PH 2001: Contemporary Philosophy
Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology

Spring 2015
Mondays, 9:40 AM–12:30 PM
DSPT 1

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Course Description and Objectives:

This course is an introductory survey of the main figures and philosophical movements of the late 19th and 20th centuries. Students will be introduced to pragmatism, analytic philosophy, phenomenology, hermeneutics, existentialism, postmodernism, and deconstruction. The focus of the course will be a close, critical study of some of the most important western philosophical texts from the last century and a half, including works from Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Peirce, James, Frege, Moore, Russell, Wittgenstein, Ayer, Carnap, Austin, Ryle, Quine, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Gadamer, Derrida and Foucault. This course partially fulfills the historical philosophy area requirement for the Philosophy or Concurrent M.A. program. It also satisfies in part the plan of study in philosophy required by the Western Dominican Province’s Ratio Studiorum.

By the end of the semester, students should be able to explain the fundamental principles and distinctive characteristics of the main philosophical movements within contemporary philosophy, and assess their relative strengths and weaknesses, particularly in their ability to address the perennial questions of philosophy regarding the meaning of existence, the possibility of knowledge of the world, the nature and being of things, and how we are to act and live.
Course Requirements:

Each class session will consist of both lecture and discussion. Students will be expected to carefully prepare assigned readings in order to actively participate in the conversation and raise thoughtful questions in class. To aid in this preparation, each week students will be given several questions related to the reading, and asked to write a brief response to each (no more than 100 words per question). Responses should be submitted via Moodle, and be completed before the beginning of that week’s class. No credit will be given for late assignments.

Students are expected to be present for class sessions, following the policies set forth in the DSPT Student Handbook. Absences will significantly affect the students’ final grade. Students should plan, in particular, to be present for the final exam on May 18, 2014, since a make-up exam will be given only in the event of a serious illness (with a doctor’s note) or an equally grave reason. Students with disabilities or whose first language is not English are encouraged to speak with the instructor about any special needs they might have.

Students will be evaluated according to the quality of their class participation, their understanding of class material as demonstrated by weekly assignments, a comprehensive final exam, and a final research paper of 15-20 pages. These assignments are designed to help students develop their own critical thinking on issues in contemporary philosophy and articulate their understanding of contemporary approaches to perennial philosophical issues both orally and in writing. They also offer students the opportunity to show their growth in the DSPT’s institutional goals of integrative thinking, self-direction, and collaborative learning. All sources in the final research paper should be cited using proper “Turabian” format (see Kate L. Turabian, A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations. Eighth Edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). Students should conscientiously avoid plagiarism, and are asked to consult the DSPT Student Handbook for the DSPT’s policies regarding academic honesty. A paper proposal consisting of a short paragraph describing a student’s chosen topic, along with a preliminary bibliography, should be submitted by April 10. The final research paper is due no later than May 22, 2014.
Grading: Class Participation and Weekly Assignments: 30%
Research Paper: 35%
Final Exam: 35%

Assigned Texts:


Weekly reading assignments will be taken from these assigned texts, as well as from readings posted on Moodle (http://moodle.gtu.edu).

Course Schedule:

2/2: Introduction to the Course

2/9: Kierkegaard and Nietzsche
    Søren Kierkegaard, selections from *Fear and Trembling*
    Friedrich Nietzsche, selections from *On the Genealogy of Morals*
2/16: No Class (President’s Day)

2/23: American Pragmatism: Peirce, James, and Dewey
Charles Sanders Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief,” “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” and “What is a Sign?”
William James, Pragmatism, Lectures I, II, IV, and VI

3/2: The Origins of Analytic Philosophy: Frege, Moore, and Russell
Gottlob Frege, “On Sinn and Bedeutung” and “Thought”
G. E. Moore, “Proof of an External World”
Bertrand Russell, “Logical Atomism”

3/9: Wittgenstein
Selections from the Philosophical Investigations and On Certainty

3/16: Logical Positivism
Ayer, Language, Truth, and Logic, Chs. 1 and 6
Rudolf Carnap, “The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language”

3/23: No Class (Reading Week)

3/30: Analytic Philosophy Comes of Age: Austin, Ryle, Quine, and Davidson
J. L. Austin, “A Plea for Excuses”
Gilbert Ryle, from The Concept of Mind, Ch. 1
W.V.O. Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”

4/6: No Class (Easter Monday)

4/13: Phenomenology I: Edmund Husserl
Edmund Husserl, “Philosophy as Rigorous Science”
4/20: Phenomenology II: Martin Heidegger
   Martin Heidegger, selections from *Being and Time*

4/27: Phenomenology and Existentialism
   Jean-Paul Sartre, selections from *Being and Nothingness* and
   “Existentialism is a Humanism”
   Merleau-Ponty, Preface from *The Phenomenology of Perception*

5/4: Hermeneutics
   Hans-Georg Gadamer, selections from *Truth and Method*, Part II

5/11: Postmodernism and Deconstruction
   Jacques Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context”
   Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?”
   Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”

5/18: Final Exam

5/22: Final Research Paper Due by 5 PM

N.B.: The instructor reserves the right to revise the course syllabus as the need arises.