

Scholar's Electives 1100F: On Certainty/Uncertainty and Meaning/Meaninglessness (2017-2018, Fall Term)

Tuesdays, 16:30-18:30 (Section 001) SH 3317 & 18:30-20:30 (Section 002) SH 3317

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Description:

This course interrogates the limits of human knowledge in the arts, the social sciences, and the sciences and it asks questions about the tools we use to arrive at "meaning." It poses the question not only of how we know what we know, but also of how we can be *sure* that we know what we know. What, in other words, does it mean "to know"? Do we control outcomes, or are they due partly or entirely to chance? Does our world actually have meaning or do we just create meanings? How, finally, does the creation of meaning take place?

We will examine a number of approaches to these questions in different periods of Western culture, from Ancient Greece to the late 20th century. In the course of the semester we will consider some modern scientific attempts to understand our world, various views on the role of chance in our experience, and discussions of the relationship between language/writing and reality.

Learning Outcomes:

This course is designed to guide you in learning to engage critically with readings and with issues and to formulate cogent responses both orally and in writing. By the end of the course you should have acquired and/or refined your ability to grasp the salient points of an argument whether of an oral or written nature and to summarize, reiterate, and analyze those points. You should also be in a position to appreciate the complexity of the causes and influences that have made for major shifts in thinking at different points along the historical timeline.

Assignments:

- a) 20% -- a three-sentence summary of the key points or issues in the readings for the week (max. 75 words). Due at the beginning of each class on Tuesday. Full sentences – no bullet/point form. (You will email these to the TA)
- b) 30% -- 150-200-word summary of the Tuesday lecture/discussion due by 4 PM on the following Friday (you will email these to the TA).
- c) 10% -- participation. Participation entails not only reading the weekly material but also taking notes on it as an aide-mémoire. If a student was in class every week, and was clearly prepared, but was so shy about speaking that s/he never said a word, s/he would nevertheless come very close (78) to the A range for participation.

For the student who is always prepared and always in class and also speaks up, it can only get better. In other words, I am interested to hear your ideas, but I understand that some people are more comfortable with speaking aloud than others. You are also free to email me with your ideas, and I will count that as participation. I consider participation not just in quantitative terms but also qualitative ones.

c) 40% -- two 850-1000-word (approximately) essays (20% each), the first being due by 31 October and the second due on or before the last day of class (5 December). You will need to delineate a topic that picks up issues and/or themes from at least two of our class readings/sessions. You are **strongly** encouraged to discuss potential topics with the TA or the professor before you begin writing. The second essay will need to use material from weeks 8-13 of the course.

NB: All assignments must be completed. The weakest assignment from both a) and b) will be dropped from the final mark, **but only if you do them all**.

Penalties:

Any assignment submitted late will be penalized 5%/day and will not be accepted at all 5 days after the due date.

Readings:

With one exception, all of the readings are available on the Weldon library website or on the course OWL site online. The one exception is the play *Copenhagen*, which must be bought at the university bookstore.

Tentative program

I: Humanity and Its Limits

Week 1: 12 September

Introduction: Aeschylus: *Prometheus Bound*

<http://olli.ucsd.edu/documents/aeschylus.pdf> (also on Owl)

Claude Calame: "From the Civilization of Prometheus to Genetic Engineering: The Role of Technology and the Uses of Metaphor," *Arion* 13:2 (2005), 25-58. (on Owl)

Week 2: 19 September

Aeschylus: *Prometheus Bound* (contd.)

<http://www.radiolab.org/story/91512-musical-language/> (podcast)

Robert Jourdain, *Music, The Brain, and Ecstasy*, chapt. 3: "...to melody..." (on Owl)

Week 3: 26 September

Special session with Rebecca Smith

SafeTALK training

Both sections together: 5:30-8:30

Week 4: 3 October

Oliver Sacks, "In the Moment: Music and Amnesia" from *Musicophilia* (2007), 201-31. (on Owl)
Podcast: <http://www.radiolab.org/story/91569-memory-and-forgetting/>

Week 5: 10 October: No class (Fall reading week)

II: The Nature of Meaning

Week 6: 17 October

Jonathan Culler, "The Linguistic Foundation," in *Structuralist Poetics* (1975):
<https://books.google.ca/books?id=cBZCOD8SVzMC&pg=PA3&lpg=PA3&dq=jonathan+culler+linguistic+foundation&source=bl&ots=sR8cyj5dbh&sig=0nzdyGMe5UqIjrRbFoLMTkQYxpw&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CD0Q6AEwBWoVChMImrzfmNukxwIVhl2SCh1NvgCm#v=onepage&q=jonathan%20culler%20linguistic%20foundation&f=false>
J.L. Borges, "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins" (on Owl)

Week 7: 24 October

Nominalism and Realism

You have a choice between a pair of podcasts or a reading selection (or both)

The podcasts: <http://www.historyofphilosophy.net/problem-universals> and

Individuation (podcast): <http://www.historyofphilosophy.net/gilbert-poitiers-individuation>

The reading, if you prefer: Michael J. Loux, "The Existence of Universals." *Universals and Particulars: Readings in Ontology*. 3-24.

(The reason I am giving a choice is because some of the students last year thought the podcast tried to be humorous but didn't succeed).

II: Uncertainty and "thinking"

Week 8: 31 October

Henri Poincaré: "Chance" *Science and Method* (1908) (on Owl)

The Darwin/Gray correspondence (1857-1869): James G. Lennox, "The Darwin/Gray Correspondence 1857-1869: An Intelligent Discussion about Chance and Design." (on Owl)

Extra reading for those who want it: *Darwin's Dice: The Idea of Chance in the Thought of Charles Darwin* (Chapt. 5)

Week 9: 7 November

Heisenberg, "The Copenhagen Interpretation of Quantum Theory", *Physics and Philosophy* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1959) (on Owl), or:

Richard Feynman, *The Character of Physical Law*, Chapter 6: "Probability and Uncertainty – the Quantum Mechanical View of Nature":

http://www.informationphilosopher.com/solutions/scientists/feynman/probability_and_uncertainty.html

And/or watch Richard Feynman's Cornell Univ. lecture on "Probability and Uncertainty" at:

<http://io9.com/watch-a-series-of-seven-brilliant-lectures-by-richard-f-5894600>

[of these 3 the last is the most entertaining]

Copenhagen (play): Act I

Week 10: 15 November

Copenhagen (play): Act II

J. L. Borges: "The Garden of Forking Paths," "The Library of Babel" "Borges and I" (on Owl)

<http://www.radiolab.org/story/91859-the-multi-universes/> (podcast)

IV: Relativity and the Construction of Meaning

Week 11: 21 November

Michel de Montaigne, "On Custom," "On Cannibals"

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3600/3600-h/3600-h.htm>

Book I, chapters xxii and xxx

Week 12: 28 November

Albert Camus: "Absurdity and Suicide" and "The Myth of Sisyphus" [the first is at the beginning of the book, the second is toward the end, just before the appendix] in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (1942; Eng trans. 1955) (on Owl)

Albert Camus: "The Guest" (on Owl)

Week 13: 5 December

Claude Levi-Strauss, "The Writing Lesson," from *Tristes Tropiques* (1955)

John Barth: "Lost in the Funhouse" (1968) (on Owl)

Conclusion