PHIL 401-01: Living Well During Dangerous Times: An Incomplete Philosophical History

Time: Tu-Th 4:30-5:45

Location: NB 1.101

Instructor: Michael Brownstein, msbrownstein@gmail.com

Office Hours: Tu-Th 3:00-4:30, or by appointment in NB 8.63.19

**Course Description**

How does one live well during dangerous times? This course considers various answers to this question. Key themes covered are stoicism, virtue ethics, existentialism, and civil disobedience.

Required Texts

None. All readings will be posted to Blackboard. (Note: a PDF will be posted, but consider purchasing a copy of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.)

**Grading**

John Jay College uses the following grading scale:

A 4.000 93.0-100.0 Excellent

A- 3.700 90.0-92.9 Excellent

B+ 3.300 87.1-89.9 Very Good

B 3.000 83.0-87.0 Very Good

B- 2.700 80.0-82.9 Very Good

C+ 2.300 77.1-79.9 Satisfactory

C 2.000 73.0-77.0 Satisfactory

C- 1.700 70.0-72.9 Poor

D+ 1.300 67.1-69.9 Poor

D 1.000 63.0-67.0 Poor

D- 0.700 60.0-62.9 Poor

F 0.000 Below 60.0 Failure

**Requirements**

*Writing Assignments* (65%; see details below)

* 9 abstracts (1-2 paragraphs each), 35% of paper grade
* 2 short persuasive essays (2-3k words), 50% of paper grade
* 1 op-ed (1k words), 15% of paper grade

*Seminar Presentations* (20%)

* This course will be run as a seminar. Students will lead the discussion on Thursdays. Each student will lead two discussions (on his/her own or in a pair).

*Participation, Attendance, and Quality of Failure* (15%)

* Active and informed participation in class discussion is required.
* 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 asking questionsin class—no matter how simple or well-informed the question is—counts as “active and informed participation.” So, ask the questions that are in your head, even if you think everyone else knows the answer. (Hint: they don’t.)
* Regular class attendance is expected and counts toward this portion of your grade. Students who miss more than 3 classes, without express permission, will be penalized.
* Quality of failure refers to your willingness to take intellectual risks. Have you proposed a different way to look at things? Have you taken a stand for an unpopular view? Have you argued for a view that might seem strange? Most importantly, have you been willing to speak or write about something even if you’re not sure it’s right? If so, then you will get a good Quality of Failure grade. Whenever you take a risk and fail, just tell yourself, “this is how I learn.”
* Respectful atmosphere: this class constitutes is an academic community. Its members, both students and instructor, have a responsibility to ensure that others feel respected and supported. All members of this class must endeavor to make the environment conducive to other’s learning and participation. This requires listening as well as talking.

**General Advice**

Doing philosophy is more like learning to ride a bike than memorizing the periodic table; more like learning to play an instrument than identifying a plant species. You will not be responsible for memorizing facts in this course. But you WILL be responsible for learning to understand, analyze, and create ARGUMENTS. In philosophy, arguments are not (usually) shouting matches. They are claims or views about one thing or another. In this class, we will focus on claims about the nature of knowledge.

Read “The Pink Guide to Taking Philosophy Classes:” <http://web.mit.edu/philosophy/guides/pinkguide.pdf>

Objectives (i.e., grading criteria) for seminar presentations and class discussion:

* Provide an organized and clear overview of the material (for presentations)
* Facilitate discussion and encourage questions (for presentations)
* Summarize arguments accurately and clearly
* Highlight conclusions or theses of arguments
* Outline key chains of reasoning and major premises
* Practice perspective-taking (understanding others’ viewpoints)
* Speak clearly and succinctly
* Speak creatively and with a willingness to fail well

**Communication**

Email me often! Staying in touch is one of the best ways to excel in this class. You can expect a response with 24 hours on the weekdays and within 48 hours on the weekend. If you do not hear back from me within this time-frame, feel free to write again.

In addition, you may find it helpful to stay in touch with classmates. Record two of their email addresses here:

* Person to my right:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* Person to my left:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Support Services**

John Jay College provides comprehensive support services to students. Please see: <http://www.jjay.cuny.edu/accessibility> for more information. Students are strongly encouraged to take advantage of these services.

Resources for undocumented students: <http://www.jjay.cuny.edu/undocumentedstudents>

**Schedule**

INTRODUCTION

Week 1 (1.31 & 2.2)

--Woolf, “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid”

--Scranton, “Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene” and “We’re Doomed. Now What?”

