HON 201: Intellectual Foundations I: What is the Common Good?

Time: Fridays 10:50-1:30

Location: online

Instructor: Michael Brownstein, msbrownstein@gmail.com

Office Hours: after each class, or by appointment

**Course Description**

This course emphasizes how different disciplines frame seminal questions about the historical, religious, scientific, and philosophical contexts that have shaped and continue to shape questions of the common good. This semester, the course will focus on the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Structure**

The first half of class each week will consist of full-group discussion of the week’s reading. The second half of class will be dedicated to small group discussion and feedback on argument essays students write in response to class material.

**Requirements**

There are three core components to this course:

1. Weekly reading responses
2. Argument essays
3. Participation

Your final grade is based on the standard John Jay scale:

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Description automatically generated

The work you do throughout the course accrues points, and your final grade is simply the sum of the points you’ve earned. In a sense, all the assignments are optional, although you must earn at least .7 points to pass the class. Here is a visualization of the course as a whole:

Reading response #1 .3 points

Reading response #2 .3 points

Reading response #3 .3 points

Reading response #4 .3 points

Reading response #5 .3 points

Reading response #6 .3 points

Reading response #7 .3 points Total = 2.1 points

Argument essay #1 .5 points

Argument essay #2 .5 points Total = 1 point

Argument essay revision #1 .2 points

Argument essay revision #2 .2 points Total = .4 points

Participation .5 points Total = .5 points

Course Total = 4 points

*Reading Responses*

Reading responses should be 500-1000 words. They have two parts: description of the main points of the reading(s) and questions you have about the reading(s). Make sure to discuss all the week’s material in your response. Also: do not editorialize in your reading responses. Your job is to describe the main argument of the reading as accurately as possible. [Here](http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html) are some tips for reading philosophy essays (and other difficult writing).

You may write anywhere between 0 and 10 reading responses. However, you cannot earn more than 2.1 total points for reading responses.

**Reading responses must be emailed to the instructor no later than 12:00 PM on the Thursday before the class for which the readings are assigned**. Except under extraordinary circumstances, **late work will not be accepted without *prior* permission.**

The grading scale for reading responses is:

* .3 points if you have obviously done the reading, made a good-faith effort to understand it, and have the central argument basically right
* .2 points if you have obviously done the reading but there are some problems with your understanding
* .1 point if you have done the reading but there are serious problems with your understanding, indicating that you did not read carefully

*Argument Essays*

Students are encouraged to write argument essays during the semester, each 1500-2000 words. The selection of topics, format, and tips will be discussed in class. Small group discussion will include peer and instructor feedback on students’ argument essays.

You may write anywhere between 0 and 3 argument essays. However, you cannot earn more than 1 total point for argument essays.

Argument essays are **due the Thursday (at 12 PM) following the class on which we discussed the material you are writing about**. Except under extraordinary circumstances, **late work will not be accepted without *prior* permission.**

Students are also encouraged to revise their essays. Substantive revisions will earn .2 points; less than substantive revisions will earn .1 points. You can earn a maximum of .4 points for revisions. Revisions are due **no later than one week from the original paper’s due date**.

A list of helpful guides for how to write a philosophy paper can be found [here](http://dailynous.com/2019/01/15/write-philosophy-paper-online-guides/).

The grading scale for argument essays is:

* .5 points if you essay is accurate, original, cleanly edited, and synthetic
* .4 points if your essay is 3 of the above
* .3 points if your essay is 2 of the above
* .2 if your essay is 1 of the above
* .1 if you have turned in something resembling an essay

Please note: IF YOU PLAGIARIZE A PAPER, YOU WILL FAIL THE COURSE. We will discuss plagiarism in the course. See the JJC Library page on how to properly cite references (<http://guides.lib.jjay.cuny.edu/welcome>) and also see the JJC page on Academic Integrity for what counts as plagiarism (<http://www.jjay.cuny.edu/academic-integrity-0>).

*Participation*

Informed participation is crucial in this class. Note that simply asking questionsabout the material counts as “informed participation.” So, ask the questions that are in your head, even if you think everyone else knows the answer. (Hint: they don’t.) If you are afraid of speaking in public, push yourself to try. If you are terribly afraid of speaking in public, please talk with me about it privately before the course begins.

Note that attendance counts toward your participation grade. **If you miss more than three classes without an extraordinary excuse, your final grade will be affected.**

The grading scale for participation is:

* .5 points for frequent and informed contributions to class discussion
* .4 points for occasional informed contributions to class discussion
* .3 points for rare but informed contributions to class discussion
* .2 points for occasional contributions to class discussion
* .1 point for rare contributions to class discussion

**Communication**

It is essential that students check their email at least once per day. Confusion, concerns, or problems should be brought to the instructor’s attention ASAP, either after class during informal conversation, over email, or by appointment.

