

Questions That Matter SYLLABUS LITE

Please see Subject Learning Guide and Syllabus for full details

Class time and room: Monday 1pm AT-1.12 | Agora Cinema
Thursday, 1pm, ELT-ELT1 | East LT 1

Instructor: Professor Rob Wilson

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A. GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE SUBJECT

Questions That Matter is the new introductory philosophy subject at La Trobe, replacing the previous general introductory subject, *Philosophical Problems*. At its core this year will be questions about values, ethics, politics, society, and the self, as well as questions about the philosophical traditions in which those questions are raised and answered. PHI1QTM satisfies the **Global Citizenship Essential** at La Trobe.

As a discipline, philosophy is typically concerned with **questions that matter** across the whole of human inquiry. Questions that we will address in this subject include:

- Are our moral values relative to, rather than universal across, different cultures?
- Does morality crucially involve human pleasure and pain?
- Can philosophy cut across cultural and national boundaries?
- Do individual citizens have rights that no government can legitimately interfere with?
- Is capitalism necessarily exploitative of citizens who are wage labourers?
- Is the body of differential significance across the sexes?

Six things are distinctive about PHI1QTM: (1) There is a full set of course notes, written by the lecturer, covering the material in each unit in the subject that will serve as a textbook-like supplement to the lectures and other readings. (2) Since the lecturer's long-term involvement with [philosophy for children](#) and in bridging across community-university boundaries shapes his view of teaching and mentoring, this introduction to philosophy will aim to ground the abstract thinking you do in everyday life. (3) Throughout the subject there will be explicit attention given to the nature of philosophical traditions and the question of who gets to do philosophy (or be viewed as a philosopher). (4) Students will be encouraged to develop their own philosophical thinking and the skills that involves through practice and active learning strategies in dialogue and writing. (5) In relation to (2)-(4) above, we will watch and discuss the film *Surviving Eugenics* (2015) and use the site [EugenicsArchives.ca](#) as stimuli for tutorial discussions in Unit 3 and perhaps elsewhere in the course of the semester. (6) You can attain all materials for the subject without any cost; if you buy the required book by Mill the total cost for course materials will be around \$10.

B. BACKGROUND AND SUBJECT OBJECTIVES

PHI1QTM has no formal pre-requisites. Amongst the objectives of the subject are **for you to**:

- **acquire** some *substantial knowledge* about issues at the heart of moral and political philosophy, and more generally about philosophical reflection on values, citizenship, and society
 - **develop** *critical thinking skills* that allow you to probe beneath the surface of what you read and hear both in class and beyond it
 - **improve the quality** of your own *thinking and writing* about ethics and politics
 - **become** a *more sophisticated philosophical thinker* about values, citizenship, and society
 - **see how to apply** the (at times abstract) knowledge you acquire in the subject to *everyday moral and political issues* and issues that matter to you.
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C. THEMATIC OVERVIEW

The subject is divided into **six two-week units**, each of which has a particular focus. The units are:

1. **Introduction: Arguing About Values**
2. **Happiness and Moral Theory: Utilitarianism**
3. **Probing the Boundaries of Philosophy**
4. **Questions About Freedom and Justice: Libertarianism**
5. **Questions about Sex and Gender**
6. **Questions About Society: Marxism**

D. SUBJECT MATERIALS

The materials for PHI1QTM consist of

- *one required book* (don't worry: like me, it's short!)
- *an integrated set of short articles and essays by prominent philosophers*
- *a set of detailed course notes that provide guidance to readings and discussions*

Between them, these subject materials represent a mixture of classic philosophical texts, readings from contemporary philosophers, and explanatory and supplementary notes written by the instructor that should bridge between these texts and readings and the lectures. *All materials are available through the subject Reading List and the LMS site for the subject.*

E. WORKLOAD AND SUBJECT REQUIREMENTS

The *reading load* for the subject is light-to-moderate in quantity and moderate in overall level. On average, the required reading each week comes to about **25 pages** without the course notes, and to approximately **33 pages** with them. The *writing load* is moderate. We will focus on *developing your philosophical thinking skills through your writing*. Assessment will be determined by the following *equally-weighted* components:

- first essay (1000 words), based on Units 2-3, due by Thursday **26th April, 2018**
- second essay (1000 words), based on Units 4-5, due by Thursday **24th May, 2018**
- tutorial and online participation, including attendance and preparation at tutorials, regular, short, low-risk writing assignments, and active involvement in tutorials and web discussions for the subject
- final examination (covering the whole subject), at the scheduled time in the final exam schedule.

Each of these components will be worth **25%** of your final grade.

F. UNIT OUTLINES, READINGS, AND GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. Introduction: Arguing About Values

- 1a. Kwame Anthony Appiah, 2006, "Moral Disagreement", ch.4 of his *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: Norton, 2006), pp.45-67. Argues that there are three sources of disagreement about values—lack of shared vocabulary, differing interpretations of a shared vocabulary, and assigning different weights to the same values. Chapter poised to argue (in the next) that moral disagreement across cultures is not inevitable.
- 1b. David Wong, 2014, "Integrating Philosophy with Anthropology in an Approach to Morality", *Anthropological Theory* 14(3), pp.336-355. Identifies three desiderata than any account of morality should satisfy, points to tensions between them, and then argues that they can be mutually satisfied. They are recognize significant diversity and variation, specify criteria for demarcating morality, and distinguish appropriate (true, justified) moralities from inappropriate moralities.
- 1c. Robert A. Wilson, 2018, "The Feeling of Eugenics", typescript. Introduces the idea of eugenics and the author's own experiences with people who were subject to eugenic practices, such as sexual sterilization, and explains why this makes eugenics seem not so distant in history.

Guiding questions

- What is everyday morality and how is it related to philosophical ethics?
- What does it mean to say that morality is objective, or to question whether it is?
- What does moral relativism say? What reasons are there to accept or reject moral relativism?

2. Happiness and Moral Theory: Utilitarianism

- 2a. John Stuart Mill, 1859, *Utilitarianism*, George Sher (ed.), 2nd edition (Hackett Publishers, 2002). Mill's classic defence of utilitarianism that raises questions about happiness and its place in both moral theory and human life.
- 2b. Martha C. Nussbaum, 2004, "Mill Between Aristotle & Bentham", *Daedalus*, 133(2): 60–8. A general introduction to Mill that locates his views of happiness with respect to both the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle and the British eighteenth-century legal philosopher Jeremy Bentham.

Guiding questions

- What do utilitarians say about the foundations of morality?
- What is the best way to think about happiness in utilitarian moral theory?
- Can objections to utilitarianism be overcome by attending to the varieties of utilitarianism?

3. Probing the Boundaries of Philosophy

- 3a. Charles Mills, 1994, "Non-Cartesian *Sums*: Philosophy and the African-American Experience", *Teaching Philosophy* 17 (September 1994). Reprinted in his *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp.1-19. Uses the contrast between Descartes' *sum* and Ralph Ellison's report of what "I am" in his *Invisible Man* to engage in making, as he says, "the black experience philosophically visible, in part through attempting to remove the conceptual and theoretical cataracts on the white eye" (p.xvi, *Blackness Visible*).
- 3b. Bryan Van Norden, 2017, "Western Philosophy is Racist", *Aeon Magazine*, 31 October 2017. <https://aeon.co/essays/why-the-western-philosophical-canon-is-xenophobic-and-racist> This is a reworked version of ch.1 of Van Norden's *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017) and argues that philosophy as it is taught in most universities in North America (at least) is culturally narrow and subsequently racist.
- 3c. Eric Schwitzgebel, 2007, "Human Nature and Moral Education in Mencius, Xunzi, Hobbes, and Rousseau", *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 24, no.2 (2007), pp.147-68, especially pages 147-155. <http://www.jstor.org.ez.library.latrobe.edu.au/stable/27745086>. Discusses Hobbes and Rousseau on the state of nature and examines the views of human nature of each in comparison with the Confucian Chinese philosophers Mencius and Xunzi by focusing on their accounts of moral development.

Guiding questions

- In what ways can we think about the various parts of, or divisions within, philosophy?
- Why might someone think that philosophy is racist, sexist, or exclusionary in some way?
- Are philosophical questions open to all people to ask, reflect on, and answer?

4. Questions about Freedom and Justice: Libertarianism

- 4a. Robert Nozick, 1973, "Distributive Justice", from chapter 7 of his *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 1973, pp.149-164, 169-182. A defence of a libertarian view in political philosophy that argues that only a state with limited power can be justified.
- 4b. Susan Moller Okin, 1989, "Libertarianism: Matriarchy, Slavery, and Dystopia", ch.4 of her *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, 1989, pp.74-88. Argues that Nozick's view is subject to refutation by a *reductio ad absurdum* argument that appeals to the distinctive role of women in the reproduction of children.

- 4c. Eli Clare, 1999, “Freak Show”, from Clare’s “Freaks and Queers”, in *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation*, 1999, pp.71-81. Discusses the historical phenomenon of “freak shows” and their significance for thinking about disability and other forms of marginalized difference.

Guiding questions

- In political philosophy, what do libertarians believe in?
- What does Nozick’s entitlement theory imply about distributive justice?
- What problems does the entitlement theory face, and can they be met?

5. Questions about Sex and Gender

- 5a. Simone de Beauvoir, 1948-49, “Conclusion”, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1948), pp.156-159; and *The Second Sex* (Vintage Books, 1989), pp.xiii-xxix, 33-37. These selections from Beauvoir’s work contain some of her classic statements about sex and gender and their significance.
- 5b. Judith Butler, 1989, “Gendering the Body: Beauvoir’s Philosophical Contribution,” in Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall (eds), *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy* (Unwin Hyman, 1989). Argues that Beauvoir’s insights about “becoming a woman” give us reason to rethink sex and gender more generally.
- 5c. Li Dàzhāo, 1919, “Women’s Liberation and Democracy”, translated by Justin Tiwald. Reprinted in Justin Tiwald, & Bryan Van Norden, (eds) *Readings in Later Chinese Philosophy: Han to the 20th Century* (Hackett Publishing, 2014), pp.359-361. A short pair of arguments from an early twentieth-century Chinese philosopher for why women’s liberation is crucial to full democracy.
- 5d. Sally Haslanger, 2017, “Epistemic Housekeeping and the Philosophical Canon: A Reflection on Jane Addams’ *Women and Public Housekeeping*”, in Eric Schliesser (ed.), *Ten Neglected Classics of Philosophy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017). Argues for the significance of Jane Addams’s broadsheet for philosophical questions about gender, governance, and the value of labour.

Guiding questions

- When Beauvoir says that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”, what does she mean?
- What arguments does Dàzhāo give for thinking that women’s liberation is crucial to democracy?
- In what ways is women’s labour of special value, according to Addams?

6. Questions about Society: Marxism

- 6a. Jonathan Wolff, 2017, “Karl Marx”, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Also online @ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/marx/>. Provides a general overview of Karl Marx and his contributions to thinking about capitalism, society, and social change.
- 6b. Karl Marx (1844-1859), “Estranged Labour” (1844), *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, sections I and II (1848), and “Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859). Free and online from the *Marx and Engels Internet Archive* @ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/>. These selections from the early work of Marx introduce key concepts such as alienation as well as the foundations for Marx’s critique of capitalism.

Guiding questions

- How does Marx think of alienation and how is it related to labour and capitalism?
- What does historical materialism claim about large-scale social change?
- What lies at the core of Marx’s critique of industrial capitalism?

Who is the instructor? I am the new professor of philosophy at La Trobe, having recently returned to Australia after more than 20 years of teaching in Canada and the United States. I am a long-standing member of the [Luxuriant Flowing Hair Club for Scientists](https://www.improbable.com/hair) (<https://www.improbable.com/hair>).