

Literature and Philosophy
PHL388H1S/2024

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Location: Teefy Hall, room 200
Time: Tuesdays 12:00-3:00
Office Hours: Mondays 11-1
and by appointment

Land acknowledgement

We wish to acknowledge this land on which the University of Toronto operates. For thousands of years it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit. Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

Course description

This course will introduce you to philosophical questions that arise in the creation and consumption of literature. In particular, we will focus on what it means to read and write about others in our lives, as well as others whose life experiences are divergent from ours. We will also discuss the question of how we should receive works of literature that were written when societal norms were markedly different (e.g., when various kinds of discrimination were more common). Finally, we will consider the moral costs of writing about experiences of trauma and illness, and whether those costs are outweighed by the moral emotions that reading such works of literature may encourage.

Course objectives

By the end of the course, you will be able to:

- ☐ Distill the central themes in works of literature and consider how they relate to practical, moral, and aesthetic questions from philosophy and ordinary life
- ☐ Reconstruct and evaluate philosophical arguments and their relationship to works of literature
- ☐ Develop an individual research project from nascent idea to polished presentation
- ☐ Construct a philosophical argument, present and defend it orally, receive and incorporate peer feedback
- ☐ Provide constructive feedback on others' arguments, ideas, and presentation skills

Communication

All readings, course materials, and announcements will be posted on Quercus. If you need to contact me, please email me rather than using the Quercus Inbox system. I'll do my best to reply within 48 hours but will take time off from emails during weekends, holidays, and past office hours.

Expectations

This seminar will be a venue for you to develop your research abilities and to actively participate in a research community. Philosophy is hard! You'll probably need to read the assigned materials more than once. To get the most out of the text and to be prepared for the discussions in seminar,

read the assigned materials actively: That means looking for the author's main thesis and the arguments they provide to support it. Ask yourself whether you agree with this thesis, and whether you think their main argument to support it is strong. Do the author's arguments depend on any problematic premises? If so, why?

If you have any questions about specific philosophical terms or concepts, please do not hesitate to ask, either in the classroom (chances are that others may have similar questions, and regardless might benefit from additional clarification too) or via email. Listen and read carefully and do your best to be charitable in your interpretations. If there are ideas you disagree with, try to keep an open mind, and understand the context in which those ideas were developed. Always try to express your disagreement and criticism in ways that are constructive, respectful, and kind.

Evaluation

Participation (10%)

During the weekly class session we will discuss the assigned readings as well as topics that may have come up as you were preparing your reading journals. I expect all students to regularly contribute to the class discussion, either in person or online. There will also be a forum on the Quercus page if you would like to continue the class discussion there. Forum posts are optional but can add to your participation grade.

Reading journals (10%)

These reading journals are graded on thoughtful completion. **For each class period after the first, by 8am the morning of class, submit via Quercus a reading response containing two things:**

1. A passage from the readings for that class that you found particularly thought-provoking or moving, along with a paragraph-long (4-7 sentence) explanation of why it connected with you in that way.
2. A paragraph-long statement of a philosophical question that the readings raised for you, broadly connected to the course themes/content.

There are 10 class periods with new readings, but for the sake of not having an assignment due before the first class, you will be allowed to submit one reading journal at a time of your choosing. In total, you will be required to submit ten journal entries. Late journal entries will not be accepted, and uncompleted ones will not be excused, but you do not have to write journal entries for the last two class periods where we will have student presentations.

Short writing assignments (2 x 15%)

1. You will be required to write one short critical reflection piece (about 1,000 words) focused on readings from either the Attention or Narrativity and Self-Understanding units. Some examples of questions you might consider are: What are some of the moral risks associated with telling stories about ourselves and others? How does assuming an identity (e.g., as an addict) relate to understanding oneself if people are always changing? Are there examples in the literary texts of the "just and loving gaze" that Murdoch refers to (i.e., the kind of attention required to see someone as they are)? Why or why not?

