Political Philosophy – the study of the ways of living/associating together

The question “what are we?” relates most directly to *ontology* – in asking the question we are asking what a human being is or perhaps what type of thing a human being is. For instance: do we have an immaterial, immortal soul as Christianity has taught? Are we in fact natural beings descended from apes and hence no special part of nature, as natural science after Darwin claims? Are our minds/brains something like an immensely complicated computer?

The answers we give, however, to the question “what are we?” are bound together with questions from the other three subdivisions above. For example, if we believe that *what we are* are beings created in the image of God (as held by Christianity), and hence we believe that God exists, how do we know that he exists? Can we prove it somehow? Does it just boil down to a question of faith? These are epistemological questions relating to our *knowledge* or *belief* God.

Depending on what we decide we are, there are also consequences for how we live our lives both ethically and politically. For example, what form of government is the best for the type of being that we are? How much of ourselves do we owe to the people around us – our families, our teachers, our government, etc? In what ways should we think about the consequences our actions have on others? Do we have an ethical duty to *change* the structure of who we are?

Course Meetings:

The course meets MWF from 12:30-1:20. Class meetings will include lectures by the instructor, discussion periods as well as workshops on important skills for students such

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as reading and writing.

Office Hours

I will hold office hours on Wednesdays from 11:30-12:30 in SAC 176. Meetings may also be arranged for alternate times by appointment.

Assignments and Grading:

Grades will be composed of class participation (20%), two 3-4 page papers (50%) and a final exam (30%).

Readings: Readings from canonical books of the Western philosophical tradition to shorter essays and newspaper articles to a contemporary science fiction/noir detective novel. These texts harmonize clarity with depth of philosophical insight, and thematically provide different tools to think about knowledge (as well as ignorance), discovery and change.

Class Participation: Active engagement and reflection is essential in any philosophy class. The participation grade will consist of attendance, participation in classroom discussion as well as the completion of short reflection papers assigned periodically during the semester.

Paper: Two 3-4 page essays. These essays are designed to allow students to present their own extended interpretations of the readings, and require a deeper level of engagement with the texts than the shorter written assignments. The instructor will distribute prompts at least one week before due date. It is also possible to propose one's own topic. Please ask for approval from the instructor well in advance of the due date. Completed papers shall be submitted via upload to the course WebCT page.

Final: Two and a half hour exam (though it need not take the full time to complete). This exam will be cumulative, meaning that all the material from the semester will be fair game. Students will be given five short essay questions, and must respond to three of them. I have designated the last class meeting as a review session.

Policies:

Attendance: Villanova has a strict attendance policy for all freshmen. Freshmen are allowed to miss no more than twice the number of class periods per week. If the number of absences exceeds this number then the student risks receiving a failing grade for the

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course. Given that this class meets three times a week (Monday, Wednesday and Friday), this means that each student may not miss more than 6 class meetings during the semester.

Excusals: Students may be excused from a class meeting in the event of a sports trip, illness or family emergency. Please submit of a proper excuse form to the instructor.

All students will be held to Villanova's standards of academic integrity without exception. The policy can be found at:

<http://www.villanova.edu/vpaa/office/student-services/policies/integrity/>.

Any form of plagiarism is unacceptable. All sources used (including the internet) must be documented, whether they are quoted directly or paraphrased. If you have any questions regarding the quality or acceptability of a resource, please contact me. Any violations of academic integrity will be reported, and will result in a failure of the assignment. For a list of resources on what counts as plagiarism and how to avoid it check out http://directory.google.com/Top/Reference/Education/Educators/Academic_Dishonesty/Plagiarism/.

Villanova makes accommodations for those with disabilities. Please talk with me outside of class to work out the appropriate arrangements. Also be sure to contact the Office of Learning and Support Services (nancy.mott@villanova.edu, x95636).

No computers are allowed in the classroom unless you obtain explicit consent from me.

If you want to formally discuss a grade you have received, please send me an email regarding why you think you should have received a different grade and return the assignment to me. No grade changes will be made in person. I will take the time to properly review your assignment and then consider your comments. I will never lower your grade because of this process. No rewrites are allowed.

Required Texts:

The following books are required for the course and are available for purchase at the bookstore:

Plato. *The Republic of Plato* transl Allan Bloom 2nd ed. Basic: 1991

Augustine. *On the Free Choice of the Will* . transl Thomas Williams Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993.

Descartes, Rene. *Meditations on First Philosophy* transl Donald A. Cress. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993.

Mieville, China. *The City and the City*. New York: Del Rey, 2010.

De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity* transl Bernard Frechtman. New York: Citadel, 1976.

Clark, Andy. *Natural Born Cyborgs: Minds, Technologies and the Future of Human Intelligence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

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Please make sure to have the correct editions/translations. If you have any questions about the editions please see me. Additional Readings will be posted on Blackboard

Units and Reading:

The Search for Unknown Unknowns, God and the Good

1/13, 1/15, 1/17 Introduction/What is Philosophy? Errol Morris “The Anosognosic’s Dilemma” Pts 1, 5. **Blackboard**

1/20 Martin Luther King Day, No Class, 1/22, 1/24 Plato: Republic
1/27, 1/29, 1/31 Plato: Republic

2/3, 2/5, 2/7 Plato: Republic

2/10, 2/12, 2/14 Saint Augustine “On the Free Choice of the Will”

Certainty, Truth and Lies

2/17, 2/19, 2/21 Descartes, Rene “Meditations on First Philosophy

2/24, 2/26, 2/28 Descartes, Rene “Meditations on First Philosophy”***First 3-4 Page Essay 2/28 due*** **Spring Break**

3/10, 3/12, 3/14 Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm “Discourse on Metaphysics” **Blackboard**

3/17, 3/19, 3/21 Nietzsche, Friedrich “On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense”
Blackboard

3/24, 3/26, 3/28 Mieville, China “The City and the City”

Technology and the Human Condition

3/31, 4/2, 4/4 Simone de Beauvoir Chapter. 2 of “The Ethics of Ambiguity”

4/7, 4/9, 4/11 Simone de Beauvoir Chapter. 2 of “The Ethics of Ambiguity”

4/14, 4/16 Transhumanist Proposals – The Singularity **Blackboard Second 3-4 Page Paper Due Easter Break 4/18, 4/21**

4/23, 4/25 Clark, Andy Selections from “Natural Born Cyborgs”

4/28, 4/29 (Tuesday deemed Friday), Slavoj Zizek “Unknown Knowns and the Public Use of Reason” **Blackboard 4/30 Review Day**