

Professor Elisabeth Camp

Office: 106 Somerset, Room 514

Office Hours: Thursdays 10:30-11:30; Wednesdays and Skype by appointment

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All readings, handouts, assignments, and announcements will be posted on Sakai.

Course Description

In this class we will explore the varieties of meaning, from basic informational correlations (as when we say that smoke means fire), to the more or less arbitrary conventions of language, and on to more open-ended forms of personal and cultural significance (as in my grandfather's watch, a movie, or life itself). What, if anything, do all these varieties of meaning have in common? Where does meaning come from? Is meaning possible without a conscious creator or interpreter? How might it have evolved? Must something have a determinate meaning to mean anything at all?

Course Goals

In this course, you will learn to:

- understand the motivations and methodology of informational, pragmatic, and hermeneutic approaches to meaning.
- recognize the practical and theoretical implications of meaning within everyday life.
- apply these diverse approaches to meaning to specific situations in your own life.

My hope is that in the long term – say, five years – you possess an increased curiosity about the diversity of meaning-creating connections between objects, ideas, and actions; have the ability to analyze and to question why things mean what they do; and take active responsibility for identifying, creating, and responding to meaning in the world.

In pursuing these goals, you will also acquire the following skills:

- the ability to engage in close reading of sophisticated arguments from a range of disciplines.
- the ability to articulate clear, structured, well-supported arguments for your own conclusions.
- the ability to engage in respectful, reasoned, and passionate debate with your peers about complex topics that lack clear answers.

Course Requirements

- Class attendance & participation (20% of grade).
- Study questions (10% of grade).
- Weekly blog posts (20% of course grade).
- Two short papers, 2-3 pages (15% each).
- A final paper, 5-7 pages (20% of course grade).
- There is NO final exam.

Attendance and Participation

This class is a seminar, and depends on your active participation, both individually and as a group. You cannot contribute meaningfully unless you have done the readings (and bring them to class); the readings are complex and sophisticated, and come from a range of disciplines, so you need to read them with attention and patience. Further, to cultivate a productive intellectual community, we need to establish good practices for respectful, inclusive discussion. (See page on implicit bias below).

Online Work

- To help you work through the readings, I will post **study questions** on Sakai on Friday. Write a **1-paragraph** response and submit it individually through Sakai. Due **Sunday night**.
Grade: 1-3 points for basic, solid or insightful comprehension.

- As part of establishing an inclusive conversation, and to make our weekly meetings as rich and focused as possible, we will have a discussion online each week prior to class.

Blog posts: 2-paragraph posts to the Sakai forum, **rotating** through roles on an assigned basis (posted under each week's forum).

Question: due **Sunday night**.

Pose your own question – something you genuinely want an answer to! Select a specific passage (1-2 sentences) from the text. Explain it, how it relates to the surrounding text and the rest of the course; and then ask something more about it. For instance, you might distinguish two possible interpretations and ask which we should prefer. Or you might explain why it seems to conflict with something else that this or another author says, or some fact about the real world, and ask how we should resolve the conflict.

**** Number** your post based on the order in which it comes in. ******

Grade: 0-5 points for context-setting; 0-5 points for posing a specific, well-motivated, textually-grounded, tractable question.

Response: due **Monday night**.

Choose 1 question, explain why you think it is interesting, and respond substantively to it. Then pose a **new question** in light of this discussion: what would we need to know or decide to settle the original question? What further implications does it have? Cite a **new passage** from this or another text that is relevant for the discussion.

(Each question gets 1 answer, on a first-come-first-served basis. **'Ping'** a question to pick it, then submit your answer within 1 hour. If there aren't enough questions to go around, expand on and respond to a study question.)

Grade: 0-5 points for engaging substantively with the original question; 0-5 points for engaging substantively with the text and surrounding issues.

Commentary: due **Tuesday night**.

Choose 1 Q&A thread. (Each thread gets 1 comment, on a first-come-first-served basis. **'Ping'** a thread, then submit your comment within 1 hour. If there aren't enough threads to go around, double up on another thread, but make sure your comment is distinct.)

Explain what you find interesting, surprising, or worthwhile about the exchange so far, and comment on the responder's response to the initial question. Address the new question posed by the responder, again by citing some relevant passage from a text.

Grade: 0-5 points for responding to and developing the thread; 0-5 points for engaging insightfully with the text.

I will post a comment on each thread on Wednesday.

On Wednesday, but in any case **BEFORE CLASS**, vote for the thread you most want to discuss in class on **webclicker.org**. In-class discussion will focus on the top 3 threads.

Other Assignments and Expectations

Papers should be **blinded** and submitted as .pdfs through Sakai. Except in extreme conditions, extensions must be granted well before the due date; **late papers** will be downgraded 1/3 grade per day.

Then first two papers will be short and focused on (1) reconstructing an argument from one of the texts and (2) applying a philosophical argument to the real world. The third paper will ask you to provide your own response to an issue raised in the course.

In general, you should not need to do additional research or reading beyond what is assigned for the course; you should focus on that reading itself. But a good go-to philosophical resource is the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: plato.stanford.edu

You are expected to be familiar with and to abide by RU's policy on academic and intellectual integrity: academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/academic-integrity-policy

If you need special accommodations because of a learning disability or for another reason, please have the Office of Disability Services (ods.rutgers.edu) get in touch with me.

If you are struggling with mental health, or just need some extra assistance dealing with life, get in touch with CAPS (rhscaps.rutgers.edu) or Scarlet Listeners (scarletlisteners.com), or some other source of support.