STOICISM

Week 2: Introduction to Stoicism (2.7 & 2.9)

--Epictetus, *Enchiridion*

--Baltzly, “Stoicism”

Week 3: Stoic Psychology (2.14 & 2.16)

--Brennan, “Stoic Moral Psychology”

--Montgomery, “The Ancient Origins of Cognitive Therapy: The Reemergence of Stoicism”

--Wallace, “Indifference is a Power”

--Pigliucci, “How to be a Stoic”

Week 4: Stoics and Social Power (2.21 & 2.23)

--Sehgal, “The Profound Emptiness of Resilience”

--Hotel Concierge, “The Stanford Marshmallow Prison Experiment”

--Miller et al., “Self-control forecasts better psychosocial outcomes but faster epigenetic aging in low-SES youth”

VIRTUE

Week 5: Confucianism (2.28 & 3.2)

--Slingerland, “Virtue Ethics, *The Analects*, and the Problem of Commensurability”

Week 6: Troubles with Confucianism (3.7 & 3.9)

--Zhuangzi, “In the World of Men”

--De Bary, *The Trouble with Confucianism* (first 2 chapters)

EXISTENTIALISM

Week 7: Introduction to Existentialism (3.14 & 3.16)

--Kierkegaard, “The Present Age”

--Crowell, “Existentialism” or Guignon, “The Legacy of Existentialism”

Week 8: Existential Ethics (3.21 & 3.23)

--Sartre, “The Humanism of Existentialism”

--Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity* (selections)

--Wolf, “The Meanings of Lives”

Week 9: Authenticity (3.28 & 3.30)

TV: Black Mirror, “15 Million Merits” [or “San Junipero”]

Week 10: Recognition (4.4 & 4.6)

--Ellison, *Invisible Man*

RESISTANCE

Week 11: Civil Disobedience (4.25 & 4.27)

--Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience”

--Gandhi, “Statement in the Trial of 1922”

--King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”

Week 12: Mobilization (5.2 & 5.4)

--Anderson, “Social Movements, Experiments in Living, and Moral Progress: Case Studies from Britain’s Abolition of Slavery”

Week 13: Resistance in film (5.9 & 5.11)

--“Amandla!: Revolution in Four-Part Harmony” or “Good Night, and Good Luck”

Week 14: Wrap-up (5.16 & 5.18)

--Wallace, “This is Water”

**Writing Assignments**

Deadlines

* Abstracts should be uploaded before the start of class on 2.7, 2.14, 2.21, 2.28, 3.7, 3.14, 3.21, 4.25, and 5.2.
* Short essays: due by 11:59 pm on 2.26 and 11:59 pm on 4.9
* Op-Ed: due by 11:59 pm on 5.14
* Extensions: requests must be made in writing (email is fine) no less than 24 hours before an assignment is due

Descriptions

* Abstracts
  + An abstract is a one paragraph summary of: (a) the main point of the reading; and (b) the argument(s) the author offers in support of his or her point. The grading scale is this: 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; 0 points if you have clearly not done the reading.
* Short Essays
  + Construct an argument about the reading in response to prompts. Your goal is to persuade the reader to see the issue in the way you propose. You are not required to do outside research, but you are encouraged to do so
  + Grading criteria:
    - Write in clear, grammatical prose, with evidence of proofreading
    - Clearly define terms and concepts
    - Present a transparent, narrow, and specific thesis statement
    - Organize and structure your writing around a thesis statement
    - References properly cited
* Op-Ed
  + While the goal of short essays is to contribute to academic discourse, the goal of an op-ed is to contribute to public debate. Op-Eds should be accessible, entertaining, and persuasive.
  + Grading criteria:
    - Write in clear, grammatical prose, with evidence of proofreading
    - Clearly define terms and concepts
    - Connect specific examples to abstract ideas in an engaging and accessible way

Formatting, Uploading, etc.

* All papers are to be uploaded as Word documents (do not cut and paste) to Blackboard (<http://www.jjay.cuny.edu/blackboard>).
* Anonymity:**do not put your name on your writing assignments**. They will be graded anonymously in order to ensure fairness.

Extra Credit

* Extra credit can be earned by scaffolding the short essay and op-ed writing assignments. This means writing and submitting a proposal, outline, and rough draft before writing the final paper.
* Contact me at least two weeks prior to a paper deadline to discuss this option.

Plagiarism

* Plagiarism is the act of presenting another person’s ideas, research, or writings as your own. The following are some examples of plagiarism (from the JJC Bulletin), but by no means is it an exhaustive list:
  + Copying another person’s *actual words* without the use of quotation marks and footnotes attributing the words to their source
  + Presenting another person’s ideas or theories *in your own words* without acknowledging the source
  + Using information that is not common knowledge *without acknowledging the source*
  + Failing to acknowledge collaborators on homework and laboratory assignments
  + Internet plagiarism includes submitting downloaded term papers or part of term papers, paraphrasing or copying information from the Internet without citing the source, and “cutting and pasting” from various sources without proper attribution.
* **If you plagiarize a paper, you will fail the course**. See the JJC page on Academic Integrity for more on what counts as plagiarism: <http://www.jjay.cuny.edu/academic-integrity-0>

General Advice

* For all writing assignments, you are expected to work hard! Half-baked ideas and sloppy writing will not be accepted. You should plan to revise your commentary several times *before* turning it in.