

Philosophical Ideas in Film

50:730:264, Fall 2022

Instructor: Young

Preferred Contact:
Alternative Contact:

Through Canvas
phillipy@camden.rutgers.edu

Description:

This course focuses on philosophical ideas in film, identifying and evaluating representations of truth, skepticism, relativism, and determinism, among others.

Rationale:

Films offer perspectives on how life is experienced and on how it might be experienced from a perspective other than one's own. In virtue of their popularity, they are one of the primary means through which our society engages these ideas. Our course is dedicated to philosophical reflection on these representations and engagements.

Course Goals:

This course is intended to foster your knowledge of philosophical ideas, your ability to identify representations of those ideas, and to cultivate a habit of interpreting and evaluating those representations. Successful students will be those who can:

- 1) Correctly identify and explain the philosophical ideas we study.
- 2) Present and evaluate arguments intended to support those ideas.
- 3) Articulate the respects in which films offer perspectives on those ideas.
- 4) Identify the philosopher's ideas those films can be seen as representing.
- 5) Offer clearly stated and well-reasoned responses to those ideas and representations.

Related General Education Goals

This course serves general educational goals of foundations for lifelong learning related to:

- *Knowledge of human cultures*, through study in the humanities and the arts, focused by "big" questions, both contemporary and enduring.
- *Intellectual and practical skills*, including inquiry and analysis, critical and creative thinking, and written communication.

This course focuses on the category of goals related to *art, aesthetics, and theories of interpretation*, including:

1. Evaluating the moral dimensions of art, including the ability to appreciate alternative world views.
2. Analyzing works of art or literature using critical methodologies.
3. Situating works of art or literature in their intellectual context.
4. Constructing creative and cogent interpretations of art or literature in written form.

Required text:

Philosophy Through Film (4th Edition), Litch & Karofsky (Routledge, 2021)

Course Calendar

Topic	Time Frame	Assigned Readings & Films	Assignments Due
Course Home	9/6-11	Materials in the Session, Introduction chapter of text.	"Hello" Forum N/A Syllabus Quiz 9/11
First Steps	9/6-14	Written Materials and Video Links in Session	Quiz: 12/14 ID/Evaluation 12/18
Truth	9/12-25	Reading: Chapter 1 (<i>with supplements from Russell & James</i>) Film: <i>Arrival</i>	Forum Opens: 9/12 First Post Due: 9/17 Forum Closes: 9/23 Quiz Opens: 9/24 Quiz Closes: 9/25 Paper Due: 9/30
Skepticism	9/26-10/9	Reading: Chapter 2 (<i>with supplements from Descartes & Berkeley</i>) Films: <i>The Matrix, Inception</i>	Forum Opens: 9/26 First Post Due: 10/1 Forum Closes: 10/7 Quiz Opens: 10/8 Quiz Closes: 10/9 Paper Due: 10/14
Personal Identity	10/10-23	Reading: Chapter 3 (<i>with supplements from Locke & Hume</i>) Films: <i>Memento, Moon</i>	Forum Opens: 10/10 First Post Due: 10/15 Forum Closes: 10/21 Quiz Opens: 10/22 Quiz Closes: 10/23 Paper Due: 10/28
Mind/Body	10/24-11/6	Reading: Chapter 4 (<i>with supplements from Churchland & Jackson</i>) Films: <i>Live, Die, Repeat: The Edge of Tomorrow</i> <i>The Matrix</i>	Forum Opens: 10/24 First Post Due: 10/29 Forum Closes: 11/4 Quiz Opens: 11/5 Quiz Closes: 11/6 Paper Due: 11/11
Artificial Intelligence	11/7-20	Reading: Chapter 5 (<i>with supplements from Turing & Searle</i>) Films: <i>Her, Ex Machina</i>	Forum Opens: 11/7 First Post Due: 11/12 Forum Closes: 11/18 Quiz Opens: 11/19 Quiz Closes: 11/20 Paper Due: 12/2
Free Will, Determinism, and Moral Responsibility	11/21-12/11	Reading: Chapter 6 (<i>with supplements from Augustine & Hume</i>) Films: <i>Minority Report, Beautiful Boy</i>	Forum Opens: 11/21 First Post Due: 12/3 Forum Closes: 12/9 Quiz Opens: 12/10 Quiz Closes: 12/11 Paper Due: 12/16

Notes:

- 1) All chapter references are to the required text indicated above, and all supplemental readings are included in the "Primary Sources" part of that text.