**Objectives**

You will not memorize facts in this course, nor will you dreamily speculate about the meaning of life. You won’t be asked to come up with “a philosophy” about life. We will consider difficult questions about the nature of the common good and its relationship to our individual lives. Your goal is to understand and analyze various answers to those questions.

Students who excel in this class will be able to:

* Summarize others’ arguments, including highlighting premises and conclusions
* Clearly define key terms and concepts
* Use examples to elucidate abstract ideas
* Distinguish an author’s view from ideas she is explaining, elaborating, or criticizing
* Outline and analyze key chains of reasoning
* Practice perspective-taking
* Speak clearly, succinctly, creatively, and respectfully
* Be willing to try out counterintuitive ideas and “fail well”
* Write in clear, grammatical, and organized prose
* Propose and defend one’s own ideas about the relevant questions under discussion

Schedule

8.28 Introductions

9.4 Pandemic History

[Dispatches from 1918](https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/radiolab/articles/dispatches-1918) (podcast)

Lepore, “[What Our Contagion Fables Are Really About](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/03/30/what-our-contagion-fables-are-really-about)”

Barry, “[The Single Most Important Lesson From the 1918 Influenza](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/17/opinion/coronavirus-1918-spanish-flu.html)”

[What’s Changed Since the 1918 Pandemic](https://pitchforkeconomics.com/episode/whats-changed-since-the-1918-pandemic-a-history-lesson-with-nancy-bristow/) (A History Lesson with Nancy Bristow) (podcast)

9.11 Causes I: Biases, Illusions, Prejudice, and Mismatch

Sethi et al. “[Who is Dying, and Why?](https://ethics.harvard.edu/files/center-for-ethics/files/19cwhoisdying.pdf)”

[Why the coronavirus is so deadly for black America](https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/why-the-coronavirus-is-so-deadly-for-black-america/id1081584611?i=1000474196638) (podcast)

Mounk, “[Four Theories for Why People Are Still Out Partying](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/moral-instincts-coronavirus/608305/)”

Muthukrishna, “[Long Read: Cultural Evolution, COVID-19, and Preparing for What’s Next](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2020/04/22/long-read-cultural-evolution-covid-19-and-preparing-for-whats-next/?fbclid=IwAR0f72KRL7U2MsUHjdLl5jYTpKobmy0StIlbV6bEV6V7MN_-Zu58eXIqayc)”

Yong, “[Immunology is Where Intuition Goes to Die](https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/08/covid-19-immunity-is-the-pandemics-central-mystery/614956/)”

Stanovitch, “[The Thinking that IQ Tests Miss](http://www.keithstanovich.com/Site/Research_on_Reasoning_files/Stanovich_IQ-Tests-Miss_SAM09.pdf)”

Wilkinson-Ryan, “[Our Minds Aren’t Equipped for this Kind of Reopening](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/07/reopening-psychological-morass/613858/)”

9.18 *No Class*

9.25 Causes II: Social and Informational Infrastructure

Klinenberg, “[Worry Less about Crumbling Roads, More about Crumbling Libraries](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/09/worry-less-about-crumbling-roads-more-about-crumbling-libraries/570721/)”

[Masks](https://youarenotsosmart.com/2020/07/31/yanss-185-why-the-reason-behind-why-some-people-refuse-to-wear-masks-during-a-pandemic-has-little-to-do-with-the-masks-themselves/) (podcast)

Brunton & Nissenbaum, “[How to Obfuscate](http://nautil.us/issue/49/the-absurd/how-to-obfuscate)”

Rini, “[Fake News and Partisan Epistemology](https://kiej.georgetown.edu/fake-news-partisan-epistemology/)”

Lorenz-Spree et al. “[How behavioral sciences can promote truth, autonomy, and democratic discourse online](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-020-0889-7)”

10.2 Causes III: Partisanship and Trust

Klein, “[Why the media is so polarized, and how it polarizes us](https://www.vox.com/2020/1/28/21077888/why-were-polarized-media-book-ezra-news)”

Roberts, “[Partisanship is the strongest predictor of coronavirus response](https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2020/3/31/21199271/coronavirus-in-us-trump-republicans-democrats-survey-epistemic-crisis)”

Roberts, “[Donald Trump and the Rise of Tribal Epistemology](https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/3/22/14762030/donald-trump-tribal-epistemology)”

Satta, “[Epistemic Tribalism, Epistemic Chaos, Epistemic Exhaustion](https://partiallyexaminedlife.com/2018/08/28/epistemic-tribalism-epistemic-chaos-and-epistemic-exhaustion/)”

