

Syllabus, Introduction to Philosophy through Fiction

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1 Overview

Fiction and philosophy might seem opposed, but in fact they have long been intertwined and mutually illuminating, and so in this class we'll focus on the two of them together. Some of the class will be philosophical fiction, including Plato and John Locke. Some of it will be philosophy *about* fiction. And some of it will be philosophy *through* fiction. But I also mean for this class to be a genuine introduction to philosophy, giving you a sense of some longstanding subjects philosophers have thought about. That means we'll do some of all of the big branches of philosophy: political philosophy, ethics, aesthetics, the philosophy of religion, metaphysics, philosophy of language and mind, and epistemology. The class will thus serve two main purposes: to enable you to see how pervasive philosophical questions are anywhere you look, and to give you the tools to think about those questions in an illuminating and helpful way.

2 Prerequisites

There are no prerequisites!

3 Responsibilities and Grades

3.1 Participation

Good philosophy requires lots of community buy-in. So participation will be a big part of this class! Specifically, it will be 30% of your grade. But there are lots of ways you can participate, depending on what works for you. (Attendance is expected, of course; let me know if you have some reason for not being able to come some day!) Here are some:

1. The old-fashioned way is simply to ask and answer questions a lot in class. More of this means a better participation grade.
2. There will be a class forum. Every student will be expected to raise *two* new topics (threads) on these forums, and to reply in a substantial way at least *fifteen* times. But this can be done anonymously to your peers, if you prefer. If this is your preferred path, just tell me what your pseudonym is so that I can give you credit. Extra points to your participation score can be

gotten by posting either one new topic, or replying an additional five times (and this can be done as much as you like, as long as the contributions are substantial).

3. Speaking in group discussions, and speaking for the group.
4. Sending me questions on the readings/fictions before or after class.
5. Peer commenting on drafts of papers. (See below.)

3.2 Papers

This course will have *four* papers of increasing length:

1. 2–3 pages, worth 10% of your grade
2. 2–4 pages, worth 15% of your grade
3. 3–5 pages, worth 20% of your grade
4. 4–6 pages, worth 25% of your grade

The aim here is to give you time and feedback in order to develop your paper-writing muscles. As a result, I will allow *one* of the later papers to be a rewriting and expansion of one of your earlier papers in response to the feedback I've given you.

4 Schedule¹

4.1 Fiction in Philosophy and Philosophy in Fiction

Philosophy is often taken to begin with Plato, in which case it also begins with fiction. So that's where we'll start. Then we'll turn to more contemporary philosophers. We'll reflect on these questions: What is fiction? What can we learn from it? Can it make us good or bad? *How* could something false do that? And is philosophy through fiction any different than philosophy in its own voice?

1. Plato, *Ion*
2. Plato, *Republic*, selections from books II and III
3. Nussbaum, "Fictions of the Soul"
4. Lewis, "Truth in Fiction"
5. Walton, "Fearing Fictions"

¹ This is flexible, depending on how much actual time there is.

4.2 *Unreliable Narratives and Doubt*

Fiction often features unreliable narrators: narrators who are confused, deceptive ignorant, etc. Here they will serve as a useful foil for exploring issues in epistemology. We'll focus on two: testimony and disagreement—when can you believe what you've been told?—and skepticism. We'll start with the classic Japanese film *Rashomon*, and then read a little more contemporary philosophical work on testimony and disagreement, including the recent film *Doubt* and Descartes. This section will also involve quite a bit of the philosophy of religion.

1. Kurosawa, *Rashomon*
2. Anscombe, "Faith"
3. Feldman, "Reasonable Religious Disagreements"
4. Shanley, *Doubt*
5. Descartes, *Meditations* I and II
6. Sosa, "Dreams and Philosophy"
7. Nolan, *Inception*

4.3 *Personal Identity and Survival*

Some of the most imaginative uses of fiction in philosophy has concerned the nature of personal identity. We'll start with the oldest example of this, John Locke's "The Prince and the Cobbler", and then to some more contemporary fiction and discussion. This will slowly morph into the question of: what's valuable about surviving? Would immortality be good?

1. Locke, "The Prince and the Cobbler"
2. Parfit, "Personal Identity"
3. Paul, selections from *Transformative Experience*
4. Jarmusch, *Only Lovers Left Alive*
5. Williams, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality"

4.4 *Fictions and Genealogies*

In this final section, we will discuss how possible stories about who we are and where we've come from can justify our current arrangements and views or unsettle them.

1. Mozi, selections from *Mozi*; and Plato, selections from the *Protagoras*

2. Hobbes, selections from *Leviathan*
3. Nietzsche, selections from *On the Genealogy of Morals*
4. Scott, *Blade Runner*
5. Srinivasan, “Genealogy, Epistemology, and Worldmaking”

5 *General Expectations, and Academic Dishonesty*

Philosophers sometimes have a reputation for being aggressive or dismissive. In this class, the basic expectation is that we’ll engage only in respectful discussion where we aim to learn from one another. And especially do not attack anyone on the basis of their race, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, or, well anything else at all.

Any kind of academic dishonesty, including plagiarism, is completely prohibited. [Insert university procedures here.]

6 *Disability Accommodations*

In light of the possibility that some students will need them, I will allow laptops, but please use them responsibly. If any kind of specific disability accommodation is needed, please let me know and we’ll work something out. [Insert university policy regarding student disability accommodations here.]