THE PARADOX OF HUMAN DESIRE: PHILOSOPHY AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

Fall 2014

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Offices Hours:
- Tuesday: 10:30 – 11:30
- Wednesday: 2:00 – 3:00
- Thursday: 10:30 – 11:30
- By Appointment.

Course Description:

In this course, we examine the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche’s genealogy and Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis on how central figures of 20th-Century philosophy conceive of human subjectivity and desire. More specifically, we examine how such figures examined and challenged the traditional Enlightenment conceptions of the rational agency by introducing the notion of the unconscious into philosophical theories about human experience and selfhood. Traditional “Enlightenment” or rationalist models of subjectivity assume that a person is conscious of feelings and desires, rational in planning and executing actions, and responsible, both to oneself and to others, for explaining and justifying one’s conduct. In short, rationalists uphold the ideal that we can master our own fate. Against this view, Nietzsche and Freud demonstrate the fragmented, unconscious, wild, strange, paradoxical, and often chaotic nature of human desire, action, and self-understanding. Such “dark thinkers of Enlightenment” unmask the ideal of rational agency as a comic pretense or naïve illusion. In this course, we will explore Nietzsche’s and Freud’s views on the paradoxical nature of the human experience of desire, time, and one’s own body. More specifically, we will examine how subsequent
figures such as Sartre, Lacan, Binswanger, and Habermas have identified four famous paradoxes of human life: the paradoxical fact that we understand something only when it’s over (time); the paradoxical fact that we only come to know our prior intentions through our future deeds (action); and the paradoxical fact that our desires are the source of our worst nightmares (desire); and the paradoxical fact that what is closest and most familiar to us, our body, is often what is most distant, alien, and perplexing (body). Our readings examine this contrast between proponents of the Enlightenment ideal of rational agency – Hegel, Husserl, Binswanger, and Habermas – and opponents of rationalist conceptions of agency – Nietzsche, Freud, Sartre, and Lacan – who have insisted upon the paradoxical nature of human life. Movies such as *Memento*, *Angle Heart*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Lost Highway*, and *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema* will be shown.

**General learning objectives:**

- Identify and articulate the different ways in which several central figures in 19th-Century and 20th-Century philosophy – namely, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Lacan, Binswanger, and Habermas – have theorized about the unique temporal constitution of human experience, action, desire, and identity.
- Understand the arguments of each author in detail as well as their fundamental assumptions.
- Identify and articulate the liabilities and assets of our authors’ various conceptions of the unique temporal configuration of human subjectivity.
- Use our philosophical theories to think about how different cultures experience and understand themselves and their world.

**Expectations:**

- **Regular attendance:** attendance is crucial to this course given the degree of difficulty of the texts. Lectures and discussions assist students in better understanding textual material, and students are expected to re-read material after we have addressed them in class.
- **Careful, critical reading and re-reading of our texts:** Student are expected to carefully read the text before class, marking the texts where they encounter difficulties or telling insights. Mark up your texts, noting key terms that you may not understand, arguments that may appear deficient, and discussions whose point or purpose may baffle. Come to class prepared to state such concerns, being able to cite page and paragraph to focus our classroom discussion. Also, mark those passages that seem insightful and try to pair such philosophical discussions with either experiences from your own life or depictions of life in artworks such as movies, plays, novels, poems, and songs.
- **Timely submission of assignments:** Given the brevity – ten weeks – and quick pace of the course, timely submission of assignments is crucial, allowing me to
provide students with helpful feedback to further support their mastery of the material.

**Participation and Attendance:** Participation, which counts as 15% of your grade, consists of the following activities:

- Active, well-informed contributions to classroom discussion.
- Discussion of course material with fellow students, whose conclusions or quandaries you share via our class alias or presentation in class.
- Office hour consultation and discussion.
- Email questions that you write to me, allowing me to answer your questions and to then share, anonymously, such exchanges with the entire class. **NB: it’s crucial that you check your email every day, since I will be sending you study questions, responses to student questions, and other instructions for class preparation!**
- Email observations, question, concerns, and judgments via our class alias to the entire class, asking other to respond to your key points.
- Suggestions of artworks – movies, songs, novels, plays, poems, etc – that may exemplify a philosophical issue pertinent to our course,
- **NB:** For the purposes of evaluation, I consider attendance a necessary yet not sufficient condition for participation (you can’t participate unless you attend, but simply attending does not mean you are fully participating). So, if you miss more than 3 days without advance notice or extenuating circumstances you will automatically lose this 15%. If you must miss a day due to family emergencies or other extenuating circumstances then please e-mail me in advance (if possible). Please also e-mail me whenever you miss class for other reasons. As for participation: you need to be an active participant to get full participation (i.e.: contribute to in-class debate, answer questions, critique an author or a point by a fellow classmate, etc). This means that you should always come to class having **thoroughly** read the assigned readings. Apart from lecture we will use structured questions and class discussion to analyze the readings; both methods require familiarity with the text and active questioning based on that familiarity.

**Paper writing standards:** Writing a philosophy paper is different from the paper writing you might do for other classes. Although many of the questions we will discuss have no single “correct” answer there are nevertheless better and worse ways to construct an argument. You will be graded on **how well you defend your views** (whatever they may be) not the content of your views. For guidance please read Jim Pryor’s essay “How to Write a Philosophy Paper” (required). Even though his writing style can be snarky, it helps: [http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html](http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html). You should strive to clearly and succinctly express your arguments. This may involve an accurate, short summary of another’s arguments. Please always keep in mind that when writing you need to express yourself very clearly, as I can only grade what you write on the page. Even if you *know* a theory or argument well in your head, I can only grade what you *write* (there is no fair way evaluate what someone *intends* to write but does not clearly or
unambiguously express). I write fairly detailed comments on each student’s paper in order to explain why you have earned a certain grade. Comments are meant to help you identify your strengths and weaknesses and to do better on the next paper. If you ever feel that my comments show that I have misunderstood what you wrote then please meet with me and we will go over the paper.

