THE PARADOX OF HUMAN DESIRE: PHILOSOPHY AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

Fall 2015

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Offices Hours:
• Monday: 10:30 – 11:30
• Tuesday: 11:30 – 12:30
• Wednesday: 1:15 – 2:15
• 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*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Wolf*, and *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema* will be shown.

In this course, then, we examine the way in which philosophical genealogy, psychoanalysis, and poststructuralism have challenged traditional Enlightenment conceptions of the rational self. Traditional models of identity assume that a person is accountable, both to herself and to others, for one’s beliefs, desires, and actions. Moreover, this responsibility requires one to, first, take stock of the different moments of one’s life and, second, give an account of oneself to others. Identity, then, is a matter, so to speak, of telling stories, to oneself and to others. Self-identification demands that one reflect upon, take apart, and re-unify the different moments of one’s life into a relatively coherent whole – a story, then, that captures who one is, a narrative that one shares with others to coordinate mutual understanding and common action. This Enlightenment conception of a unitary, rational, self-narrating, responsible self demands that one reflexively balance identity and difference – balance, in other words, the demand that one remain the same person amidst all of the different, shifting, often jarring, and sometimes destructive events, circumstances, and situations of one’s ongoing life. This Enlightenment model demands comprehensive unity – i.e. holding on to all of the moments of one’s life – and singularity of purpose – i.e. doing this work as one’s unique responsibility.

The Enlightenment model of the rational self has been severely challenged by the so-called “dark thinkers of the Western Enlightenment”: Marx, Nietzsche, Darwin, and Freud. We examine Freudian and Lacanian models of self, which conceive of subjectivity as a tenuous balance between conscious and unconscious processes, and we examine Nietzschean and poststructuralist models of the self as alienated within, and reified by, anonymous and unaccommodating social demands. For such dark thinkers, our stories are often evasive, defensive, illusory, and symptomatic of an underlying self-estrangement. For such thinkers, the ideal of human thriving is not flat-footed truth telling but, instead, fashioning life-enhancing narratives, perhaps even fictions, about ourselves.

We begin the course with a few songs from Tracy Chapman’s provocative Album, *Telling Stories*. In these songs, Chapman raises fundamental questions about the stories we tell about ourselves and, correlatively, the histories that we presumably share with others. In this provocative album, she questions whether the stories we tell ourselves and others might be so permeated by fiction that truth telling becomes impossible. As a good artist, she raises these questions about the human condition, leaving us, her appreciative audience, to question our own lives. We then turn to various skeptics -- Hayden White, Louis Mink, and Paul Ricoeur – who argue that narratives – or more simply, “stories” – are not designed to represent facts and, consequently, cannot be evaluated as true or false. These thinkers deny that narratives carry the cognitive function of representing “how things really are,” and, moreover, they suggest that narratives serve either moral or ethical goals – to condemn or praise – or aesthetics goals – to please or entertain.

We then read David Carr’s spirited defense of the traditional model in *Time, Narrative, and History*. According to Carr, the Enlightenment ideal of the self as the locus of responsible, rational agency is not unseated by such critical challenges. He argues that the social commerce of giving and asking for narrative self-accounting is not
only possible but, indeed, necessary in human life and, further, that such accounts are indeed evaluated as true or false, *inter alia*. Moreover, Carr persuasively argues that human experience, action, involvement in events, and, indeed, identity are ontologically constituted by an active, form-giving subject that keeps past, present, and future together, unifying them into an unfolding narrative-like temporal structure. Maintaining a human perspective upon the world demands that the subject hold together and unify the moments of experience, the phases of action, the sequences of events, or the stages of one’s life into a beginning-middle-end configuration. Without this temporal self-configuration, there would simply be no human viewpoint upon, or perspective of, the world. By drawing attention to Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological account of the temporality of human subjectivity, Carr’s demonstrates that human life is ontologically structured precisely as such temporal self-coherence and, as a consequence, stories can indeed truly represent the integrity of experience and action. In short, Carr defends key elements of the Enlightenment model of a rational subject who must keep track of its experiences, actions, and involvement in events. For Carr, the human subject is not a thing but, instead, an activity of configuring oneself in time, much as an author configures her protagonists involvements in the world.