- 2) The “Hello” forum is not graded. It is just a chance to get to know each other a little bit.
- 3) The syllabus quiz and the logic quiz are not required, but if you earn perfect scores on either or both of them before they close (see the indicated due dates), correct answers will count as extra credit points when I calculate final grades. You may retake either or both as many times as you wish during the time frame when they are open. But be aware that since the questions are drawn at random from a pool, you will probably not get the same set of questions with each attempt.
- 4) Because of the timing of the Labor Day and Thanksgiving holidays and finals week, the time intervals for the due dates are not the same in every session. Please plan accordingly.

Course Requirement Explanations & Guidelines

Rationale:

Different people are better at engaging with our course concepts in different ways. Because of that, I offer a variety of ways to participate in and demonstrate mastery of the material we study, and this is what (in my mind) justifies combining the scores of the different types of assignment so that you don't have to be good at all of them to do well in the course.

The discussion forums are there for you to participate in the exchange of thoughts about the ideas we are studying. Being part of an ongoing conversation about our ideas affords an opportunity to clarify understanding as well as to critically evaluate our course concepts as well as to consider each other's perspectives on those concepts. But on the other hand, not everyone feels completely comfortable participating in a conversation where others might disagree with their contributions.

The quizzes are about correctly identifying course concepts, conceptual relations between course concepts and criticisms of those course concepts. But given the nature of our subject matter, the wording of those quiz items has to be much more carefully and technically chosen than in many other areas of study. For some students, that can be an obstacle to a good performance.

Some students have difficulty correctly identifying course concepts in the words I use to describe them, and do much better when they express their understanding in words of their own choosing. The papers are for them. There is a lot of detail about the content requirements for these papers below.

Hopefully, sharing this little slice of my teaching philosophy and the rationale behind my course requirements will give everyone a clearer idea of how to do well in this course.

Course Requirements (Summary):

Your graded course requirements will include *forum posts* and *quizzes* on the material presented in the required text on each topic taken up in this course, the scores for which

may be supplemented or replaced by extra credit *papers* based on that same material. Each of these serves specific course goals, as will be indicated below.

Each chapter-based session that corresponds to a chapter in the text is worth a maximum of 200 points, for a total of 1200 points for the whole course. Within each session, you may earn up to 100 points on the quiz, and up to 100 points for forum posts. If you are unable to earn your target total by those means, up to 100 additional points are available if you write a paper on that topic (not to exceed 200 total points for that session). Details on these requirements follow, as well as guidelines for fulfilling them effectively.

Requirement Explanations & Guidelines

Each topic-based session provides you with more opportunities to earn points than would be required to earn a perfect score for the session. The reason for this is that in my experience, different students are better at demonstrating their mastery of the material in different ways. So I offer many different kinds of opportunities. Mathematically speaking, it would be possible to completely omit one of the graded assignments in any given session and still earn an "A"—although you are certainly encouraged to pursue all three.

By the end of the first topic, I am sure you will have sorted out the combination of assignments that best suits your abilities and purposes in reaching your target grade. Detailed explanations for how to maximize your scores on each assignment follow.

Forum Posts

The discussion forums are intended to offer opportunities for conversational interaction about your reactions to the ideas we are studying and the films in which those ideas are represented. This activity supports course goals #2 and #5, as well as all four of the general education goals from the category of *art, aesthetics, and theories of interpretation*.

