Problems in Philosophy (Spring 2010) Professor Susan Schneider

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In this class we ponder questions which have been asked for hundreds, and even thousands of years. And we will often use science fiction thought experiments to do this. For examples of questions we will ask, consider:

* Does God exist?
* What are you?
* Do you have free will?
* What is real?
* What are the limits of human knowledge?

These questions do not have uncontroversial answers. In this class you will learn about various ways of responding to them. I hope to give you each something that lasts beyond college: an ability to examine your life by considering philosophically rich questions about the ultimate nature of the universe, about our ability to know the nature of the universe, and about who you are.

Texts:

* Reason and Responsibility: Readings in Some Basic Problems in Philosophy, Joel Feinberg and Russ Shafer-Landau. (please order on Amazon)
* Science Fiction and Philosophy, 2nd edition, Susan Schneider (at the bookstore)

Our approach: this is a mainstream introduction that blends historical readings with contemporary pieces. Many of the pieces employ philosophical “thought experiments” – examples that are designed to get you to form initial opinions on topics. The plausibility of the opinions as well as the thought experiments themselves will be scrutinized carefully. Like most introductory courses, we focus on topics in metaphysics and epistemology (the study of what exists and the nature of knowledge, respectively), although we touch on some ethical issues as well. The topics are interrelated, so as we turn to a new topic we will draw from, and add to, our understanding of the previous topic(s).

Our course requirements:

1. In class mid-term exam on lectures and readings.
2. A final: a comprehensive in class exam, with emphasis on material that is post-midterm but also with comprehensive questions spanning the entire course.
3. A final paper. Due on the last day of classes (5 pages).
4. Participation in discussion meetings (10%). This includes offering quality comments in the meetings as well as doing any assignments given by the professor or TA that are due in the discussion meetings. (E.g., I will periodically ask you to bring an outline of an answer to a philosophical puzzle to your meeting, or to frame an outline of the best version of a position on an issue).

Hints on doing well in this class:

1. It is a good idea to read the material more than once. Philosophy readings can be difficult. Outlining is often helpful.
2. You shouldn’t try to cram philosophy at the last minute. One builds a plausible philosophical position only gradually.
3. Try writing a draft of your paper several days before it is due. Read over it again and again to make your position is airtight.

Schedule

Note: the schedule may be modified as the term progresses. And the weeks are only approximate. The important thing is to be sure the reading is done before the class lecture on a given topic.

1. METHODOLOGY: For your first few discussion meetings please read: Jim Pryor, “Philosophical Terms and Methods” and “Guidelines on Reading Philosophy” (these are online).
2. TOPIC 1: OUR KNOWLEDGE OF THE EXTERNAL WORLD

What is reality? Can we ever know the world as it truly is? Why is knowing “ultimate reality” important?

All from Schneider

* + Plato, short excerpt from The Republic. (Week 2)
  + John Pollack, “Brain in a Vat,” in Feinberg. (Week 2).
  + Rene Descartes, “Meditations on First Philosophy,” (Week 2)
  + Nick Bostrom, “The Simulation Argument: Why the Probability that You are Living in the Matrix is Quite High” ([http://www.simulation-argument.com/matrix.html).](http://www.simulation-argument.com/matrix.html)) (Week 3).
  + Robert Nozick, excerpt from Anarchy, State and Utopia (on the “experience machine”) (Week 4)

Assignments for class meetings: (i), write and review your outline of Bostrom’s piece; (ii), defend your answer to the questions: would you hook up to the experience machine? Why does it matter if one is in an experience machine, dream, matrix, etc.?

\*Suggested: G.E. Moore, “Proof of an External World” (in Feinberg); Chisholm, “The Problem of the Criterion” (in Feinberg).

TOPIC 2: WHAT ARE YOU? PERSONAL IDENTITY, THE SELF, AND SURVIVAL (weeks 5-7)

What makes you the person that you are? If science was able to make a perfect recording of all the neural patterns in your brain right now, could you be brought back to life later? Can an android or a non-human animal be a self or be conscious?

* + Isaac Asimov, “Robot Dreams” (week 5).
  + Olson, “Personal Identity” (week 5)
  + John Locke, “The Prince and the Cobbler”, in Feinberg. (Week 6).
  + David Hume: “The Self”, in Feinberg. (Week 6).
  + Derek Parfit, “Divided Minds and the Nature of Persons”, (Week 6).
  + Ray Kurzweil, “Who am I? What am I?” (Week 7).

(For your first discussion on this topic: outline and carefully distinguish the different theories presented. For your second: figure out what the split brain case is supposed to be doing for Parfit).

\*\*\*Mid-term exam (Week 7)\*\*\*

TOPIC 3: THE FREE WILL DEBATE (weeks 8-10)

Are your actions just part of the chain of physical causes and effects? Can you ever break out of the chain and act “freely”?

* + Paul Holbach, “The Illusion of Free Will” (in Feinberg) (week 8).
  + Roderick Chisholm, “Human Freedom and the Self” (in Feinberg) (week 9).
  + A.J. Ayer, “Freedom and Necessity” (Feinberg). (Week 9)
  + Sider and Conee chapter on free will (week 10).
  + Handout: “The Book of Life: a Thought Experiment.” (A thought experiment by Alvin Goldman). (Week 10).
  + Andy Clark, “A Brain Speaks” (Blackboard) (week 10).

(Discussion: bring and defend an answer to the question: Can one do something different than that which is contained in Goldman’s book of life? Justify your answer carefully).

TOPIC 4: THE EXISTENCE AND NATURE OF GOD (remainder of the semester).

Is there a good argument for God’s existence? If there is a God, why is there so much evil in the world? Should you make a “leap of faith”?

* + Blaise Pascal, “The Wager”, in Feinberg.
  + St. Anselm of Canterbury, “The Ontological Argument”, in Feinberg.
  + Gaunilo of Marmoutiers, “On Behalf of the Fool”, in Feinberg.
  + St. Thomas Aquinas, “The Five Ways”, in Feinberg.
  + Samuel Clarke, “A Modern Formulation of the Cosmological Argument,” in Feinberg.
  + William Paley, “The Argument from Design”, in Feinberg.
  + J.L. Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence,” in Feinberg.

Comprehensive final exam.

Other details:

* + Of particular import is the excellent online encyclopedia: The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: [http://plato.stanford.edu/.](http://plato.stanford.edu/) You’ll find articles on all the positions we cover.
  + You can also read over the other papers in the sections we cover in the Feinberg book. Many of them are classic papers.
  + You’ll need to see the film The Matrix to follow some of the lectures in Unit 1. For fun, you may also enjoy the film, Vanilla Sky.