

PAR 101: Honors Intro to Philosophy

Term: Spring 2021	Instructor: Robert Smithson
Time: MW 3:30-4:45pm	Email: smithsonr@uncw.edu
Room: BR 100	Office: BR 100
	Office Hours: MW 1-2pm or by appointment

Course Description

Do we have free will or are we just the products of our upbringings? Where does morality come from? What is the relationship between science and religion? With recent advances in artificial intelligence, might it be possible to produce a machine with consciousness? What should we do when we encounter people who seem just as reasonable as us, but who disagree with us on deep moral questions? What kind of limits, if any, should there be on freedom of speech? How is technology shaping our understanding of ourselves as humans? What is required for a person to live a good and meaningful life? In this class, we will address these questions using philosophical reasoning. In this special Honors version of the course, the focus will be on applying philosophy to contemporary social issues involving politics, religion, ethics, art, and technology. Students will engage in ethical debates as parts of small teams and will apply philosophical concepts to out-of-classroom events in the surrounding community..

Course Goals

1. To provide an overview of six fundamental areas of philosophical inquiry: *epistemology*, *ethics*, *metaphysics*, *metaethics*, *the meaning of life*, and *applied ethics*. By examining these issues, the course aims to show students how philosophy can help us better understand the world and our place in it. In particular, this Honors section of PAR 101 will focus on applying philosophy to contemporary social issues.
2. To help students develop a variety intellectual virtues: the ability *to think self-critically*, the ability *to think charitably*, and the ability *to reconstruct and analyze arguments*.
3. To develop students' writing and argumentation through a series of short writing assignments throughout the term.

Course Texts

All texts for the course will be posted to the course's Canvas site.

Grading

Three writing assignments (3 pages each): 50%
Final: 15%
Miscellaneous short homework assignments: 25%
Participation: 10%

Papers

In light of the third listed goal for the course, there will be a series of writing assignments throughout the term, each 3 pages long (double-spaced). There will be five total prompts. Students are required to respond to three of those prompts. Students have the option of submitting four papers; if four papers are submitted, the instructor will drop the lowest paper score.

To facilitate anonymous grading, only include your identification number (and not your name) at the top of the document. For helpful advice on writing philosophy papers, see the “Writing Philosophy Papers” resources found on Canvas.

Attendance

The participation grade takes into account both attendance and discussion in class. Class attendance is mandatory. Students arriving late will receive reduced credit for attendance that day. Students leaving class early will also receive reduced credit.

The professor will accommodate a reasonable number of excused absences for religious holidays and official off-campus college business such as academic conference presentations and athletic competitions. However, students must discuss with the professor the dates of the anticipated absences no later than the last day of the drop period. Students must present to their professor written evidence of the anticipated absences and discuss with him/her how and when make-up work should be completed prior to missing the class. Students should not expect to receive allowance for excused absences if they do not meet with the professor beforehand and clarify the dates as necessary.

Absences will be addressed by the professor in accordance with his attendance policy. The professor retains the right to determine what would be considered to be a reasonable number of absences (excused or otherwise) for the course. A student will not fail a course because the number of religious observances and/or college business absences exceed the number of absences allowed, except if excessive absences make it impossible to fulfill the expectations of the course. The student’s class participation grade in the course, though, may still be affected.

Honor Code

All students enrolled at UNCW are subject to the UNCW Student Academic Honor Code, which is intended to help every member of the UNCW community appreciate the high value placed on academic integrity and the means that will be employed to ensure its preservation. Students are expected to perpetuate a campus culture in which each student does his or her own work while relying on appropriate resources for assistance. In such a climate, students enjoy a special trust that they are members of a unique community in which one’s thoughts and words are attributed correctly and with proper ownership, and in which there is little need for systems to sanction those who cheat. As such, all UNCW students shall commit to the principles and spirit of the Honor Code by adhering to the following pledge:

As a student at The University of North Carolina Wilmington, I am committed to honesty and truthfulness in academic inquiry and in the pursuit of knowledge. I pledge to uphold and promote the UNCW Student Academic Honor Code.