This assignment is due by February 13.

2. The second writing assignment is focused on your individual project. You will be required to provide an abstract (about 1,000 words) and preliminary bibliography (at least 5 sources) for the final paper you intend to complete by the end of the year. It is okay if your project changes substantially as you continue to work on it (and this will not impact your grade on either assignment), but it will be helpful for you to be able to map out your argument and discuss the sources that you intend to use. **This assignment is due by March 12.**

Final paper (50% - see breakdown below)

You are required to write a final essay (up to 6,000 words). You should be in touch with me to discuss the topic of your essay and preliminary bibliography ahead of time.

You will present the outline of your final paper by giving an 8-minute presentation to the classroom (15%), followed by a brief Q&A period (**on March 26 and April 2**). You will have then a chance to incorporate the feedback received in your final paper (35%), which is due by **April 23**.

Except for the oral presentation and participation component, all assignments will be submitted electronically through Quercus.

Important dates:

February 13: Last day to submit the first writing assignment

March 12: Last day to submit the second writing assignment

March 26 & April 2: Student presentations

April 23: Last day to submit the final paper

Late Work Policy

With the exception of the reading journals, I will provide a 24-hour extension (no questions asked!) if you contact me before a paper deadline and send me what you have written so far. Otherwise, late work will be graded down a third of a letter grade for each full day that it is late. In other words, if a paper were due on Monday, and you didn't contact me, handing in the paper on Tuesday would bring an A paper down to an A-, etc. **If you fall behind on work for this class for whatever reason, please come talk to me so that we can figure out a plan to help you get back on track.**

The University of Toronto is committed to equity, human rights, and respect for diversity. All members of the learning environment in this course should strive to create an atmosphere of mutual respect where all members of our community can express themselves, engage with each other, and respect one another's differences. U of T does not condone discrimination or harassment against any persons or communities.

Academic Integrity

Please be aware that it is your responsibility to know about and respect academic integrity principles. All suspected cases of academic dishonesty will be investigated following procedures outlined in the Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters. If you have questions or concerns about what constitutes appropriate academic behaviour or appropriate research and citation methods, please reach out to me. Note that you are expected to seek out additional information on academic

integrity from me or from other institutional resources (for example, [the University of Toronto website on Academic Integrity](#)).

Normally, students will be required to submit their course essays to the University's plagiarism detection tool for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their essays to be included as source documents in the tool's reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University's use of this tool are described on the [Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation website](#).

Accessibility, Accommodations, and Support

Please let me know how we can work together and set the class up to enable you to participate fully, access all materials, and succeed. I am happy to meet individually to talk about how I can best support your learning and engagement.

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. If you have a disability that may require accommodations, please feel free to approach me and/or the [Accessibility Services office \(UTM Campus, UTSC campus\)](#).

The University provides academic accommodations for students with disabilities in accordance with the terms of the Ontario Human Rights Code. This occurs through a collaborative process that acknowledges a collective obligation to develop an accessible learning environment that both meets the needs of students and preserves the essential academic requirements of the University's courses and programs.

The University provides reasonable accommodation of the needs of students who observe religious holy days other than those already accommodated by ordinary scheduling and statutory holidays. Students have a responsibility to alert members of the teaching staff in a timely fashion to upcoming religious observances and anticipated absences and instructors will make every reasonable effort to avoid scheduling tests, examinations, or other compulsory activities at these times. Please reach out to me as early as possible to communicate any anticipated absences related to religious observances, and to discuss any possible related implications for course work.

The University strives to provide a family-friendly environment. You may wish to inform me if you are a student with family responsibilities. If you are a student parent or have family responsibilities, you also may wish to visit the [Family Care Office website](#).