These forums will play a role similar to what would have been our day-to-day conversation if we were meeting in a classroom. So an informal conversational tone will be fine. During the time frame specified for each forum, eligible posts are worth 20 points each, up to a maximum of 100 points per forum. Not more than two posts per day can earn credit. Here is how to earn all 100 of those points:

The first 20 points are for making your first post by the due date indicated in the course calendar. You will only be able to see your classmates' posts after you have made your first post, so this post will be a response to one of the prompt questions provided.

The remaining 80 points (20 per post) can be earned by posts which fit any of the following descriptions:

- 1) Up to two posts can earn credit as responses to additional prompt questions. *Posts which are intended to serve this function should be labeled "Prompt Question Response."*

- 2) Up to two posts can earn credit for raising critical reactions to issues that go beyond the content of the prompt questions—as long as they are still about the assigned readings. *Posts which are intended to serve this function should be labeled "A Step Beyond."*
- 3) Up to two posts can earn credit for offering additional support for a view expressed by a classmate. (Please note that while there is nothing wrong with a simple agreement, this does not constitute "additional support." Reasons must be given.) *Posts which are intended to serve this function should be labeled "Additional Support."*
- 4) Up to two posts can earn credit for playing "devil's advocate," meaning a friendly challenge to classmate's post that prompts them to reconsider their assertions based on additional evidence, from an alternative perspective, etc. (Posting a reply to a classmate who has challenged you in this way is also eligible for credit.) *Posts which are intended to serve this function should be labeled "Devil's Advocate."*
- 5) Questions asking your instructor (me!) for clarification of any aspect of the assigned reading are also eligible for credit. But please note that you will need to be specific. "What are they basically saying?" is too vague for me to know where to start. It would be much more productive to cite a passage you find confusing. *Posts which are intended to serve this function should be labeled "Clarification."*
- 6) You can also earn credit for up to one post that offers a relevant website reference. But offer a reason why you found it helpful. "Here's a good one on determinism" is not enough. Add a few sentences explaining why you think it is so good. That could be a real contribution to the conversation. *Posts which are intended to serve this function should be labeled "Website."*

Two Further Points:

- 1) When commenting on classmates' posts, confine your comments to agreements or disagreements regarding the ideas. Personal attacks will not be tolerated. I will lower the course grade of any student who violates basic courtesy requirements.
- 2) Please note that points are assigned according to the number of posts made with appropriate content, and no post will earn more than 20 points. Posts which address more than one question will not earn additional points, so please put your comments on different questions/topics into different posts.

Quizzes

There will be an objective (true/false & multiple choice) quiz on each topic/chapter from the Litch text indicated in our syllabus. They are intended to spot check your ability to identify the concepts we are studying and their representations in film. They may also serve to alert you to any misunderstandings you may have prior to writing a paper on this topic. (See course goals #1 and #4 indicated above.)

Each will consist of 20 questions worth 5 points each, for which you will have 50 minutes (one standard classroom credit-hour).

Each quiz is based on the explanations of the philosophical ideas offered in the relevant chapter of our textbook. To be fully prepared, study those explanations, read the relevant "Readings from Primary Sources" for background on those ideas, and be sure you understand the author's use of the film examples to represent those ideas. You may use your course materials as references, but the allotted time will not be enough to finish the quiz if you do not already know the material well.

Because the answers are made available after each quiz closes, academic integrity concerns dictate that no quiz will be re-opened after that time under any circumstances. Essays and other extra credit options will be the means of making up any lost points.

Essays

Relative to the quizzes, these essays represent a more narrowly focused and more deeply detailed "quality control" sample of the knowledge and skills you have developed in our course. The presentation, explanation, and analysis of our course concepts and their representations in film, as well as your own reactions to those ideas and representations, are the essential contents of these papers. As such, they relate to all five of the course goals as indicated earlier in this syllabus, as well as all four general education goals from the category of *art, aesthetics, and theories of interpretation*.

