

SYLLABUS
PHIL 153H | Fundamental Questions in Philosophy
Dr. James K.A. Smith

Office: HH342

Office Hours: W10:30-11:30am, Th1:30-2:30pm or by appt

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DESCRIPTION

Becoming a self—the construction of an *authentic* self—is an enduring theme in the history of philosophy from Plato to the present. It is also a central vocation of Christian faith and life. This introduction to philosophy will explore key questions in philosophy by thinking about just what it means to “be human.” Through a close analysis of several key texts, we will see that the construction of an *authentic* self demands reflection upon three key sets of questions:

- What am I? Who am I? Where have I come from? What am I called to be?
- What's wrong with me? How have I been distracted from "being myself?"
- How can I fix that? How can I be "healed," so to speak? Or how can I "get back on track?" How can be the person that I am *called* to be? How can I *become myself*?

In the work of Plato, Aquinas, Augustine, and Descartes (as well as films such as *Blade Runner* and *American Beauty*) we will see that becoming a self requires *reflection* on oneself. Such reflection requires asking difficult questions we don't normally ask ourselves. And such questioning is the essence of philosophy as a way of life. So this course is less an introduction to a field of research and more an invitation to a way of life characterized by faithful questioning.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

The goal of the course is to carefully consider several texts dealing with the issues of personal identity and the nature of the human person, which will then give students the tools needed to consider other texts and philosophical problems. As such, the course will focus on depth (rather than a skim-the-surface survey of philosophy); but the skills learned will then allow students to pursue broader horizons independently—though in the course of investigating the questions above, we will also broach classic philosophical questions about God, evil, knowledge, and the nature of reality. Our objectives are:

1. To introduce students to the *discipline* of philosophy—both as a kind of spiritual “discipline” as well as demarcating its field and place within the university.
2. To introduce students to the *history of philosophy* by considering works from each of the ancient, medieval, modern, and postmodern periods which raise the question of the relationship between language and human nature. Issues of continuity and discontinuity will be considered.
3. To help students develop *critical reading skills* which will aid them not only in philosophy but also other disciplines. The course will be very textually oriented, but also encouraging discussion of the texts under consideration and their relevance to contemporary issues.
4. To help students develop *writing skills* within the discipline and in general. Assignments will include both expository projects that require the student to grasp and summarize arguments within a text, presenting them in a clear and concise fashion, as well as the application of philosophical ideas to contemporary issues and challenges. Opportunity will also be given to develop a critical writing voice when engaging the texts.
5. To engage in critical reflection upon the Christian worldview and its implications for how we think about issues of human identity and social existence.

6. To create opportunities for students to reflect upon their own calling and vocation as Christians—as *humans* created in the image of God—through reading philosophical texts, engaging in philosophical analysis, and articulating philosophical reflection in writing.

TEXTS [abbreviations employed in course schedule]

Plato, *Five Dialogues*, trans. Grube (Hackett, 1981).

Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Chadwick (Oxford, 1992). [*Conf*]

Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Cottingham (Cambridge, 1996).

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Students who value learning for its own sake, who take responsibility for their work, who devote ample time to careful reading before class, who listen carefully and take conscientious notes, and who engage their peers in discussion will do well in this class. Students who are just jumping through a hoop, who are trying to do as little as possible, who lack any curiosity, who fail to attend class or engage in class discussions will *not* do well. With that in mind, the specific graded components are as follows:

1. Regular attendance, reading of texts, completion of homework, and participation in class discussions are the essential foundation for succeeding in this introduction to philosophy. [10%]

2. Two exams, a Mid-Term and Final. Review questions will be distributed in advance to aid study. [2x20%=40%]

3. Two film reflection papers: (1) a 4-page Reflection Paper on the relation between soul and body and the essence of the person in Plato's *Phaedo* and Aquinas in relation to either *Bladerunner* or *The Matrix* (due April 7); (2) a 4-page reflection paper on *American Beauty* in light of Augustine's *Confessions*. Detailed instructions will be provided in class and students are encouraged to consult with the instructor about their projects. [2x20%=40%]

4. A final reflection project, related to David Foster Wallace's Kenyon College commencement address (recently published as "This is Water"): In light of our philosophical explorations in Plato, Descartes, and Augustine, students can either (1) write a letter to David Foster Wallace, engaging and critiquing his articulation of "the good life"; or (2) write their own commencement address as an alternative to Wallace's. Further instructions will be provided in class. Student projects will be presented either orally or via a "poster presentation" format. [10%]

GRADING

Your final grade will be calculated on the basis of the above breakdown; *all assignments must be completed to receive a final grade*. Late assignments will not be accepted. Grade/percentile equivalents in the Department of Philosophy are as follows:

A 100-95	B+ 89-87	C+ 79-77	D 69-65
A- 94-90	B 86-83	C 76-73	F 64-0
	B- 82-80	C- 72-70	

Satisfactory completion of assignments constitutes C-level work; B-level work exhibits a comprehension and understanding of philosophical concepts, terms, and categories (and their relation) and well-reasoned reflection on the topics and texts; A-level work is characterized by all of the above plus a creative appropriation, understanding, and communication of philosophical ideas.