Writing Resources

1. For general information about writing resources at UofT, students can start here: <https://writing.utoronto.ca>. Arts & Science Writing Centres will offer a mix of in-person and online appointments in 2023-24, with an asynchronous option at some centres. Students can find information about the offerings of specific college writing centres at <http://writing.utoronto.ca/writing-centres/arts-and-science>. You should visit each individual centre's site for information on how to make an appointment.

2. More than 60 advice files on all aspects of academic writing are available from <http://advice.writing.utoronto.ca>. Printable PDF versions are listed at <http://advice.writing.utoronto.ca/student-pdfs>. Pages offering advice on how to format documents and integrate sources are listed at <http://advice.writing.utoronto.ca/using-sources>.

3. For optional group instruction on writing and study skills, please refer to the Writing Plus workshop series at <http://writing.utoronto.ca/writing-plus>. In 2023-24, these workshops will be conducted in person and through Zoom. Students may join these virtual workshops at the Quercus Writing Plus site: <https://uoft.me/writingplus>.

4. Information about the English Language Learning program (ELL)'s fall offerings is available at [English Language Learning | Faculty of Arts & Science \(utoronto.ca\)](https://utoronto.ca/english-language-learning). For more information, please contact the ELL coordinator Leora Freedman at ell.newcollege@utoronto.ca.

The University offers a range of support and encourages students to talk to others if they need help, such as peers, instructors and teaching assistants, department heads, health and wellness staff and counsellors, and registrarial staff. The University also provides a wide range of student support services, including: [Health and Wellness/Counselling Centres at St. George](#), at [Scarborough](#), and at [Mississauga](#); [the Family Care Office](#); [the Academic Success Centre](#); [the Centre for International Experience](#); and [Writing Centres](#). If your well-being is impacted, please visit [U of T's Mental Health website](#) to see the range of supports available to you as a student. Or for immediate support, use the [U of T Telus Health Student Support](#) (with free counselling available in over 140 languages, 24 hours a day). Please reach out if you need help or are struggling – there are lots of supports available.

Schedule and readings (subject to change):

Attention

1/9 – class introduction

Lucille Clifton – “why some people be mad at me sometimes”

Anne Lamott – *Bird by Bird* (selections)

1/16 – Robert Walser – “A Little Ramble”

Zadie Smith – “On Joy”

Ross Gay – “Joy Is Such a Human Madness”

Iris Murdoch – “The Idea of Perfection”

Narrativity and self-understanding

1/23 – Galen Strawson – “Against Narrativity”

John Martin Fischer – “Stories and the Meaning of Life”

Sarah Manguso – “Keeping Time”

1/30 – Leslie Jamison – “Does Recovery Kill Great Writing?”

Owen Flanagan – “Identity and Addiction”

Doug McConnell – “Narrative Self-Constitution and Recovery from Addiction”

Moral rupture and repair

- 2/6 - Mark Twain - *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (selections)
Jonathan Bennett - "The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn"
Nomy Arpaly - "Huckleberry Finn Revisited"
- 2/13 - Thomas Nagel - "Moral Luck"
Kaveh Akbar - "Being in this World Makes Me Feel Like a Time Traveler,"
"Calling A Wolf A Wolf (Inpatient)"
Margaret Urban Walker - "What Is Moral Repair?"

2/20 - Reading week, no class

Aesthetic and moral values

- 2/27 - Berys Gaut - "The Ethical Criticism of Art"
- 3/5 - A.W. Eaton - "Robust Immoralism"
Susan Wolf - "One Thought Too Many": Love, Morality, and the Ordering of Commitment"

Trauma, illness, and empathy

- 3/12 - Sarah Manguso - "Poison"
Anne Boyer - "The Sororal Death"
Susan Sontag - "Disease as Political Metaphor"
- 3/19 - Simone de Beauvoir - "Literature and the Metaphysical Essay"
Natalie Shapero - "Form, Save for my Own"
Ada Limón - "The Conditional"

In-class presentations

- 3/26 - no new readings
4/2 - no new readings