PHIL 11001-018: INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY (FALL 2015, M/W 11AM-12:15PM)

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OFFICE LOCATION: Bowman Hall, 320, Room N
PRIMARY OFFICE HOURS: Tuesday, 1-6pm (see below for more options)

REQUIRED TEXTS: Exploring Philosophy: An Introductory Anthology, Steven M. Cahn, 5th edition

I will often distribute supplementary readings on Blackboard (BB). Make sure your Blackboard account is operational and that this course appears in your Blackboard course list. If it doesn’t, then there is probably a registration issue, which you should try to remedy as soon as humanly possible.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

What is your purpose in life? What values do you hold? What do you think is truly important—not just for you, but objectively? Are there objective truths of this type? Of any type? Many people believe that answers to these kinds of questions flow from one or another kind of religious belief. This, in turn, raises a number of controversial issues: Are religious beliefs justified? Most importantly, are there good reasons to believe in a god (or multiple gods)? And does religion provide a firm foundation for morality? Do organized religions play a mostly positive or a mostly negative role in our society? These are the kinds of topics that we will discuss in the first half of this course.

In the second half of the course, we turn to some fascinating questions about the nature of the mind. What, after all, is a conscious mind? What is the relationship between it and the physical body? Is the mind a separate entity, distinct from what is going on in the brain? If not, then how can a mind be “in” a body? Recently, a number of philosophers and psychologists have proposed that the mind is made up of information-processing activities that go on in the brain, analogous to the software that is run “in” (or “on”) computer hardware. But what exactly is it to process meaningful information? Can a man-made, inorganic machine really perform such a task on its own, or is really just a tool for human minds? Can an artificial machine one day come to have a conscious mind, like that of a human? We will explore these questions, with readings of both historical and contemporary sources.

Kent Core: This course may be used to satisfy a Kent Core requirement. The Kent Core as a whole is intended to broaden intellectual perspectives, foster ethical and humanitarian values, and prepare students for responsible citizenship and productive careers.

Diversity: This course may be used to satisfy the University Diversity requirement. Diversity courses provide opportunities for students to learn about such matters as the history, culture, values and notable achievements of people other than those of their own national origin, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, age, gender, physical and mental ability, and social class. Diversity courses also provide opportunities to examine problems and issues that may arise from differences, and opportunities to learn how to deal constructively with them.

In this course, we survey the writings of philosophers from different eras. Introductory textbooks often present the student with writings solely by male authors. While it is true that these authors represent a significant part of the philosophical tradition, it is undeniable that women have likewise made important contributions to the field, and continue to do so today. Sadly, these contributions are often left out of mainstream discussions. In this course, we seek to rectify this problem by engaging with a number of philosophical writings by women.
COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

Reading

Readings will be assigned for every class session. All readings are required, except those that are marked as optional. I have selected the readings with an eye toward keeping them manageable. You will be expected to complete all of the readings assigned for a given class session before that session; please prepare accordingly. Note that reading philosophical texts is not like reading plot-driven novels or short stories. With argumentative writing, it often happens that you need to read something more than once to grasp its meaning. If you’ve finished a reading, and you don’t feel like you’ve understood the main points well enough to pass a quiz, you should re-read the material and make an outline/summary. If after multiple readings you still feel like you don’t understand the main points, please contact me with detailed questions that reference specific parts of the text. It’s a good idea to provide evidence of having made a serious effort to understand the material independently.

Three “macro” papers (60% of the final grade)

This course is intended, in part, to improve your writing skills and to enhance your use of writing as a tool for critical thinking and reflection. In keeping with these goals, I will ask you to write three philosophical essays. The minimum length of each essay is 1500 words [~4 pages] and the maximum length is 2000 words [~6 pages]. That’s relatively short, by the standards of the profession, but these assignments will require a great deal of care and effort on your part. I will provide detailed instructions for each paper approximately two weeks before that paper is due. In addition, we will take some class time to go over the basics of writing a philosophical essay, with a focus on constructing an effective thesis statement and organizing your ideas into a cogent argument.

Although assigning grades to philosophical essays is sometimes thought to be unconstrained or purely subjective, there are, in fact, specific guidelines for writing and assessing philosophical papers. In general, philosophical writing should be clear, focused, persuasive, and attentive to every detail. It should avoid using jargon and ‘-isms’ wherever possible, and express complex ideas in commonsense terms, though always with an eye for academic standards of diction. The biggest factor in determining the grade on a philosophical paper is the strength of the overall argument, and the author’s ability to anticipate and forestall challenges to his or her claims and inferences. Also important is the author’s care with factual claims, as well as his or her comprehension of the course material. The grade is never based on the thesis that the author has chosen to put forward. The goal of this course is to teach students to reason well about difficult abstract issues. Success in the course consists in learning to argue well for your conclusions, whatever they happen to be.