Two other important 20th-century philosophers emerge in Carr’s book as contributing to our understanding of the temporal nature of human subjectivity: Martin Heidegger and Georg Friedrich Hegel. Heidegger’s hermeneutic analysis of human life builds upon and yet challenges Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological account of human experience and action. Heidegger demonstrates that human experience is not primarily cognitive, as Husserl had argued, but instead practical, engaged, immersed in worldly matters, and “caring” about its own being in the world. This focus upon the practical nature of human temporality leads him to contrast two modes care. One way of handling or “caring about” one’s involvement is general, anonymous, and public: humans strive to manage their affairs as anyone would. Another way of “caring about” one’s involvement is not general but singular, not anonymous but “my own,” and not public but private. According to Heidegger, being human – which he calls *Dasein* (being-there) – begins by caring exclusively about former, which is a form of servitude that can only be broken by caring about the latter, which he calls “authenticity.” We examine authenticity as ideal of individuated human thriving, the ideal that one must “do it on one’s own.” Carr contrast this ideal of individual thriving with Hegel’s social ideal of mutual recognition with others: i.e. the correlative ideal of mutual care. Carr discusses Hegel’s fascinating and far-reaching analysis the Master/slave dialectic, a scenario within which humans assume a competitive and coercive attitude rather than cooperative and communicative attitude to each other. Surprisingly enough, Hegel demonstrates that the master becomes progressively weaker and more impotent to the extent that he manipulates others, while the slave become progressively stronger and more powerful to the extent that she mutually recognizes others within the shared human condition. Carr demonstrates that these ideals are not contradictory but, instead, complementary. In the shorthand that we develop in the course, storytelling is both “one’s own” and “shared with others.”

In our second book, Roger Frie’s *Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity in Modern Philosophy and Psychoanalysis: A Study of Sartre, Binswanger, Lacan, and Habermas*, we turn to Jean Paul Sartre’s “dark” account of the ego and its social relations as a fierce, competitive struggle to dominate others, which offers yet another challenge to the
traditional rational ideal of mutual reconciliation among rational egos. Sartre in effect reverses Hegel’s ideal of mutual recognition, insisting that human desire to master, subordinate, and disempower others. For Sartre, the human condition is defined precisely by the failure of symmetry, reciprocity, and mutuality in human coexistence, a truly dark picture of human life as competitive, coercive, and combative. For Sartre, stories function as the contested domain in which competitors jockey for supremacy in assuming the vantage point of narrating the significance of one’s own and another’s action. The winner, so to speak, writes the history of the vanquished, and one “wins” by asserting exclusive authorship of one’s own stories, stories that are no longer “co-authored.”

We turn another, “dark” reading of human subjectivity and rational accountability: namely, Jacques Lacan’s interpretation of Freud, which treats the rational, responsible, “reality-testing,” account-giving ego as sort of fabricating rationalization of otherwise hidden motives and forces. For Lacan, large tracts of what we say about ourselves are simply benighted stories tailored to social expectations, stories that systematically elide the real determinants of perceptions and actions. The “account-giving ego” acts as a sort of ongoing “public relations” department responsible for generating effective “press releases” deployed to meet others’ expectations. Unlike the “rational ego,” the “desiring subject” is that dimension of human life that challenges, undermines, disorganizes, disrupts, and sometimes destroys our standard, socially administered self-images and self-symbols. For Lacan, we find that we are otherwise than what we imagined or said about ourselves. The unconscious for Lacan is not a repository of ready-made needs, desires, and motives but, instead, the unfinished business of the past, a past that is eerily “remembered for us,” unavailable to consciousness, and ever more insistent and disruptive precisely because truncated, unfinished, and insistent. The past “haunts” us as so many ghosts – traces of past experiences and events – that make a claim upon our lives, a claim that is ever more opaque, powerful, and implacable precisely because incomplete, inchoate, and illegible. Like Freud, Lacan believes that the rational ego is not the “master of its house.”

Finally, we turn to Habermas’s emphatic defense of the Enlightenment ideals of personal responsibility, mutual recognition, and communicative reciprocity. Arguing against the general direction of Lacan’s and Sartre’s model of intersubjectivity, Habermas demonstrates that human communication – language – establishes a shared, rational, and highly structured medium of human coexistence within which mutual recognition is simply presupposed. Like Hegel, Habermas demonstrates that mutual recognition is simply not optional but, instead, structurally required in communicative interactions with others. For both Hegel and Habermas, freedom and mutual recognition are two sides of the same coin: one cannot be free unless others are tendered as likewise free. By analyzing language use, Habermas demonstrates that, first, that language is essential in human life and, second, that language presuppose a type of freedom made possible by mutual recognition.

