290-01-02 Theory of Knowledge

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THEMES

The theory of knowledge is in a way a theory of authority, for throughout history many different convictions have claimed for themselves the authority of knowledge: in our century, science and political ideology; in earlier centuries, philosophy or theology. Our goal this semester is to investigate these various claims to authority, with an eye to differences between “ancient” and “modern” theories of knowledge. Among the questions we’ll raise: is there a difference between knowledge and opinion? What does knowledge have to do with human action? Are there limits to human knowledge, or special conditions for achieving it? What are the moral and political implications of knowledge and the ways we pursue it? In what ways do our convictions concerning the nature of knowledge affect our view of education, or of the human good?

TEXTS

Plato, Meno (Hackett Press)

Descartes, Rene Discourse on Method and Meditations (Hackett)

Bacon, Francis The New Atlantis and Great Instauration (Harlan Davidson)

Nietzsche, Friedrich The Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life (Hackett Press)

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

The course requirements are: 5 quizzes, two essays, a mid-term and a final exam.

Quizzes: Quizzes address details from the readings due on a given day. They total 20% of your grade.

Essays: The goal of the essay is to explain and evaluate an argument in one of the readings. The first essay will concern Plato; the second essay will concern either Bacon or Descartes. Each essay is to be approximately five to seven pages in length, and is worth 20%. Each essay should be submitted to TurnItIn.com, along with a hard copy handed in to class (details to follow).

Mid Term and Final Exams: These exams will be preceded by study questions handed out in advance, and will be essay in format. The mid term and the final exams are worth 20% each.

Class Attendance and Participation: Class attendance and participation are mandatory. Three unexcused absences drop your total grade by one letter grade; six unexcused absences result in failure for the course. It is not possible to receive an A in the class without regular participation in class discussion.

A note on electronics: Cell phones are not allowed in the class.

SCHEDULE OF READINGS

August 25: Introduction

Aug. 27—Sept. 19: Plato, Meno

Plato essay due: Friday, Sept. 19

Sept. 22—October 24: Descartes, Discourse on Method

Mid-Term Exam: Friday, Oct. 17
Oct. 27—Nov. 7: Bacon, *The New Atlantis*

Bacon/Descartes essay due: Friday, Nov. 14

Nov. 10—Dec. 12: Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History*

Final Exam: Section 01, Wednesday, Dec. 17, 8:00 am
Section 02, Friday, Dec. 19, 8:00 am

**GRADING STANDARDS**

The Philosophy Department has adopted the following standards for evaluation of all written work:

**A**= work that not merely fully and accurately reproduces class discussion, the main thread in an argument or the main philosophical significance of a text under discussion, but which goes beyond these and indicates a contribution of the student, giving evidence of a deeper understanding of the material in question.

**B**= work that shows a more or less complete and exact understanding of the issues, texts, and/or arguments as explained in class, clearly and logically formulated without going beyond such explanations.

**C**= work that shows basic understanding of the material but with errors, omissions and confusions of either a formal or material nature.

**D**= work that shows a minimal acquaintance with the material or serious logical and conceptual flaws in formulating responses to the question raised, the argument at issue, or to the philosophical text under discussion.

**F**= work that shows inadequate acquaintance with texts, issues, or ideas with little or no valid logical argumentation; or, the work is a plagiarism. In cases of plagiarism, which involve the use of published or other’s written work without giving credit, an F will be awarded for the semester and the student’s name reported to the Dean of the College.

**Core Curriculum Goals**

Listed below are goals the University has agreed upon for courses taught in the core curriculum. To varying degrees, this course will involve these goals:

**GOAL 1:** “Students will be effective communicators in writing and orally”

In your written assignments and in our class discussions, we'll work on organizing and expressing ideas using clear and arguable theses, supported by evidence drawn from the books we'll be reading together.

**GOAL 2:** “Students will be critical thinkers”

To read well one must think critically. Throughout the semester we will therefore analyze and interpret important works of philosophy, evaluating the strength of their arguments. Even more importantly, we'll discuss fundamental questions that arise from the human condition, especially about the relationship between science, religion, and the good life.

We will also be evaluating the use of science and mathematics in society and everyday life, given their importance for the modern world.

**GOAL 3:** “Students will be creators of new knowledge and expression”

Reading well and thinking clearly require us to use our imagination and creativity, individually and collectively. Interestingly, one of our themes this semester is whether there is such a thing as “new
knowledge”—whether knowledge is created or discovered.

GOAL 4: “Students will be able to understand and appreciate the arts, humanities and science disciplines, and reflect on connections among these studies”

Because the books we’re reading are the “great books,” the ones decisive for shaping many of our convictions, our focus this semester will be upon great ideas in the history of Western, especially ideas concerning knowledge, its pursuit and its uses. This effort will involve us in a special way with learning the origins of the scientific method, in contrast to the methods and aims of other endeavors, for example, in the humanities and the arts.

GOAL 5: “Students will be integrated individuals who articulate a coherent, ethical perspective on the world and their place in it”

The goal of any liberal arts education is to become a more thoughtful and more engaged human being. Accordingly, we will pay special attention to the societal and moral dimensions of discourse, art, information, science and technology. Part of this effort requires us to reflect on our own experience, and relate it to the books we’re reading and the ideas we’re uncovering, as a means to evaluating the contemporary world and our places within it.

In the final analysis, the goal of the liberal arts is liberate you, to set your soul free to think and to act and to care thoughtfully for the world.