Your understanding of the expectations will evolve throughout the semester. In accordance with this, the first paper will count for less in your final grade than the others. (16% of the final grade for the first paper; 22% for each of the other two papers.) This way, if you make mistakes on the first paper, they won’t do as much damage to your grade, and you can avoid making the same mistakes in subsequent papers. In addition, students who receive a C or below on their first paper will be given a chance to revise it for a higher grade. You will have at most two weeks from the day the paper was returned to you to complete the revision. When revising your paper, make sure to take into account all of the comments and suggestions that I put on it. Important: When turning in a revised version of your paper, please make it clear which words, sentences, or paragraphs were revised, by casting them in a different color. I will not accept the revision if this requirement is not met.

Late papers will be accepted, but will be penalized an entire letter grade for each 24-hour period of lateness.
Three “micro” assignments (5% each, for a total of 15% of the final grade)

There will be three “micro” assignments throughout the semester. These assignments can take a different forms—a short write-up, a group project, a quiz, etc. I will announce each micro assignment in advance and provide detailed instructions for how to complete them. If it turns out to be a quiz, and you are absent on the day of the quiz for a legitimate reason (medical, legal, etc.), you may request a make-up assignment, e.g., a short paper.

Weekly Journal or Participation in a Study of Social Cognition (15% of the final grade)

For this component of the course, students will have a choice between two options. Please read the information below and decide which of the options you prefer. Please note that the first option—the neurocognitive study—is only available to 18 students. Participation in the study will be determined on a first-come-first-served basis, so if you choose this option, you will need to sign up for the study and participate in it as early as possible at the beginning of the semester.

Option 1: A neurocognitive study

The first option is an opportunity to participate in a study that is being conducted here at Kent State by the Social Cognition Research Group (SCRG). Participants in the study will answer a computerized questionnaire, once at the beginning of the term and once again at the end, for a total of 4 hours. While responding to the questionnaire, each participant’s brain activity will be monitored with electroencephalograph (EEG) equipment, which consists of an apparatus like a shower cap that is placed on the participant’s head. The study will enable us to formulate optimal educational practices for developing accurate perception and judgment of other people. Participants in the study will receive $30 for each of the two sessions ($60 total). Only those who complete both sessions will receive 15% of the final grade—the equivalent of one full letter grade.

Option 2: A weekly journal

For those who do not participate in the neurocognitive study, the equivalent assignment will be a journal, consisting of weekly write-ups (300-500 words each), in which you reflect on that week’s readings or class sessions. The journal will be checked every week and a grade will be assigned to each entry. The topic of each week’s entry will be up to you, though it must connect explicitly and directly to something that was covered in the course materials or class discussions that week.

It takes approximately 20-30 minutes to write 300-500 words. With 14 weeks in the semester, the total time spent on the journal will be approximately 280-420 minutes, or 5-7 hours. This is comparable to the time that would be taken up by the first option, which includes 4 hours of participating in the study, plus the time it takes to schedule the appointments, to get to and from the lab, etc.
Class Participation (10% of the final grade)

Class participation consists in contributing to class discussion by asking questions or making comments that demonstrate a grasp of the course material and an interest in the topics. Although attendance is required, it does not count as class participation. I think of participation as a kind of intellectual investment in the course, which goes beyond simply completing the reading and writing assignments. Some students will initially find it difficult to speak up in front of a crowd. Nevertheless, public speaking is an essential aspect of the course, and also a requirement; no student can receive an A in the course without engaging actively in class discussion. Limited class participation credit can also be earned by engaging with me by email or at office hours.

To make the class participation grade as objective as possible, you will be asked to write down some keywords from your contribution to the class discussion at the end of each class session. Please make sure to do that.

Grading

Here is a summary of how your final grade will be calculated:

- 60% of the final grade for the three macro papers (16% for the 1st, 22% for the 2nd and 3rd)
- 15% of the final grade for the three micro assignments (5% each)
- 15% of the final grade for the EEG study or weekly journal
- 10% for class participation (over and above mere attendance)

The following provides a translation from the numerical score to a letter grade:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A 96-100</th>
<th>B+ 86-90</th>
<th>C+ 71-75</th>
<th>D 56-60</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>91-95</td>
<td>B 81-85</td>
<td>C 66-70</td>
<td>F 55 or below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>76-80</td>
<td>C- 61-65</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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There is no “curve” for the course. This means that you are not in competition with your classmates for high grades. It is conceivable—though exceedingly unlikely—that everyone in the course will receive an A. Or a D.

