Existence and Anxiety

Philosophy 125W

Fall 2015

Thursdays, 5:30-7:30 pm;  Sever Hall 214

Professor: Dr. John Kaag

Email: John\_Kaag@uml.edu and jkaag@fas.harvard.edu

Office: By Appointment

Office Hours: By Appointment

“He must have an inclination, born of strength, for questions that no one has the courage for; the courage for the *forbidden*.” Friedrich Nietzsche suggests that a philosopher, at his or her best, will have the grit to answer questions that, for most of us, most of the time, remain unasked. His [*Antichrist*](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/19322/19322-h/19322-h.htm), for a variety of reasons, gets a bad rap. It could be because it attempted to give the lie to Christian morality, undermine the authority of the priest, and challenge social hierarchies. But I suspect that it bothers readers for a more basic, and I would argue, more interesting, reason: it asks the philosopher in each of us to face our own forbidden questions. So what are *your* forbidden questions? Don’t worry, I won’t tell. What? Having trouble thinking of any?

Don’t be surprised if they aren’t on the tip of your tongue or just beneath the surface of consciousness. We have a vested interest in burying them pretty deep, in not asking certain types of questions. We have developed ingenious methods of suppression—and ingenious methods of suppressing the suppression. These questions are, after all, forbidden. Nietzsche suspects that the iron-clad integrity of our cultural practices, personal relationships, political commitments, religious faiths, and everyday habits depend on our ability (conscious or unconscious) to forego critical reflection on a variety of sensitive subjects. In order to enjoy the secure normalcy of everyday life, we place a gag order on any question that might jeopardize it.

Still having trouble thinking of any?

THIS CLASS WILL HELP.

Let’s start by considering the forbidden questions of other ages and then move a bit closer to home; it’s usually easier to ask questions that are significant to other people, before turning a skeptical gaze on our own lives. So let’s try that. After the Peloponnesian War in 400 BCE, [Socrates](http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.2.i.html) asked a question that stuck in the craw of every Athenian citizen of his day: “Why did we lose?” He was forced to drink hemlock for that one. Around the same time, a man name Siddhartha asked a question that would probably still bug most of us today: “Is material wealth the be all and end all of human life?” His answer to this question led him to abandon his life as an Indian prince. (Granted, he got to become the Buddha, but leaving his family still wasn’t a walk in the park). In the modern era, [Roger Williams](http://books.google.com/books?id=sjmeBMAiyNMC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Roger+Williams&source=bl&ots=1iuYFceXKd&sig=KrTLYjJJdHeYyOuU_xDQaKnFm-c&hl=en&sa=X&ei=yWMRUJSBE-ez6wGAroBY&ved=0CDAQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=Roger%20Williams&f=false) asked if Great Britain of the 17th century provided adequate religious freedom to its citizens. When he answered in the negative, he was forced to head to the New World. Forbidden questions must have followed him to the Americas, however, because [Henry David Thoreau](http://thoreau.eserver.org/civil.html) ended up asking one that landed him in a Massachusetts jail in 1846: “Should our tax dollars support institutions of slavery and unjust war?” This question was, in turn, taken up by the likes of [Ghandi](http://www.gandhiserve.org/cwmg/cwmg.html) and [Martin Luther King](http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html) (and both of them died for it).

Interestingly, the forbidden questions of one age often become the morally obligatory ones of the next. They suddenly become the questions that everyone wishes they had been the first to ask. *But most of the time we aren’t the first.* This is why we now revere these visionary figures as social activists and heroes rather than as subversives and traitors. Unfortunately, Socrates and Thoreau (and many other Nietzschean philosophers) can enjoy their notoriety only in the hereafter.

Which brings us to the second most disturbing question of our analysis. Who exactly does the forbidding when it comes to forbidden questions? Who does the exiling, punishing, and killing of those pesky philosophers who draw into question those unquestionable tenets of our society?

I will pose an answer that I would love for you to disprove: *We do.* We, in our unreflective everyday mode of being-in-the-world, sentence Socrates to death, and put Thoreau and MLK behind bars.

The easiest way to falsify my claim is to voice, at least to yourself, a few of the nasty little questions that we have not been talking about.

Maybe you believe that forbidden questions are finite in number, and that we’re lucky enough to live in an age that has answered all of them. I will respectfully suggest that this is not the case. Every dominant culture believes that it has created, in [Leibniz’s words](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/leibniz-evil/), the best of “all possible worlds.” But it is, in fact, this belief (both self-deceiving and hubristic) that allows these societies to go morally astray, and sometimes wildly so.

So let’s stop beating around the bush.

I cannot ask the questions for you. That is not how philosophy works. But “Existence and Anxiety” will give you the space and tools to ask them for yourself. And maybe even provide some provisional answers.