More information on the Honor Code is available at the following website:

<http://www.uncw.edu/odos/honorcode/>.

Please be especially familiar with UNCW's position on plagiarism as outlined in the UNCW Student Handbook. Plagiarism is a form of academic dishonesty in which you take someone else's ideas and represent them as your own. Here are some examples of plagiarism:

1. You write about someone else's work in your paper and do not give them credit for it by referencing them.
2. You give a presentation and use someone else's ideas and do not state that the ideas are the other person's.
3. You get ideas from some other reference material and do not reference that material.

Accessibility Services

It is very important that this classroom be an inclusive environment that meets the learning needs of all of its students. If you are a person with a disability and anticipate needing any type of academic accommodations in order to fully participate in your classes, please contact the Office of Disability Services (962-7555). Please give me a copy of the letter you receive from Office of Disability Services detailing class accommodations you may need. If you require accommodation for test-taking, please make sure I have the referral letter no fewer than three days before the test.

Title IX Statement

UNCW practices a zero tolerance policy for any kind of violent or harassing behavior. If you are experiencing an emergency of this type contact the police at 911 or UNCW CARE at 962- 2273. Resources for individuals concerned with a violent or harassing situation can be located at <http://uncw.edu/noharm/resources/index.html>.

University Learning Center

The University Learning Center's (ULC) mission is to help students become successful, independent learners. Tutoring at the ULC is NOT remediation: the ULC offers a different type of learning opportunity for those students who want to increase the quality of their education. ULC services are free to all UNCW students and include the following:

—Learning Services (University Learning Center) <http://uncw.edu/ulc/learning/>

—Math Services <http://www.uncw.edu/ulc/math/index.html>

—Supplemental Instruction <http://www.uncw.edu/ulc/si/index.html>

—Writing Services <http://www.uncw.edu/ulc/writing/index.html>

Electronic Device Policy

In order to promote classroom discussion, no laptops, tablets, phones, etc. are permitted during class except by instructor permission.

In order to protect the integrity of the classroom experience, the use of recording devices is limited to either the expressed permission of the faculty member or with proper documentation from the Office of Accessibility Services.

Course Schedule

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This schedule is subject to change, depending on the progress of the discussion in the class. If there are changes, I will make note of them in class and will send out an email about the changes. Next to each class period, there is an assigned reading. The reading for 08/26 should be completed before class on 08/26, etc.

In addition to the listed reading, there is typically a handout summarizing the material discussed in class. This handout will be made available on Canvas. If it is helpful to you, you are able to read the handout prior to class, but this is not required.

Date	Topic
	UNIT 1: EPISTEMOLOGY
	<i>Week 1: traditional skepticism</i>
W 1/20	Introduction, syllabus, external world skepticism. <i>Reading:</i> none.
M 1/25	Moorean response, IBE, the “concessive” response <i>Reading:</i> none. [Paper 1 assigned]
	<i>Weeks 2-3: epistemology in 2021—peer disagreement</i>
W 1/27	Peer disagreement. <i>Reading:</i> Richard Feldman (2012). Reasonable Religious Disagreements. (excerpts) HW: Feldman discusses a variety of possible responses to religious disagreements. What do you think is the most plausible response he considers, and why? (1/2 page)
M 2/1	Privileged standpoints. Writing philosophy papers. <i>Reading:</i> Vida Yao (ms) Intro to Writing Philosophy. PAR Paper Characteristics. Example paper (with sample comments added).
W 2/3	Normative vs. descriptive disagreements.
	<i>Weeks 4-5: epistemology in 2021—testimony and expertise</i>
M 2/08	Testimony and the media, partisanship, bias. <i>Reading:</i> Alex Worsnip (forthcoming) The Obligation to Diversify One’s sources.
W 2/10	Epistemic bubbles and echo chambers, “fake news”, disinformation. <i>Reading:</i> Thi Nguyen (2018). Escape the echo chamber. https://aeon.co/essays/why-its-as-hard-to-escape-an-echo-chamber-as-it-is-to-flee-a-cult Reginia Rini (2018). How To Fix Fake News. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/opinion/facebook-fake-news-philosophy.html

- M 2/15 Propaganda
HW: identify a recent example of propaganda (in the inclusive sense of the term we have adopted throughout this class). Analyze it using the conceptual tools we have discussed in class. (1/2 page)
- W 2/17 TBA: propaganda and virtue ethics?

