

INTRODUCTION TO WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

“The Power of Curiosity”

Instructor: Prof. Perry Zurn (he/him)
Office: Batelle-Tompkins 112
Office Hours: T/F 1:00-2:00

Location: TBD
Time: T/F 2:30-3:45
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COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course introduces students to the history of Western philosophy through the story of curiosity. That is, students gain familiarity with classical and contemporary philosophical figures, concepts, arguments, and methodologies by tracking a single word—curiosity—across the eons. Following curiosity’s transformation from distraction and disease, to scientific inquiry and innate intellectual capacity, to imperial affect and force for political change—this course offers a unique and powerful introduction to Western philosophy. There are three families of famously recalcitrant conundrums in philosophy. Philosophers tackle these through a series of metaphysical questions (e.g. What is real? What is personhood?), epistemological questions (e.g. What is true? How do we know?), and ethical questions (e.g. What is good? What is justice?). In this course, we take curiosity as a philosophical problem in itself and ask: Are there better or worse ways to be curious or to practice curiosity? What is curiosity’s relationship to knowledge and education? Does curiosity make us human? And how might curiosity be practiced collectively, across different social groups and values? Ultimately, we explore philosophy itself as a practice of curiosity. What does it mean to practice philosophical curiosity responsibly—even mindfully—in an increasingly distracted and fractured era?

COURSE GOALS:

- Become familiar with philosophical figures, concepts, arguments, and methodologies
- Trace the term, concept, and practice of curiosity across the Western philosophical canon
- Grapple with the political implications of curiosity, especially for marginalized groups
- Sharpen one’s own capacity for inquisitive awareness, through both speech and writing
- Practice and theorize curiosity in community, from an ethico-politically informed perspective

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS:

- Participation:* 10%
Participation includes attendance, questions, presentation of one’s own ideas, representation of others’ ideas, etc., as well as practicing the attitudes of curiosity, attention, and humility.
- “Choose to be Curious” Exercises* (3 available; 3 required) 15%
In these exercises, students analyze the competing definitions and the various functions of curiosity. For each assignment, listen to two podcast episodes and write a 2 pg. reflection identifying 1) the definitions of curiosity and 2) the practices of curiosity that you hear.
- Short Essays:* (5 possible; 3 required) 45%
In the short essay, students analyze and evaluate ancient and or contemporary philosophies of curiosity. Each short essay should be 3-4 pages and respond to an assigned prompt.
- Final Paper:* 30%
The final paper should be 8-10 double-spaced pages in length. For this final paper, you will be asked to pursue a research question of your own choosing. Enjoy putting your philosophical curiosity to work!

COURSE SCHEDULE:

Be advised that many of these texts are complex. Preparation of reading assignments may involve dictionary work, library research, keeping a notebook of technical terms and arguments, maintaining a running list of questions to be asked during classes and, quite often, reading a text multiple times. All assigned texts will be available as pdfs on Blackboard. Print, mark, and bring to class.

8/28 Introduction and Syllabus

8/31 The Power of Curiosity

I. Ancient and Medieval Philosophy

9/4 Seneca, "Preface," *Natural Questions* (65)

9/7 Plutarch, "On Being a Busybody," *Moralia VI* (100c)

9/11 Augustine, *Confessions* (397), Book X.30-35

9/14 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (1270), II.ii.165-167

9/18 Christian Zacher, "Curiositas," *Curiosity and Pilgrimage* (1976)

9/21 *Choose to be Curious* exercise 1 due

9/25 **Class Cancelled: Prof. Zurn at UPenn Curiosity Talk**

9/28 Lynn Borton Visit (Host of the "Choose to be Curious" Podcast)

II. Modern Philosophy

10/2 Rene Descartes, "The Search for Truth" (1641) and "Wonder" (1649)

10/5 *Choose to be Curious* exercise 2 due

10/9 Blaise Pascale, *Pensées* (1670), pgs. 56-66, 82-84, 229, 288-293

10/12 **Class Cancelled: Fall Break**

10/16 John Locke, *Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), §108-127

III. Existentialism and Pragmatism

10/19 **Class Cancelled: Prof. Zurn at SPEP Conference**

10/23 Friedrich Nietzsche, selections

10/26 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (1927), §35-§38

10/30 William James, *Talk to Teachers* (1899), Chapters 4-7

11/2 John Dewey, *How We Think* (1910), Chapter 3 and 10

IV. Postmodernism

11/6 Michel Foucault, "The Masked Philosopher," "Power, Moral Values, & the Intellectual" (1980)

11/9 Jacques Derrida, "Session 11," *Beast and the Sovereign* (2002)

11/13 Foucault and Derrida, cont. (Or, On Curious Writing; On Plant and Animal Curiosity)

V. Contemporary Political Philosophy

11/16 *Choose to be Curious* exercise 3 due

11/20 Cynthia Enloe, "Being a Curious Feminist" (2004)

11/23 **Class Cancelled: Thanksgiving**

11/27 Eli Clare, "Freaks and Queers," *Exile and Pride* (1999)

11/30 Curiosity and Political Activism (no text)

12/4 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom* (1998), Chapters 2 and 3

12/7 **Class Cancelled: Prof. Zurn at UPenn Curiosity Conference**

12/11 Final Paper due

The syllabus is designed to meet the educational objectives of the course and is, therefore, subject to change at the discretion of the instructor.