If these questions make you uncomfortable, trust me, you are not alone. For most of us, most of the time, a great deal turns on our answering questions like these in the affirmative—automatically, habitually, repeatedly. Questions like these interrupt the habit. And this is unpleasant. As a class, we will face this unpleasantness and try to negotiate it in meaningful and constructive ways.

**Course Schedule:**

We will be reading these selections in the following order. I will confirm what the next class’s reading will be at the end of each class. I reserve the right to make changes to the assigned readings or the due dates of assignments. You must have a copy of the reading with you in class on the day it is being discussed or you will not be marked present.

**Week 1-3**

 **Plato – Apology and Crito:** [**http://classics.mit.edu/Browse/index-Plato.html**](http://classics.mit.edu/Browse/index-Plato.html)

**Introduction and Kierkegaard**

**Essay 1 Prompt Distributed (Sept. 18)**

**Week 4**

 **Turgenev and Dostoyevsky**

**Week 5-6**

 **Nietzsche**

**Essay 1 due (October 2)—Revisions will be returned approximately one week after submission. Final drafts of papers are due one week after receiving Revisions.**

**Week 7**

 **Hesse and Heidegger**

**Week 8**

 **Rilke, Jaspers, Kafka, and Marcel**

**Essay 2 Prompt Distributed (Oct. 24)**

**Week 9-10**

 **Camus and Sartre**

**Week 11**

 **Beauvoir and Barnes**

**Essay 2 Due (Nov. 7) Revisions will be returned approximately one week after submission. Final drafts of papers are due one week after receiving Revisions.**

**Week 12**

 **Marquez and Beckett**

**Week 13**

 **Roth and Miller**

**FINAL PAPER DUE DURING FINALS WEEK (NO FORMAL FINAL)**

**Required texts:**

Solomon’s *Existentialism* (2nd Edition)

Several articles will also be sent to you by email. You are encouraged to print these articles out in order to read them. You must bring a copy (either a hardcopy or on a laptop) of the article with you to class on the day it is being discussed.

**Evaluation mechanisms:**

Participation & Attendance

worth: 20% of your final grade

instructions: Regular, punctual attendance is expected; participation in class discussion is strongly encouraged. Regular failure to attend, participate, or bring the day’s assigned readings to class will result in a failing participation grade.

2 Short Essays (5 pages Each)

worth: 50% of your final grade

date: TBA

instructions: These essays will each be worth 25% of your final grade, and will test your knowledge of the arguments covered in the course. Essays must be handed in hard copy and by DORPBOX. Exams should be typed and double-spaced, with 1-inch margins and 12 point font.

Final Paper (1) (10 pages)

worth: 30% of your final grade

due: TBA

instructions: This paper should philosophically analyze the arguments made in at least one of the articles or books we’ve read in class. **You are responsible for choosing your own topic; you are highly encouraged to do this in close consultation with me or Will.** This paper should be between **eight** and **ten** pages. Exams must be handed in hard copy AND DROPDOX. This paper should be typed and double-spaced, with 1-inch margins and 12 point font.

**Policies**:

Assignments & Essays: Assignments must be handed in hard copy and by DROPBOX on the day they are due. Late assignments will be docked 1/3 of a letter grade for every day they are late unless you provide excusing documentation (e.g., a doctor’s note). There will be no extra credit assignments given. **N.B.: Failure to complete any assignment or exam will result in an automatic failing grade in the course. Failure to attend at least 50% of classes (without a valid medical excuse) will result in an automatic failing grade in the course.**

Classroom Etiquette: Cell phones should be silenced; I reserve the right to answer any phone that rings during class. Texting is absolutely forbidden; anyone caught texting will be asked to leave class immediately and will be considered absent for that class. You are required to bring your textbook or readings and syllabus to each class with you.

Students with Disabilities: Any student needing accommodations due to a documented learning, psychological, or physical disability should contact me privately to discuss his or her needs.

Plagiarism: Academic dishonesty is prohibited in all programs of the University. Sanctions may be imposed on any student who has committed an act of academic dishonesty.

Rubric: For an explanation of what is expected from your essay assignments (both midterms and final paper), see the attached rubric developed by Carnegie Mellon University’s Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence.