One of my main mottos: Being a person is hard! But it's one of your jobs.
(Other mottos: don't count unhatched chickens; don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good.)

Implicit bias is bias against members of a group merely in virtue of their membership in that group; it typically consists of tacit attitudes and unintentional actions towards a group which may be in direct conflict with a person's explicit beliefs and values. Most implicitly biased actions are performed by people who are not even aware that their actions are biased. Even the most well-meaning and conscientious people have implicit biases.

Some Data

- A study of over 300 recommendation letters for medical faculty hired by a large U.S. medical school found that letters for female applicants differed systematically from those for males. Letters written for women were shorter, provided "minimal assurance" rather than solid recommendation, raised more doubts, portrayed women as students and teachers while portraying men as researchers and professionals, and more frequently mentioned women's personal lives. (Trix and Psenka 2003)
- In a national study, 238 academic psychologists (118 male, 120 female) evaluated a curriculum vitae randomly assigned a male or a female name. Both male and female participants gave the male applicant better evaluations for teaching, research, and service experience and were more likely to hire the male than the female applicant. (Steinpreis et al 1999)
- Research shows that incongruities between perceptions of female gender roles and leadership roles cause evaluators to assume that women will be less competent leaders. When women leaders provide clear evidence of their competence, thus violating traditional gender norms, evaluators perceive them to be less likeable and are less likely to recommend them for hiring or promotion. (Eagly et al 2002).
- Implicit biases are pervasive: they appear as statistically "large" effects that are often shown by majorities of samples of Americans. Over 80% of web respondents show implicit negativity toward the elderly compared to the young; 75-80% of self-identified Whites and Asians show an implicit preference for racial White relative to Black. (From the [Project Implicit®](#))

Common Examples

- A woman or member of an underrepresented group makes a point in a seminar or colloquium, only to be ignored, and then a white male makes the same point a little later, only to be applauded for his insight.
- A speaker or instructor fails to notice or call on women or members of other underrepresented groups.
- When writing recommendation letters, an advisor unintentionally uses different language or focuses on different features when writing for a woman from those she or he uses when writing for a man. For example, instead of focusing on women's accomplishments and academic caliber as the advisor would for a male advisee, the advisor focuses on how hard the candidate has worked, includes irrelevant references to her personal life, and makes weaker or ambiguous praise.
- When reading recommendation letters, an evaluator unintentionally attributes joint work to the collaborator, or interprets ambiguous wording in a way that hurts the candidate.

So You Think You Aren't Implicitly Biased?

- Participants' self-conceptions as being objective increased the likelihood of exhibiting gender bias in a hiring evaluation task. ([Uhlmann and Cohen 2007](#)).
- People are better able to detect implicit biases in others than in themselves ([Ponin, Lin, Ross 2013](#)). Studies show that the 'bias blind spot' and 'better-than-average' effect is not attenuated by increased cognitive ability.
- Participants in implicit bias study tended to 'redefine' or 'construct ad hoc' criteria they thought were relevant to job success to match their biased expectations. ([Uhlmann and Cohen 2005](#)).
- A study targeting specifically the effects of age-and-gender bias on evaluations of philosophical essays found that old men are apparently believed to write better essays than young women. The study also found that being in a good mood enhanced gender biases and being in a bad mood reduced them. ([Forgas 2011](#))

Schedule of Topics and Readings

Varieties of Meaning

- Th 9/8 Introduction (excerpt from Lewis Carroll)
 Th 9/15 John Locke: *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, III.2
 Paul Grice: "Meaning"

Signals

Natural Meaning

- Th 9/22 Ruth Millikan: "Local Natural Signs and Information"

Animal Signals

- Th 9/29 Robert Seyfarth and Dorothy Cheney: "Signalers and Receivers in Animal Communication"

Conventional Signals

- Th 10/6 David Lewis: "Coordination and Convention" (excerpts)
 Warren Weaver and Claude Shannon: "Introductory Note on the General Setting of the Analytical Communication Studies" (excerpts)

From Nature to Conventional Semantics

- Th 10/13 Brian Skyrms: "The Evolution of Meaning"
 Dorit Bar-On: "Origins of Meaning: Must We 'Go Gricean'?"

First Paper Topics Handed Out

Beyond Semantic Convention: Pragmatics

- Th 10/20 Paul Grice: "Logic and Conversation"
 Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber: "Relevance Theory"

Tu 10/25 FIRST PAPER DUE

Significance

What is Artistic Meaning?

- Th 10/27 Jerome Stolnitz: "On the Cognitive Triviality of Art"
 Cleanth Brooks: "The Heresy of Paraphrase"
 Louis Mink: "History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension"

Where is Artistic Meaning?

- Th 11/3 Roland Barthes: "The Death of the Author"
 Alexander Nehamas: "The Postulated Author"
 Jorge Borges: "Pierre Menard, The Author of the *Quixote*"

Second Paper Topics Handed Out

Social Meaning and Identity

- Th 11/10 Pierre Bourdieu: "Structures, *Habitus*, Practices," "Belief and the Body"

Tu 11/15 SECOND PAPER DUE

- Th 11/17 Judith Butler: "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution"
 Kwame Anthony Appiah: "Why There Are No Human Races"
 Sally Haslanger: "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?"

Meaning in and of Life

Tu 11/22 Albert Camus: "The Myth of Sisyphus" (excerpts)
Thomas Nagel: "The Absurd"

Th 12/1 Susan Wolf: "Meaning in Life and Why It Matters"

Final Paper Topics Handed Out

Th 12/8 Review and Conclusion

Th 12/20 FINAL PAPERS DUE