Vallier, “[Social and Political Trust](https://www.niskanencenter.org/wp-content/uploads/old_uploads/2019/05/Vallier-Social-and-Political-Trust-Niskanen.pdf)”

10.9 Dilemmas

[Playing God](https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/radiolab/articles/playing-god) (podcast)

Emanuel et al. “[How the Coronavirus May Force Doctors to Decide Who Can Live and Who Dies](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/12/opinion/coronavirus-hospital-shortage.html)”

Emanuel et al. “An Ethical Framework for Global Vaccine Allocation”

Ballantyne, “[ICU triage: How many lives or whose lives?](https://blogs.bmj.com/medical-ethics/2020/04/07/icu-triage-how-many-lives-or-whose-lives/)”

10.16 One-on-One Meetings

10.23 Obligations

Singer, “[Famine, Affluence, and Morality](https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2265052.pdf?casa_token=zyNbB2-_6C4AAAAA:QyjSR2C0tO5RabCmCX9w9VC3bL_kU3X5BsP6nbxHesGkkHzELFT7tUwq5N9wf27m90KFdbTOfBvcmxlSH1HufzcHywK2WPRZtv6d7U4nkVHXG96C0vM)”

Collins, “[Are you complicit in deaths if you don’t stay home? How to do good during the virus lockdown](https://theconversation.com/are-you-complicit-in-deaths-if-you-dont-stay-home-how-to-do-good-during-the-virus-lockdown-134147)”

Copp & Dworkin, “[Are we Obligated to Get Vaccinated?](https://www.3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2020/06/are-we-obligated-to-be-vaccinated.html)”

10.30 Consequences I: Emotions and Well-Being

Gessen, “[The political consequences of loneliness and isolation during the pandemic](https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-political-consequences-of-loneliness-and-isolation-during-the-pandemic)”

[A Social Prescription: Why Human Connection is Crucial to Our Health](https://www.npr.org/2020/04/20/838757183/a-social-prescription-why-human-connection-is-crucial-to-our-health) (podcast)

[Beat Your Isolation Loneliness](https://www.happinesslab.fm/coronavirus-bonus-episodes/beat-your-isolation-loneliness) and [Help Others to Help Yourself](https://www.happinesslab.fm/coronavirus-bonus-episodes/episode-5-help-others-to-help-yourself) (podcasts)

More here

11.6 Consequences II: Democracy and Authoritarianism

Davis, “[The Unraveling of America](https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/political-commentary/covid-19-end-of-american-era-wade-davis-1038206/?fbclid=IwAR0dZ__i7iQtl4pgwdW9wbCHVlSyzfGkiaK0NYmCY_eXCFLd5wlyqHp4Isc)”

Gessen, “[We Won’t Know the Exact Moment Democracy Dies](https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/we-wont-know-the-exact-moment-when-democracy-dies)”

[The frightening fragility of America’s political institutions](https://www.vox.com/2020/7/10/21318625/donald-trump-surviving-autocracy-masha-gessen-the-ezra-klein-show) (podcast)

Yong, “[How the Pandemic Defeated America](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/09/coronavirus-american-failure/614191/)”

11.13 The Future I: Pandemics and Climate Change

Crist, “[What the Coronavirus Means for Climate Change](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/27/opinion/sunday/coronavirus-climate-change.html)”

Roberts, “[The Scariest Thing About Global Warming (and COVID-19)](https://www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/2020/7/7/21311027/covid-19-climate-change-global-warming-shifting-baselines)”

Kunreuther & Slovic, “[What the Coronavirus Curve Teaches Us About Climate Change](https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/03/26/what-the-coronavirus-curve-teaches-us-about-climate-change-148318?fbclid=IwAR3qG3ii8yCy_YjlR3YjGIS5imsIh6hmrc7vwX_t464X8gRfmCGHUTxcgLI)”

Stokes, “[How Can We Plan for the Future in California?](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/08/californias-disasters-are-a-warning-climate-change-is-here/615610/)”

11.20 The Future II: Imagination

Stanley Robinson, “[The Coronavirus is Rewriting Our Imaginations](https://www.newyorker.com/culture/annals-of-inquiry/the-coronavirus-and-our-future?fbclid=IwAR21XgjzzoghVoFaZgniAW-XdqkpiY6UtXZi9xH5wSGbQ-btTiWV9peSjUI)”

Mann, “[State of the Species](https://orionmagazine.org/article/state-of-the-species/?fbclid=IwAR2Yo8afIOmAGK-BYE9Y-ritPcQ73mBndbLeuQqxg26NpHNtlMpEDGMHjZs)”

11.25 (Weds) TBD

12.4 One-on-One Meetings