**Guidelines for writing-intensive courses:**

Writing-intensive courses at Harvard Extension offer students the opportunity to develop their writing skills in the context of a particular academic discipline, and they all feature common elements.  Students will:

\*   develop core writing skills, as defined by the instructor, in the discipline of the course;

\*   complete multiple writing assignments of varying lengths, at least 2 of which must be revised;

\*   produce a minimum of 10-12 pages of writing, exclusive of the required drafts, over the course of the term;

\*   meet at least once in individual conference (in person, by phone, or electronically) with the instructor or TA to discuss writing in progress;

\*   and receive detailed feedback on their drafts and revisions, on both content and expression.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Excellent** | **Good** | **Needs Improvement** | **Unacceptable** |
| **CONTENT** |  |  |  |  |
| **Argument** |  |  |  |  |
| Thesis | A clear statement of the main conclusion of the paper.  | The thesis is obvious, but there is no single clear statement of it. | The thesis is present, but must be uncovered or reconstructed from the text of the paper. | There is no thesis. |
| Premises | Each reason for believing the thesis is made clear, and as much as possible, presented in single statements. It is also clear which premises are to be taken as given, and which will be supported by sub-arguments. The paper provides sub-arguments for controversial premises. If there are sub-arguments, the premises for these are clear, and made in single statements. The premises which are taken as given are at least plausibly true. | The premises are all clear, although each may not be presented in a single statement. It is also pretty clear which premises are to be taken as given, and which will be supported by sub-arguments. The paper provides sub-arguments for controversial premises. If there are sub-arguments, the premises for these are clear. The premises which are taken as given are at least plausibly true. | The premises must be reconstructed from the text of the paper. It is not made clear which premises are to be taken as given, and which will be supported by sub-arguments. There are no sub-arguments, or, if there are sub-arguments, the premises for these are not made clear. The paper does not provide sub-arguments for controversial premises. The plausibility of the premises which are taken as given is questionable. | There are no premises—the paper merely restates the thesis. Or, if there are premises, they are much more likely to be false than true.  |
| Support | The premises clearly support the thesis, and the author is aware of exactly the kind of support they provide. The argument is either valid as it stands, or, if invalid, the thesis, based on the premises, is likely to be or plausibly true.  | The premises support the thesis, and the author is aware of the general kind of support they provide. The argument is either valid as it stands, or, if invalid, the thesis, based on the premises, is likely to be or plausibly true. | The premises somewhat support the thesis, but the author is not aware of the kind of support they provide. The argument is invalid, and the thesis, based on the premises, is not likely to be or plausibly true. | The premises do not support the thesis.  |
| Counter-Arguments | The paper considers both obvious and unobvious counter-examples, counter-arguments, and/or opposing positions, and provides original and/or thoughtful responses. | The paper considers obvious counter-examples, counter-arguments, and/or opposing positions, and provides responses.  | The paper may consider some obvious counter-examples, counter-arguments, and/or opposing positions, but some obvious ones are missed. Responses are non-existent or mere claims of refutation. | No counter-examples, counter-arguments, or opposing positions are considered. |
| **Understanding** |  |  |  |  |
| Text | The paper contains highly accurate and precise summarization, description and/or paraphrasing of text. The paper uses appropriate textual support for these. | The summarization, description and/or paraphrasing of text is fairly accurate and precise, and has textual support, but other passages may have been better choices.  | The summarization, description and/or paraphrasing of text is fairly accurate, but not precise, and the textual support is inappropriate. | The summarization, description and/or paraphrasing of text is inaccurate and/or has no textual support. |
| Ideas | The paper contains a highly accurate and precise description of the issue or problem, along with a careful consideration of possible alternatives or solutions. The paper contains relevant examples, and indicates the salient issues the examples highlight. | The description of the problem or issue is fairly accurate and precise, and possible alternatives or solutions are considered. Examples are given, but similar examples may have been better.  | The description of the problem or issue is fairly accurate but not precise, and possible alternatives or solutions are either not considered, or ill-described. Examples are given, but it is not made clear how they are relevant. | The description of the problem or issue is inaccurate, and possible alternatives or solutions are not considered, and examples are not provided.  |
| **Analysis** | The paper successfully breaks the argument, issue, or problem into relevant parts. The connections between the parts are clear and highly accurate. | The paper successfully breaks the argument, issue, or problem into relevant parts. The connections between the parts are fairly accurate. | The paper breaks the argument, issue, or problem into parts, but some parts may be missing or unclear. The connections between the parts are somewhat accurate.  | The parts identified are not the correct and/or relevant ones. The connections between the parts are completely inaccurate. |
| **Synthesis** | The paper successfully integrates all relevant parts from various places into a coherent whole. The connections between the parts are clear and insightful. | The paper integrates most relevant parts from various places into a mostly coherent whole. The connections between the parts are generally clear. | The paper integrates some parts from various places into a somewhat coherent whole. The connections between the parts are somewhat unclear. | The parts to be integrated are not clear and/or relevant. The connections between the parts are unclear. |