When you receive your final grade for the course, please note that it is non-negotiable. I will not change grades under any circumstances, unless I have made a demonstrable clerical error in my calculations.

Attendance

Attendance is mandatory; excessive absences or lateness (more than 2) will negatively impact your final grade in the course. A sign-in sheet will be passed around at the beginning of each class session. All students are expected to come to class on time and to be engaged for the length of the class session.

Students who are absent from class for religious reasons or due to documented medical treatment will not incur any penalty on their final grade, but are responsible for all required reading and writing assignments.
General Etiquette

• Please silence your cell phone (or, better yet, turn it off entirely) prior to entering the classroom. Do not use it during class for anything. This includes text messaging and taking notes. Leave your phone in your bag. If your phone rings—especially if your ringtone is some cheesy R&B club hit—you’ll not only disturb the class, but you’ll also look silly in front of everyone. If this happens more than once, I will lower your final grade by 2%. If cell phones become a more general nuisance, I will be forced to ask all students to deposit their phones into a basket at the beginning of each class session.

• Laptops are permitted in class, but solely for the purpose of taking notes. If I find that you are using your laptop for any other purpose (as is typically obvious), I will ask you never to use your laptop in the classroom. Having a laptop in the classroom is not a right; it’s a privilege. Use it responsibly.

• I would be grateful if you would treat your email correspondences with me as professionally as possible. Please make sure to include your full name in the body of the email. Write in grammatical English sentences, separated into paragraphs where necessary. I do not want to see any of the following in your email: ‘LOL’, ‘plz’ (instead of ‘please’), ‘2’ (instead of ‘to’ or ‘too’), ‘u’ (instead of ‘you’), ‘r’ (instead of ‘are’), ‘your’ (instead of ‘you’re’, or vice versa), multiple question marks at the end of a sentence, multiple exclamation points at the end of a sentence, multiple consecutive commas anywhere in the email, unnecessary quotation marks, advertisements, entire paragraphs written in ALL CAPS, entire paragraphs written in italics, and so on.

• Please do not “reply-all” to any mass mails that I send to the entire class. If you need to email me directly, please start a brand new private email thread between you and me.

• Please do not fall asleep in class. If you need to sleep, leave the room.

• If the classroom has plenty of open seating, please avoid sitting in the back of the room. (The first day doesn’t count.) If you decide to sit there, try especially hard to avoid falling asleep, talking to other students during the class session, using your phone or your computer, or any of the other things I mentioned above.

• Please do not come to class late. It’s distracting and extremely disrespectful. Make it to class on time. If you do happen to come into the classroom late, please find the seat closest to the door, and move to it quietly and respectfully, without disturbing the ongoing lecture or discussion. Also, please do not have your headphones on when entering the room late, as this demonstrates a complete lack of respect for your peers and your instructor.

• Repeated failure to abide by any of these policies will result in a decrease in your final grade, typically by 2% per violation. If your grade is lowered in this manner, you will be informed by email or in person.
Office Hours and Availability

As noted above, my primary office hours are on Tuesdays, 1-6pm. However, many other options are available. If you want to meet with me at some other time, let me know and we can try to arrange it. If you prefer to meet somewhere on campus other than my office, let me know and we’ll see what we can work out. (It won’t always be possible, of course.) In general, I’m quite flexible; my only hard and fast rule is that I cannot meet with you on the weekends.

Needless to say, I can be reached by email at any time. I will do my best to respond to your emails as quickly as possible. Sometimes I will reply to your message immediately, even at odd hours, like 4am. However, please do not assume that this is always possible; there is great variability. Occasionally, I will not have access to email or will not be able to answer your query for up to several days. In such cases, please be patient.

There are many other means of contacting me, including Skype, GoogleChat, iChat, and the like. I am open to all of these options, if you prefer to use them.

Plagiarism, Cheating, and other forms of Academic Dishonesty

Please note that I do not tolerate academic dishonesty in any form. I take a strict stance on this. Be aware that I will dole out maximum penalties for violations, including assigning failing grades and pushing for suspension and/or expulsion from Kent State. If you are unclear on what constitutes plagiarism or academic dishonesty, please make it your business to learn about this immediately. Ignorance of university policy will not be accepted as an excuse. University policy 3-01.8 deals specifically with the problem of academic dishonesty. The sanctions provided in this policy will be used to deal with any violations. If you have any questions, please read the following URL: http://www.kent.edu/policyreg/policydetails.cfm?customel_datapageid_1976529=2037779

Information for Students with Documented Disabilities

University policy 3-01.3 requires that students with documented disabilities be provided reasonable accommodations to ensure their equal access to course content. If you have a documented disability and require accommodations, please contact me at the beginning of the semester to make arrangements for necessary adjustments. Please note, you must first verify your eligibility for these through Student Accessibility Services, which can be reached at 330-672-3391 or www.kent.edu/sas