The paper scores will combine with your quiz and forum scores as indicated in the "Course Requirements Summary." Here is how that will work:

Your paper's rubric score will be the percentage of the points you have remaining in the session that I will assign. If you scored 150/200 points by means of the forum and quiz, that is 75%, which would be a "C" for the session if you do nothing further.

But you have 50 points left you could potentially earn by writing the paper. Let's say you write a paper, and it earns an 80% rubric score. Then you will earn 40/50, for a total of 190/200, which is an "A!"

(It would be possible to skip either the forum or the quiz entirely and still do well, but I do not recommend this. Prudence suggests that "banking" at least some points via the forum and quiz will take the pressure off of how strong the essay needs to be to get your overall score into your target grade range.)

Essay Writing Guidelines

Sometimes coming up with a topic is the biggest obstacle in paper writing! So while you are free to choose your own essay topic, I have included some suggestions in each session where they are relevant. Dealing with any of them effectively and thoroughly would certainly demonstrate what I need to see as far as your understanding of course concepts and your ability to present an argument about them is concerned.

If you choose one of them, be sure your paper addresses every element indicated. Also be sure to explain every term that is an important part of your discussion. And keep in mind that whether any given suggested topic prompts this or not, the purpose of every essay is to have a point of your own to make. For that reason, I advise that you choose your topics based on what you feel you have the most to say about, not what you think you can answer most quickly.

Think of writing for an audience of reasonably intelligent people who just don't happen to know much (if anything) about your subject. So while they would be capable of understanding a good explanation of the concepts you are dealing with, you cannot presume they understand anything unless you actually give the explanation. Thinking that way should help you get into the appropriate level of detail I need to see to demonstrate your understanding.

Of course, there are always additional possibilities. If you believe you have a different idea which is equally viable as an essay topic, contact me about it in advance to be sure. For while I am happy to grant you the freedom to follow your own path, I need to be sure that the work you do is appropriate for my grading purposes. Since these assignments are intended as alternative means of assessing your understanding of our course concepts, *not* of your knowledge of material *besides* what we are studying, I am *not* looking for a research paper based on extra-textual materials.

The following general guidelines indicate what is expected of all essays, regardless of the particular topic.

- 1) Your essay should proceed in a step-by-step fashion from the introduction through the main "body" of your argument to culminate in its conclusion, by which point your thesis should be supported in a compelling way. The following steps offer a detailed account of this process. Each should usually be a paragraph or two.
 - a. The introduction must inform the reader of the topic you will address, mention any sources you plan to draw from in making your argument (such as the film you are writing about and philosophers whose ideas you will discuss), and indicate the specific point the essay is intended to support (also known as your "thesis"). It is often good to open with a general statement of an important problem, a rhetorical question, or some sort of dramatic flourish which will attract your reader's interest before narrowing in on the specifics of the paper.
 - b. In the "body" of your essay, the first task is to present the relevant details of the film example, immediately after the introduction. You might start by giving an overview of the story, and then focusing more closely on the details of any scene you are using to make your point.
 - c. Next, present the ideas of the philosopher (or philosophical concept) which you will use to analyze the film example (See course goals #1 and #2).
 - d. Show how those ideas apply to the film example, indicating what you believe the philosopher would have to say about it and why. (See course goals #2-4, Gen Ed goals 1-4)
 - e. Offer your reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with the ideas you presented in the previous two steps. (If you are only writing about one philosopher,

this step might turn out to be your conclusion.) (See course goal #5, Gen Ed goals 1-4)

- f. If you are discussing a second philosopher (or philosophical concept), repeat this process (steps c through e) *Note: if you plan to support one and oppose the other, discuss the one you oppose first. That way your support for the second leads more naturally into your conclusion.*
- g. If you have additional observations of your own to add, or broader claims to make regarding the point you have shown in this paper, place them in the final paragraph, which will then be your conclusion. (See course goal #5, Gen Ed goals 1-4).