| **Evaluation** |  |  |  |  |
| Argument | The paper evaluates the argument in question by checking for adherence to various standards (validity, soundness, etc.), and checking for informal fallacies. The paper suggests how the argument could be made better according to the appropriate standard.  | The paper evaluates the argument in question by checking for adherence to various standards (validity, soundness, etc.), and checking for informal fallacies. | The paper evaluates the argument in question by checking only the truth of the premises and/or the conclusion, and does not check for informal fallacies. | The paper evaluates the argument in question by whether the author agrees or disagrees with the conclusion or a premise. |
| Position | The paper evaluates the position in question by checking for support in an argument and internal consistency, and by exploring unmentioned plausible alternatives. | The paper evaluates the position in question by checking for support in an argument and internal consistency. | The paper evaluates the position in question by considering its plausibility.  | The paper evaluates the position in question by whether the author agrees or disagrees with it.  |
| **Creation** |  |  |  |  |
| Thesis | Thesis is original, interesting, and relevant. | The thesis is interesting and relevant. | The thesis is slightly off-topic, obviously true (or false), or not really worth writing about. | The thesis is totally irrelevant. |
| Examples | Examples are original, relevant, insightful, and well-used. | Examples are original, relevant, and well-used. | Examples are unoriginal, only somewhat relevant, and/or not well-used. | Examples are missing, irrelevant an/or misused. |
| Alternative Positions | Previously unmentioned alternative positions are explored. | Alternative positions are explored. | Alternative positions are mentioned but not explored. | Alternative positions are ignored. |
| **STYLE** |  |  |  |  |
| **Clarity** | All sentences are complete and grammatical. All words are chosen for their precise meanings. All new or unusual terms are well-defined. Key concepts and theories are accurately and completely explained. Good, clear examples are used to illuminate concepts and issues. Information (names, facts, etc.) is accurate. Paper has been spell-checked and proofread, and has no errors, and no rhetorical questions or slang. | All sentences are complete and grammatical. Most words are chosen for their precise meanings. Most new or unusual terms are well-defined. Key concepts and theories are explained. Examples are clear. Information (names, facts, etc.) is accurate. Paper has been spell-checked and proofread, and has very few errors, and no rhetorical questions or slang. | A few sentences are incomplete and/or ungrammatical. Words are not chosen for their precise meanings. New or unusual terms are not well-defined. Key concepts and theories are not explained. Examples are not clear. Information (names, facts, etc.) is mostly accurate. Paper has several spelling errors, rhetorical questions and/or uses of slang. | Many sentences are incomplete and/or ungrammatical. The author does not acknowledge that key words have precise meanings. Information (names, facts, etc.) is inaccurate. Paper has many spelling errors, rhetorical questions and/or uses of slang. |
| **Organization** |  |  |  |  |
| Introduction | Thesis is clear, and contained in the introduction. The topic is introduced with minimal fanfare. It is made clear how the paper will get to this conclusion, not in a detailed outline of the paper, but rather in a concise summary of the steps in argument.  | Thesis is contained in the introduction. The topic is introduced with little fanfare. It is generally clear how the paper will get to this conclusion, not in a detailed outline of the paper, but rather in a description of the steps in argument. | Thesis is not contained in the introduction. The topic is introduced with too much fanfare. The flow of the paper is described as an outline, and not as a description of the steps in argument. | Only the topic is introduced, with no description of the paper. Or, the paper is described inaccurately. |
| Body | It is very easy to follow the argument. It is made explicit which claims are being used as premises, and how these premises are supposed to support the thesis. New premises are each introduced in new paragraphs or sections. If there are sub-arguments, it is made explicit which argument is the main one, and which are the secondary ones. | It is generally easy to follow the argument. It is clear which claims are being used as premises, and how these premises are supposed to support the thesis. Usually, new premises are introduced in new paragraphs or sections. If there are sub-arguments, it is clear which argument is the main one, and which are the secondary ones. | It is somewhat difficult to follow the argument. It is somewhat unclear which claims are being used as premises, and/or how these premises are supposed to support the thesis. Separate premises are lumped together in the same paragraphs or sections. If there are sub-arguments, it is not clear which argument is the main one, and which are the secondary ones. | It is impossible to follow the argument. It is completely unclear which claims are being used as premises. It is completely unclear how the premises are supposed to support the thesis. Premises are discussed randomly, or not at all. There seem to be many arguments, and it is completely unclear which is the main one. |
| Conclusion | The paper uses the conclusion to tie up loose ends. For example, the paper considers objections to the argument to which it is acknowledged there is no space or expertise to respond. Or, the paper briefly considers the implications of the acceptance of the conclusion for a larger argument, or for a larger issue or problem. Or the paper explains what further work may need to be done in this area. | The paper uses the conclusion to tie up some loose ends, but combines this with a restatement of the introduction. | The conclusion is merely a restatement of the introduction. | The conclusion is missing. |