A note on grading philosophy: all grades are *earned*, and grades are assigned for the *quality* of work, not the *quantity* of work (which is why I generally have a policy against "extra credit")

assignments). Some students seem to assume that they, in effect, begin with 100% and then “lose” points through the course of the semester. But in fact, the opposite is true: you begin with 0% and need to *earn* your points throughout the semester.

ACADEMIC ETHICS

The instructor, and Calvin College, highly value academic integrity and excellence. As such, no violation of academic integrity (e.g., plagiarism, use of sources without citation, use of internet resources without documentation) will be tolerated. (Students are responsible for consulting and understanding the College’s policy on Academic Integrity, *Calvin College Student Conduct Code*, I.13-4). Any violation of academic integrity will result in failure of the course and referral to the Dean, where the violation will be put on record.

A NOTE ON CLASS DISCUSSIONS

I hope that our class will involve lots of discussion, questions, and conversational give-and-take. In order to facilitate that, please know that I suffer from some hearing loss: because of the pitch range that is affected, I find it particularly difficult to hear higher-pitched speakers (usually women), and I have trouble making out consonants (so words sometimes sound mumbled to me). I note this only so that you don’t feel uncomfortable if I ask you to repeat an answer or question. If I do so, I’m not “calling into question” your contribution; I’m just trying to hear it. It is particularly helpful if I can see you when speaking to me, so you might keep that in mind. Thanks!

AND A NOTE ON LAPTOPS IN CLASS

While I recognize that there can be benefits of taking notes on one’s laptop, there are also drawbacks to having laptops present in the classroom (the clicking of keys can be annoying to neighbors, the light of the monitor can be distracting, and the fleeting presence of wi-fi presents its own temptations). With the drawbacks in mind, the default is to *not* permit laptops in class, but I will entertain requests to use them and will certainly concede any recommendations made by Student Academic Services.

COURSE SCHEDULE (subject to revision)

The course is divided into three units:

- I. What is Philosophy?: An Introduction to Philosophy and the Christian Worldview
- II. What is a Human Being?: Plato, Descartes, and Aquinas
- III. What is a Human Being Called to Be?: Augustine and David Foster Wallace

<i>Date</i>	<i>Topic</i>	<i>Readings/Assignments</i>
September	8T Introductory Session: Who Are We? What is Philosophy?	
	10R What is a Philosopher?: Socrates' <i>Apology</i>	Plato, 17a-25e (pp. 23-31)
	15T What is Philosophy?: <i>Apology</i> , cont'd	Plato, 26a-42a (pp. 31-44)
Quiz	17R Who am I? What am I? Body, Soul, and the Human Person in Plato's <i>Phaedo</i>	Plato, 57a-72e
	22T Plato's <i>Phaedo</i> , cont'd	Plato, 72e-95a
	24R Plato's <i>Phaedo</i> , cont'd	Plato, 95a-118a
	29T What am I?: Plato's <i>Phaedo</i> and Descartes' <i>Meditations</i>	Descartes, pp. 3-23
October	1R Am I Alone?: Descartes, God, and Other People	Descartes, pp. 24-36
	6T To Err is Human?: The Problem of Evil	Descartes, pp. 37-43

	8R	Descartes: Conclusion and Review	
	13T	[Review Session]	Review Questions
	15R	MID-TERM EXAM	
	20T	What am I?: Body and Soul in Aquinas— Another View	Aquinas, <i>ST</i> Ia.75.4,6; 76.1 [Handout and online]
	22R	<i>Bladerunner</i> Screening	
	27T	[Academic Advising: No Class]	
	29R	<i>Bladerunner</i> Discussion: What is a Human Being?	
November	3T	Who am I? Where did I come from? Augustine's <i>Confessions</i> , Book I	<i>Conf</i> 3-23 Reflection Paper 1 Due
	5R	What's Wrong With Me? Augustine's <i>Confessions</i> , Book II	<i>Conf</i> 24-34
	10T	How Do I Entertain Myself? Augustine's <i>Confessions</i> , Book III	<i>Conf</i> 35-51
	12R	Who are (or should be) my Friends? Augustine's <i>Confessions</i> , Books IV and VI	<i>Conf</i> 56-64, 98-110
	17T	How can I become myself? Augustine's <i>Confessions</i> , Book VIII	<i>Conf</i> 133-154
	19R	<i>American Beauty</i> Screening	
Project outline due	24T	<i>American Beauty</i> Screening	
	26R	[Thanksgiving Recess]	
December	1T	Lester Burnham's <i>Confessions</i> : A Discussion of <i>American Beauty</i> in light of Augustine	Reflection Paper 2 Due
	3R	What Does the Good Life Look Like?	David Foster Wallace, "This is Water" [handout]
	8T	Review for Final Exam	Review questions
	10R	Student Presentations & Poster Session	

Final Exam: **Wednesday, Dec. 16, 1:30pm** [no exceptions]