Our third book, Bruce Fink’s *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*, returns us to Lacan’s model of subjectivity. This may appear instructionally odd, since we have already examined Lacan and deployed Habermas to critique his psychoanalytic account of human life. The instructor, however, wants to examine whether Lacan, appropriately read, might in fact complement, rather than contradict, Habermas. By carefully reading (Fink’s interpretation of) Lacan’s genetic account of the
emergence of human subjectivity, we explore whether Lacan’s account of human desire might inform, but not unseat, Enlightenment ideals. This exercise of re-reading demonstrates an important dimension of philosophical inquiry: namely, the importance of deepening one’s understanding of apparently contradictory philosophical theories to really examine whether they might be compatible – compatible because focused upon different types of questions, concerns, and subject matter. We end the course of this rather simple note, returning to Tracy Chapman’s plaintive songs. If mutually shared stories about our coexistence with others is simply not optional but required in human life, and if the story of our own genesis and originating desires are largely inchoate, incomplete, and opaque, then how do we share stories that preserve both ethical rightness (Hegel and Habermas) and erotic vibrancy (Lacan)?

Another instructional feature of this course is the use of artworks – movies – to aesthetically illuminate, intensify, and probe our philosophical research, research that begins with an artwork: Tracy Chapman’s album *Telling Stories*. Christopher Nolan’s *Memento* is paired with David Carr’s *Time, Narrative, and History*. Nolan portrays a type of severely compromised form of human life within which short-term memory is eliminated, at least in part, but he is also concerned with the distinctive Nietzschean motif of “On Truth and Lies in the Non-moral sense.” My key pedagogical conceit in pairing artwork and theory is to demonstrate that aesthetic sensitivity and philosophical precision belong together when we raise fundamental questions about the human condition. Art without philosophy is mute; philosophy without art is empty. Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* is paired with Roger Frie’s *Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity in Modern Philosophy and Psychoanalysis: A Study of Sartre, Binswanger, Lacan, and Habermas*. Adapting Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* to the historical circumstances of the Vietnamese War in the decade of the 70s, Coppola examines the social unconscious, the “heart of darkness,” at the very core of western civilization. One of the legacies of the Enlightenment and western modernization is early modern colonialism and its modern imperialist aftermath. Both Conrad and Coppola examine how rationality and rapacity, reason and madness, moral ideals, and insane murder might be two sides of the same historical phenomenon. In short, they examine the social unconscious in much the same way that psychoanalysis examines the individual unconscious. We pair *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Wolf* with Frie’s presentation of Sartre’s theory of intersubjectivity, asking what a Sartrean world might look like or, alternatively, how we might analyze the motivations and outlooks of Martha and George, the protagonists of the play. Finally, we pair *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema* with Bruce Fink’s *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*, asking how Lacan’s insights might be at work in 20th-century cinematography or, alternatively, cinematography might both support and challenge Lacanian analysis.

**REQUIRED FILMS:**

- 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. “On Truth and Lies in the Non-moral sense”: http://www.e-
scoala.ro/biblioteca/friedrich_nietzsche.html

REQUIRED FILMS:
• Memento, 2000 (directed by Christopher Nolan).
• Who’s Afraid of Virginia Wolf, 1966 (written by Ernest Lehman, directed by Mike Nichols, adapted from Edward Albee’s 1962 play).
• Apocalypse Now, 1979 (directed by Francis Ford Coppola).

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 and Policies:
• 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 my 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.
• This course operates under the College Honor System. The Honor System
demands that we treat each other with respect, we nurture independent thought,
we take responsibility for personal behavior, and we accept environmental responsibility. **Academic honesty** is a critical part of our value system at K. When you borrow an idea, express the idea in your own words, thus thinking it through and making it your own, and acknowledge the source of the idea in a note, or, in certain situations, use the exact words of the source in quotation marks and acknowledge it with a note. Ideas raised in class are part of the public domain and, therefore, sources of the ideas need not be acknowledged. If you are ever in doubt about this, you must ask. For the full policy, see [https://reason.kzoo.edu/studev/policies/dishonest/](https://reason.kzoo.edu/studev/policies/dishonest/)

**Participation and Attendance**: Participation, which counts as 15% of your grade, consist 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.
- **NB:** Any student with a learning difference who needs an accommodation or other assistance should make an appointment to speak with me as soon as possible.

**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 nonetheless 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. 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 in class on the due date. 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:
  - Carr, “The Temporal Structure of Experience and Action”
  - *Evening Film, 8:00 PM Dewing 103: Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000)
- Friday:
  - Review & Discussion
  - 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:**
  - Review & Discussion

Week Five:
- **Monday:**
  - Frie, “Situating Sartre and Binswanger”
- **Wednesday:**
  - Frie, “Jean-Paul Sartre: Reconstructing the Subject”
  - **Evening Film, 8:00 PM Dewing 103: Who’s Afraid of Virginia Wolf?**
- **Friday:**
  - Review & Discussion
  - Writing Assignment #3

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

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

Week Seven:
- **Monday:**
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: Part One and Two**
- Friday:
  - Review & Discussion
  - Writing Assignment #4

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”
  - **Evening Film, 8:00 PM Dewing 103: The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema: Part Three**

- 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: