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.
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


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


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


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

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
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).