UNIT 2: ETHICS

Weeks 6-7: traditional moral theorizing

- M 2/22 Utilitarianism, moral theories.
Reading: None
- W 2/24 Objections to utilitarianism.
Reading: Amia Srinivasan (2015) Stop the Robot Apocalypse.
- M 3/01 Kantianism and the motive of duty. The Kantian vision.
Reading: none.
[Paper 2 (Kantianism) assigned]
- W 3/03 Virtue Ethics and Platonic Justice
Reading: none.
[Paper 3 (Virtue Ethics) assigned]

Weeks 8-9: ethics in 2021

- M 3/08 Black Lives Matter and protests.
Hill (1979) Symbolic Protest and Calculated Silence.
HW: Identify a protest from the recent news. Hill discusses many possible reasons why someone might engage in a symbolic protest: which of these reasons (if any) might apply to your specific example? Do you agree with Hill that this is a good (or bad) reason to engage in symbolic protest? (1/2 page)
- W 3/10 Servility and self-respect.
Reading: Hill (-) Servility and Self-Respect
- M 3/15 Courage and vice.
Reading: TBA
HW: What would it look to exhibit the virtue of courage in the year 2021 in the United States? (1/2 page)
- W 3/17 Patriotism.
Reading: TBA.
HW: It is often lamented that the social climate in the US is fractured or dysfunctional. What would be required for this social climate to improve? (1/2 page)

UNIT 3: FREEDOM, MEANING, AND HUMAN LIFE

Weeks 10-12: traditional arguments on freedom and meaning

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- M 3/22 The tracing argument
Reading: Listen to “Life Is a Coin With One Side”, *This American Life* segment by David Kestenbaum.
<https://www.thisamericanlife.org/662/where-there-is-a-will>
- W 3/24 The tracing argument, continued.
Reading: None.
HW: Identify a time where your moral attitudes (e.g., blame, praise, resentment, admiration, etc.) towards someone changed as a result of learning more about their past life history. Discuss how and why your attitude changed. (1/2 page)
- M 3/29 Compatibilism: why does freedom matter?
Reading: Selections from the work of Frederick Douglass; George Moses Horton, “On Liberty and Slavery,” Emma Lazarus, “The New Colossus,” Abraham Lincoln, “Gettysburg Address.”
[Paper 4 (free will) assigned]
- W 3/31 The problem of evil
Reading: Dostoevsky (1879) *The Brothers Karamazov* (excerpt).
[Paper 5 (problem of evil) assigned]
- M 4/5 The Euthyphro problem
Reading: Plato (380BCE) *Euthyphro*.
- W 4/7 The meaning of human lives.
Reading: Susan Wolf (2007) *The Meaning of Lives*.
HW: What vision, if any, do you have for your life? What seems like the biggest obstacle to pursuing or accomplishing that vision? (1/2 page)
- M 4/12 Immortality.
“Reading”: Clips from season 4 of “The Good Place.”
- W 4/14 *Weeks 13-15: freedom and meaning in 2021*
Genetic engineering.
Reading: Bill McKibben (2003). *Enough: Staying Human in an Engineered Age* (excerpts).
HW: Describe what you consider to be the best argument McKibben offers against germline genetic engineering. (1/2 page)
- M 4/19 Medicalization.
Reading: Conrad (2008) *The Medicalization of Society* (ch. 8).
- W 4/21 TBA: Contemporary threats to freedom and meaning?
(Big Data, algorithms, technological saturation, ennui)
Reading: Susan World on sanity
HW: Identify and discuss a “contemporary” threat to a human’s living an autonomous, meaningful life. (1/2 page)
- M 4/26 TBA:
- W 4/28 TBA:
- M 05/03 3-6pm **FINAL EXAM**