**Turning in writing and extensions:** All writing assignments are due by 5.00pm on the due date (includes the 3 author summaries, the midterm and the final). Assignments will be counted down 1/3 of a grade (i.e.: A to A-, or B- to C+) for each day (or part of a day) they are late. This means it is important to turn papers in on time. Please plan so that you are not working on your paper right up until 5.00. Extensions will not normally be granted. However, please let me know if you feel there are extenuating circumstances that merit an extension. Turn in paper copies to the clear bin hanging near my office (HH #201). An electronic copy (the same as the paper copy) should also be emailed to me. The paper copy needs to be in by 5.00, but the electronic copy may arrive later in the evening when you have access to email.

**Laptops and cell phones:** This class involves engaged discussion. A distraction-free environment where people can focus on the material is always the best for discussion. Because laptops or cell phones typically produce a variety of distractions (email, Farmville, etc…) they are not allowed. Also, please do not text during class.

**Discussion questions:** I distribute questions via email each week to help you focus on the most salient issues within the readings (this is why I ask for your K-emails the first day). Although we will discuss some of these questions in class we will not always get to every question. I encourage you to think about the questions we do not get to after class and re-read the material with them in mind. Doing so will help you on assignments and papers. You are also encouraged to come to office hours to discuss any questions that we don’t get to in class or other aspects of the class as well.

**Readings:** Please read the readings before class on the day for which they are listed below (except the 1st day). You will need to thoroughly read (not skim) all assigned readings. This course has quite a bit of difficult reading and philosophy texts take time to read. I don’t want anyone to fall behind, so please make sure you set aside enough time in your fall schedule to do the readings. You are encouraged to come to office hours to talk further about the readings.

**REQUIRED TEXTS:**

Roger Frie *Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity in Modern Philosophy and Psychoanalysis: A Study of Sartre, Binswanger, Lacan, and Habermas*

Bruce Fink *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*

**RECOMMENDED TEXTS:**

Freud, Sigmund. “The Ego and the Id” [Handout]

Nietzsche, Friedrich.

**READING SCHEDULE**

**The Temporal Structure of Human Experience and Action:**

**Week One:**
- Monday:
  - Tracy Chapman’s *Telling Stories*
    - “Telling Stories”
    - “Less Than Strangers”
  - Carr, Introduction
Wednesday:
  o Carr, “The Temporal Structure of Experience and Action”
  o **Evening Film, 8:00 PM Dewing 103: Memento** (Christopher Nolan, 2000)

Friday:
  o Review & Discussion
  o Writing Assignment #1: Beyond Google Research Topic.

### The Temporal Structure of the Self:

**Week Two:**

- **Monday:**
  - Carr, “Temporality and Narrative Structure”

- **Wednesday:**
  - Carr, “The Self and the Coherence of Life”

- **Friday:**
  - Review & Discussion
  - Writing Assignment #2

### The Intersubjective Structure of Selfhood:

**Week Three:**

- **Monday:**
  - Carr, “Temporality and Historicity”

- **Wednesday:**
  - Carr, “From I to We”

- **Friday:**
  - “Beyond Google Library Research Seminar,” (Upjohn Library)

**Week Four:**

- **Monday:**
  - Carr, “Time, Narrative, and Historicity”

### Existential Philosophy and Psychoanalysis:

- **Wednesday:**
• Frie, Introduction
• **Evening Film, 8:00 PM Dewing 103: Apocalypse Now** (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979)

• **Friday:**
  o Review & Discussion

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**Week Five:**

- **Monday:**
  o Frie, “Situating Sartre and Binswanger”
- **Wednesday:**
  o “Frie, “Jean-Paul Sarte: Reconstructing the Subject”
- **Friday:**
  o Review & Discussion
  o Writing Assignment #3

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**Enlightenment and Anti-Enlightenment Conceptions of Intersubjectivity: Hegel and Nietzsche in Contemporary Theory:**

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**Week Six:**

- **Monday:**
  o Frie, “Ludwig Binswanger: The Primacy of Relation”
- **Wednesday:**
  o Frie, “Sartre and Binswanger: Speaking Subjects”
- **Friday:**
  o Review & Discussion

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**Week Seven:**

- **Monday:**
  o Frie, “Jacques Lacan and Juergen Habermas”

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**The Lacanian Subject: Analysis as the Controlled Deconstruction of the Ego:**

**Wednesday:**

- Fink, “Language and Otherness”
- Fink, “The Nature of Unconscious Thought, or How the Other Half ‘Thinks’”
- **Evening Film, 8:00 PM Dewing 103: The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema**

**Friday:**
The Paradoxes of Human Subjectivity:

Week Eight:
- Monday:
  - Fink, “The Creative Function of the Word: The Symbolic and the Real”
  - Fink, “The Lacanian Subject”
- Wednesday:
  - Fink, “The Subject and the Other’s Desire”
- Friday:
  - Review & Discussion

Week Nine:
- Monday:
  - Fink, “Metaphor and the Precipitation of Subjectivity”
- Wednesday:
  - Fink, “Object (a): Cause of Desire”
- Friday:
  - Review & Discussion
  - Writing Assignment #5

Week Ten:
- Monday:
  - Review & Discussion
- Wednesday:
  - Review & Discussion
- Friday:

Finals Week: