

Syllabus

David Sanson — Philosophy 251 — Spring 2015

My office is Stevenson 341. My email is desanso@ilstu.edu. My office hours for this term are MW 3:15-4:15, and by appointment.

What Am I?

This course is structured around that question. We will approach it through several clusters of inter-related questions:

- Am I a soul, or a spirit? Am I a human animal? Am I a mind? A brain? A story I tell to myself?
- Do I know myself? How? What about others? Do I know that they are also “selves” like me?
- I am consciously aware of many things. But what is consciousness, and how am I related to my consciousness?
- Am I a free agent—something that deliberates and makes choices and makes a difference in the world? Am I responsible for what I do? Or am I a machine, laboring under the illusion that I am free, when in fact nothing I do is under my control?
- What makes me *me*? What is my *essence*? To what extent is it up to me what I am or what is essential to me? Am I essentially a man or a woman? Am I essentially Black, or White, or Asian, or Latino?

We will approach these questions through philosophy. Philosophy aims to use reason to tackle hard problems like these. We won't always succeed at discovering the truth, but we can get a better sense of which answers make sense and which do not, and which are more likely to be true.

Course Objectives

The first and most fundamental objective of this course is to teach you what it is like to think through philosophical problems like a philosopher.

One of the fundamental tools in philosophy is argument identification and analysis. The course assignments will be focused on improving this fundamental skill. This skill that has broad application outside of philosophy: it is, in essence, the ability to *think* in a clear and explicit way, and communicate your thoughts to others in a clear and explicit way.

Those objectives are topic-neutral: they would apply to any course on any philosophical topic. But the topic of this course—the self—has been one of the central topics in philosophy since its beginning, and continues to be a central topic in philosophy today. It is a topic that touches upon central issues in metaphysics, epistemology, the philosophy of mind, political philosophy, and ethics.

So this course will expose you to a range of important positions and arguments across several areas of philosophical research. If you are a non-major, it will make for a good topical overview of many parts of the discipline. If you are a major, it will help you see connections.

But really, why bother worrying about philosophical questions at all? That's a hard question. Hopefully this course will put you in a better position to answer it for yourself. But I kind of like this answer, from Bertrand Russell:

The value of philosophy is, in fact, to be sought largely in its very uncertainty. The man who has no tincture of philosophy goes through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of his age or his nation, and from convictions which have grown up in his mind without the co-operation or consent of his deliberate reason. To such a man the world tends to become definite, finite, obvious; common objects rouse no questions, and unfamiliar possibilities are contemptuously rejected. As soon as we begin to philosophize, on the contrary, we find [...] that even the most everyday things lead to problems to which only very incomplete answers can be given. Philosophy, though unable to tell us with certainty what is the true answer to the doubts which it raises, is able to suggest many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts and free them from the tyranny of custom. Thus, while diminishing our feeling of certainty as to what things are, it greatly increases our knowledge as to what they may be; it removes the somewhat arrogant dogmatism of those who have never travelled into the region of liberating doubt, and it keeps alive our sense of wonder by showing familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect. (Bertrand Russell, "The Value of Philosophy", from his *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912), p. 156-157)

So I suppose one of the objectives of this course is to "free [you] from the tyranny of custom" and remove your "somewhat arrogant dogmatism," but that seems a bit too personal to state as a course objective.

This course is in the Humanities category of the General Education program. Such courses are supposed to achieve some subset of a long list of objectives decided upon by committee. I've listed all the objectives at the end of the syllabus. The University hopes that, by reading these objectives, you will get a sense of how the General Education program is meant to work as a whole, and how this course contributes to that whole.

It seems to me that this course should help you think about what contributes to the quality of life (Ib). And it should help you make informed judgments (IIa) and report those judgments, in a clear and analytic way (IIb), while demonstrating the ability to think reflectively (IIIId), in order to identify and solve problems (IVa).

Books

I have ordered two texts for the course:

- Shaun Gallagher, Ed. (2011). *The Oxford Handbook of the Self*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN-13: 978-0199679546
- Robert Kane (2005). *A Contemporary Introduction to Free Will*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN-13: 978-0195149708

I have put Kane's book on course reserve at Milner. Unfortunately, Milner does not own *The Oxford Handbook of the Self*.

Additional readings are available from the schedule. Note that many of links are only accessible to those enrolled in the class.

You are also encouraged to search for books and articles on topics that catch your interest. A good place to start is <http://philpapers.org>

Assignments

Your grade will be based upon

- homework exercises (10%),
- "levels papers" (40%),
- a midterm (25%) and final (25%)

Homework exercises will be assigned occasionally throughout the term as appropriate and graded pass/fail. "Levels papers" are explained in detail below. Exams will be in class, and will consist of a mix of short answer and essay questions related to the readings and class discussions.

Attendance is required, but I am not going to make a habit of "taking" attendance. Instead, I will make a habit of cold-calling at random. If I cold-call you at random and you are not present, I will take note. Each time this happens, your grade for the course will drop by 1%.

Levels Papers¹

The "levels papers" are modeled after video game mechanics. There are three levels for you to progress through, and you are allowed to progress to the next level only after you have completed the previous level. Just as with levels in video games, the idea here is to insure that you are always working on a task that is challenging enough to be interesting, but not so challenging that it is frustrating.

Your "levels grade" is determined by how far you progress through the levels. You have a maximum of five attempts at the levels, each due on a specific day (see schedule). After attempting a level, you will receive one of four evaluations: "not much progress", "making progress", "almost", or "complete". Each attempt must be written on one of the readings covered since the last attempt was due (hence, each attempt will be on a new topic—you will not be rewriting the previous attempt). Your levels grade will be determined by how far through the levels you progress, and which evaluation you get on the last level you attempt, according to the following scale:

	Not much progress	Making progress	Almost	Complete
Level 3	B	B+	A-	A
Level 2	C-	C	C+	B-
Level 1	F	D-	D	D+

¹I borrow this system (and much of the following description) from Dustin Locke.

Brief descriptions of each level are as follows:

Level 1. Expository paper, between 150 and 300 words. Choose one particular argument from the readings and explain that argument in a very short paper. We will be doing some exercises during the first couple of weeks of class that will prepare you to write this paper.

Level 2. Expository paper, between 400 and 600 words. This paper will be just like level 1, except that you will explain two arguments from the reading that have some important relationship to one another. For example, you might choose to discuss an argument and then another argument that is an objection to the first. Alternatively, you might choose a second argument that builds on the first argument. There are other possibilities as well — the only requirement is that the two came from the readings and have some interesting relationship to one another. (When you write your paper, you should make it clear just what the relationship is.) As this paper now has a bit of complexity, make sure to include an introductory paragraph that briefly explains what your paper is going to be about and how it will proceed.

Level 3. Expository and critical paper, between 700 and 1000 words. This will be just like level 2, except that you will also argue that one of the arguments you discuss is unsound (i.e., that it either has a false premise or a bad inference). Your criticism here must be original, and you should be sure to defend your criticism against potential objections.

You have a maximum of five attempts at the levels. The due dates for these attempts can be found on the course calendar.

Getting in Touch

Email is the best way to reach me when I am not in my office. I am not always online and I cannot always respond immediately. If I have not responded in 24 hours please email me again, letting me know it is your second email (I won't take this as harassment). Include "251" in the subject line of your email and your full name somewhere in the body of your email, so I know who you are(!), and that the email is related to this class.

Disabilities

Any student needing to arrange a reasonable accommodation for a documented disability should contact Disability Concerns at 350 Fell Hall, 309-438-5853, <http://www.disabilityconcerns.ilstu.edu>.

Other Sources of Support

Life at college can get very complicated. Students sometimes feel overwhelmed, lost, experience anxiety or depression, struggle with relationship difficulties or diminished self-esteem. Many of these issues can be effectively addressed with a little help. Student Counseling Services (SCS) helps students cope with difficult emotions and life stressors. Student Counseling Services is staffed by experienced, professional psychologists and counselors, who are attuned to the needs of college students. The services are free and completely confidential. Find out more at <http://counseling.illinoisstate.edu> or by calling 309-438-3655.

Academic Misconduct

Academic integrity is expected and required. Students are expected to be honest in all academic work. A student's placement of his or her name on any academic exercise shall be regarded as assurance that the work is the result of the student's own thought, effort, and study.

If you have questions, refer to the Code of Student Conduct, B1 (Academic Integrity), which outlines unacceptable behaviors in academic matters, or talk to me. In certain circumstances (such as cheating or plagiarism) I may be required to refer a student to Community Rights & Responsibilities for a violation of Illinois State University's Code of Student Conduct.

General Education Objectives

Courses in the Humanities category of General Education address the following program objectives:

- I. knowledge of diverse human cultures and the physical and natural world, allowing students to
 - b. explain how the combination of the humanities, fine arts, natural and social sciences, and technology contribute to the quality of life for individuals and communities
 - c. experience and reflect on global issues
- II. intellectual and practical skills, allowing students to
 - a. make informed judgments
 - b. report information effectively and responsibly
 - c. write in a variety of genres, contexts, and disciplines
 - d. deliver purposeful presentations that inform attitudes or behaviors
- III. personal and social responsibility, allowing students to
 - b. interact competently in a variety of cultural contexts
 - c. demonstrate ethical decision making
 - d. demonstrate the ability to think reflectively
- IV. integrative and applied learning, allowing students to
 - a. identify and solve problems
 - b. transfer learning to novel situations
 - c. work effectively in teams