A few additional points:

I will not reward students who waste my time by turning in poor work because they feel they have nothing to lose. I may not assign any credit at all to a paper which does not appear to demonstrate a good faith effort at fulfilling the basic goals indicated above.

Grammar, spelling, and composition issues will count. While many styles are appropriate for personal communications, this is a more professional setting. Edited Standard Written English is expected in this course. However, this course is not designed for me to micromanage these issues with you; rather, it is expected that by the time you are taking a philosophy course in college you should either have mastered these skills or else be aware of where to get help.

It is extremely unlikely that papers of less than 3-5 pages (approximately 900-1200 words) will be able to successfully demonstrate sufficient knowledge of course concepts, application to examples, and compositional quality.

I will offer comments and feedback on your work for the sake of improving the quality of future performance and grades.

Extra Credit: Logic Identification/Evaluation

See the directions in the "First Steps" session for how to earn extra credit based on identifying and evaluating arguments and fallacies of a variety of types.

Policies

Academic Integrity

Rutgers' academic integrity policy, including explanations of what count as violations and the penalties they incur, is spelled out here:

<https://academicaffairs.rutgers.edu/academic-integrity-policy-and-procedures>

Be aware that I will pursue academic integrity violations to the maximum extent allowed by this policy, and that I will not make any exception for any reason.

Late Work

The purpose of the forums is to participate in an ongoing conversation about the assigned readings and the film examples used to illustrate them. Once the class has moved on to the next topic, posts to a previous forum are no longer relevant, and therefore cannot earn credit after the stated time frame of the forum. If for any reason you were unable to fully participate in a forum during its specified time frame, writing the paper for that topic will be the sole means of making up for the lost points

As stated earlier, the correct answers (and explanations thereof) will be made available shortly after the quizzes close, so there can be no such thing as making up a quiz after the fact due to academic integrity concerns. *No exceptions.* If for any reason you were unable to take a quiz during its specified time frame, writing the paper for that topic will be your most direct means of making up for the lost points.

Papers submitted after the due date will be subject to a grade penalty, usually 10% or one letter grade. Papers will not be accepted more than one week late. The last paper cannot be accepted late at all because of the schedule for final grades to be submitted. The *only* exceptions to this policy on late papers will be based on documentation which proves that timely submission was *impossible*.

Course Completion

Incomplete grades will be only be assigned to students who make arrangements with me in advance. Otherwise, course requirements remaining unfulfilled at 11:59 pm on the last day of the term will be assigned scores of zero.

Communications

All communications for this course should be submitted through the course website email, for purposes of security and documentation as well as convenience.

Final Grade Computation

The scale for final grades is based on the following percentages:

Score	Letter Grade
90% and higher:	A
88% and higher:	B+
80% and higher:	B
78% and higher:	C+
70% and higher:	C
60% and higher:	D
Below 60%:	F

Please note that since the papers provide ongoing opportunities for improving scores, and there are number of extra credit possibilities, I do not "round up" when determining final grades. If you want a better grade, you have the opportunity to earn it.

Online Philosophy Resources

<http://www.philosophypages.com/>

This is a very good general reference website for philosophy. It includes biographical and historical information that provides a sense of the context of the ideas you are studying, as well as explanations of many of those ideas. See the "dictionary" for good definitions of key philosophical terms. "Links to other sites on the internet" is good for many additional resources. The "study guide" page offers very good advice on studying and writing for any philosophy course, including this one.

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/>

Similar to Philosophy Pages, but its biographical information and accounts of philosophers' ideas are much more detailed. So while Philosophy Pages offers a good basic orientation, this is good for a more thorough follow-up.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/>

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy is the most scholarly of all sources listed here. It may be a bit beyond what you really need for this class. But in the event that our course drives you sufficiently insane as to become a philosophy major, it will be good for you to know this is out there.