Registration and Withdrawal Deadlines

University policy requires all students to be officially registered in each class they are attending. Students who are not officially registered for a course by published deadlines should not be attending classes and will not receive credit or a grade for the course. Each student must confirm enrollment by checking his/her class schedule (using Student Tools in FlashLine) prior to the deadline indicated. Registration errors must be corrected prior to the deadline. The official registration deadlines for this course can be found by doing a Detailed Class Search from the Schedule of Classes found at: https://keys.kent.edu:44220/ePROD/bwlkffcs.P_AdvUnsecureCrseSearch?term_in=201580

Email Agreement

Please send me an email before our next meeting, which includes a statement to the effect that you have read this syllabus and that you agree to abide by the policies that it sets out. (Note the difference between “I read it” and “I agree to abide by it”.) Please feel free to ask questions.
COURSE SCHEDULE

Readings marked with the symbol (Bb) will be distributed over Blackboard and/or Dropbox. Readings that don’t have an asterisk are in the textbook. All readings are required, unless marked as optional.

SECTION I: THE MEANING OF LIFE

Mon, 8/31:  First day of class; no reading assigned for this day

Wed, 9/2:  (Bb) Richard Dawkins, “Selfish Genes and Selfish Memes”

Mon, 9/7:  Labor Day, no class session; please watch episode 2 of “Black Mirror”

          Susan Wolf, “Meaning in Life”
          Christine Vitrano, “Meaningful Lives?”
          Robert Nozick, “Philosophy and the Meaning of Life”

SECTION II: THE EXISTENCE OF GOD AND THE EFFECTS OF RELIGION

Mon, 9/14:  Ernest Nagel, “Does God Exist?”

            Eleonore Stump, “The Desires of the Heart”
            Marilyn McCord Adams, “The Problem of Hell”

Mon, 9/21:  (Bb) Richard Dawkins, The God Delusion, ch. 8
            (Bb) Daniel Dennett, excerpt from Darwin’s Dangerous Idea
            Michael Scriven, “Faith and Reason”

Wed, 9/23:  Anne C. Minas, “God and Forgiveness”
            Steven M. Cahn, “God and Morality”

Mon, 9/28:  (Bb) Richard Dawkins, The God Delusion, ch. 9

Wed, 9/30:  (Bb) Richard Dawkins, The God Delusion, ch. 10

  Sunday, October 4th:  The first macro paper is due at 11:59pm

SECTION III: THE MIND-BODY PROBLEM

Mon, 10/5:  Rene Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy, (Mediation 1)
            (Bb) David Rosenthal, “Introduction to Cartesian Philosophy of Mind”

Wed, 10/7:  Rene Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy, (Mediation 2)
            (Bb) Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia and Rene Descartes, Correspondence

Mon, 10/12: Rene Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy, (Mediation 6)
            (Bb) René Descartes: “Letters Concerning Animal Minds”
    Richard Taylor, “Body and Soul”
    Optional: Barbara Montero, “The Body Problem”

Mon, 10/19: Paul Churchland, “The Mind-Body Problem”


SECTION IV: ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND ANIMAL MINDS

Mon, 10/26: Alan Turing, “Computing Machinery and Intelligence”

Wed, 10/28: Alan Turing, “Computing Machinery and Intelligence” (continued)

Mon, 11/2: (Bb) Daniel Dennett, “Artificial Intelligence as Philosophy and as Psychology”


Mon, 11/9: (Bb) John Searle, “Minds, Brains, and Programs”
    Optional: Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on The Chinese Room

Wed, 11/11: Thomas Nagel, “What is It Like to be a Bat?”

Mon, 11/16: (Bb) Terrel Miedaner, “The Soul of Martha, a Beast”

Wed, 11/18: (Bb) Terrel Miedaner, “The Soul of the Mark III Beast”
    (Bb) Daniel Dennett, “The Tower of Generate and Test”

    Sunday, November 22nd: The second macro paper is due at 11:59pm

Mon, 11/23: (Bb) Daniel Dennett, excerpt from Kinds of Minds

11/25 - 11/29  THANKSGIVING BREAK, NO CLASSES

SECTION V: FREE WILL

Mon, 11/30: Thomas Nagel, “Free Will”
    (Bb) John Hospers, “Determinism, Free Will, and Psychoanalysis”

Wed, 12/2: W. T. Stace, “Free Will and Determinism”
    David Hume, “Of Liberty and Necessity”

Mon, 12/7: Steven M. Cahn, “Freedom or Determination?”


    Wednesday, December 16th: The second macro paper is due at 11:59pm