

Prof. Moris Stern  
Fall 2012

email: moris.stern@gmail.com

CUNY – Brooklyn    Office Hours: TBA (Boylan, 3316)  
CORC 3105 – **Philosophical Issues in Literature**

### Objectives for the Course

- 1) Students will understand literatures of the past, and their relationship to the shaping of the modern world
- 2) Students will understand philosophical literature (in works of fiction and non-fiction), past and present, and will acquire a critical appreciation of their contribution to the life of the individual and society. Students will develop skills of conceptual analysis and argumentation
- 3) Students will develop skills of conceptual analysis and argumentation
- 4) Students will be able to express ideas clearly in writing
- 5) Students will be able to develop a basis for evaluating texts

### **Course Description & Objectives & Expectations:**

The class will address the three basic themes in an introductory philosophy course – reality, knowledge, and values – by means of both philosophical and literary texts. The philosophical texts will conceptually articulate the general key principles in areas of metaphysics, knowledge, and ethics, and the literary texts will dramatize and further explore these concepts by illustrating the application of these principles in specific lived contexts.

We will start with *Siddhartha*, Herman Hesse's 20<sup>th</sup> Century dramatization of one version of the story of Buddha. Siddhartha starts his journey with, and will introduce to us, the question of philosophy: what is reality, ultimately? Nils Rauhut, the author of a contemporary textbook that will clearly and analytically present to us most of the philosophical issues, calls it philosophy's attempt to gain the “the big-picture view of the universe.” Along with the first chapter of *Siddhartha*, we will read Rauhut on this, and the classical Ancient Greek named Parmenides. Parmenides philosophically (by means of an argument) articulates for the first time in Western philosophy the issue of the ultimate structure of the whole of what there is. Parmenides argues for a very peculiar and paradoxical claim, that is also present in the first chapter of *Siddhartha* and sends the bewildered Siddhartha (much like us, the readers) on the journey of attempting to comprehend it. The claim is: All Is Unchanging One (and, therefore, all multiplicity and change are an illusion and an appearance only).

In order to make sense of Siddhartha's (and our own) bewilderment, regarding Parmenides claim, we will study Rauhut's textbook discussion of our mind and body relationship, and the two ways of knowing (by means of perception and by means of thinking, empiricism and rationalism) that emerge from this original mind/body dualism in our experience. We will then move on to Rauhut's philosophical discussion of issues

in religion – our mind's attempt to grasp all of what there is as one meaningful whole. Rahut will shed light on the difficulties in comprehending existence as one meaningful whole (the issues with cosmological and design arguments for God's existence, and the problem of evil), which we will attempt to think through in terms of the original dualism of mind and body, and the dualistic knowing by means of thinking and perception.

As we follow Siddhartha on his journey of self-discovery through excessive reclusive asceticism, excessive immersion in the everyday affairs and concerns, and, finally, enlightenment, we will encounter other philosophical issues that Rahut will help us analyze. Can the problem of evil (unjustified suffering) be rectified by means of ethics (whether Utilitarian, Kantian, or Virtue ethics)? In general, the recurring philosophical themes throughout many of these issues is that of substance and essence. Do we have free will, and what is it, or is free will an illusion? In other words, is there a substance endowed with free will that is independent of nature's cause and effect, and how can we describe this freedom's essence? If not, does that relinquish us of the burden and dignity of moral responsibility? Are mind and body one substance, or are they two substances? Does the person remain the same self, or the same substance, as all of his characteristics are changing (the problem of personal identity) – and how can we describe this unchanging identity's essence?

Our next literary text, will be Sartre's *Nausea*, a classic in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Literature as such, and in the Existentialist literature in particular. We will watch Roquentin, *Nausea's* protagonist, experience the gap between our knowledge of what exists and what exists. At first, Roquentin, experiences this gap with regard to objects outside of himself, and, subsequently, Roquentin experiences this gap with regard to himself. At this point, we will revisit and expand Rahut's discussion of issues with and limitations of knowledge. We will discuss whether reality is as it appears to our senses and as we think about it – by way of discussion of philosophical issues concerning perception (the problem of distortion of perspective) and induction (the problem of knowing in terms of universals or kinds or essences, while individuals escape being known). We will try to make sense of Roquentin as a philosophical skeptic who experiences bare existence of each thing and himself, without essence (the specific kind of a thing we know it to be) and without substance (the very thingness of the thing, what makes a thing remain what it is as its properties or qualities change). We will enlist the help of the philosopher Maritain to shed light on the issues of essence, substance, and act (the thing's development according to its essence). As we watch Roquentin's experience of one's own and the world's bare existence (without essence, substance, act) unfold – we will have an opportunity to analyze what this experience of the world and the self is like, whether it is liveable continually, and whether it is necessary (at least sometimes) in order to experience and live in freedom.

### *I. Objectives/Goals*

**Understanding** — When the course is complete, students will know the following concepts, among others:

- personal identity, free will, causality, determinism, mind, body essence, substance and accidents, potency and act,, impartiality, utilitarianism,

Kantianism, virtue, rights (negative and positive), duties, (negative and positive), dignity, utility, happiness, empiricism, induction, realism, idealism, skepticism, certainty, prima facie, necessity, contingency, universality, individuality.

**Application** — Students will illustrate the above concepts by:

- 1) analyzing these concepts in terms of their constituent concepts
- 2) analyzing one's own experience in terms of these concepts
- 3) analyzing these concepts in terms of their problematization by counterarguments

**Experience** — The experiences that students will engage in during this course will be:

- 1) reading, analyzing and thinking about philosophical and literary texts
- 2) discussion with classmates
- 3) writing short paper assignments

**Values** — Students will learn the value of:

- 1) reading, analyzing and thinking about complex texts
- 2) discussing with peers
- 3) thinking deeply about ethics and the concepts of philosophy, as such, and in the context of literature

## II. *Expectations*

### **Instructor's Duties and Responsibilities**

- be available by email and respond within 24 hours
- be available for office hours, in order to discuss the subject matter of the class, your progress in class, etc.
- provide clearly explained assignments – reading, discussion, and writing – and give you sufficient time to complete these without rush
- provide a clear explanation of what will be expected for successful assignment completion and how it will be graded

### **Student's Duties and Responsibilities**

- read the assigned material before discussions
- read the assigned material again before working on writing assignments
- hand in paper assignments on time
- always be courteous in your discussion to members of this course community

### **Course Assignments and Grading Policy:**

#### I. 4 Written Assignments – PAPERS. Each Paper is 25% of the grade.

- a) There will not be any revisions for papers – do your best and incorporate what you learn from writing earlier papers into later papers
- b) All papers will be submitted through Blackboard and all plagiarism will be reported to the Dean

II. Participation & discussion in class & CLASS DISTRACTIONS & ATTENDANCE  
GRADE POLICY (concerning *absences* and *text-messaging*, *web surfing*, etc.)

- concerning *distractions*
    - there is to be no text-messaging, web surfing, or other distractions in class
      - if you are using a laptop, and I see that you are using the keyboard in class, I will ask you to show me at the end of the class what you have taken as notes
    - during each class, the first instance of a distraction will receive a warning, and each following instance will lower an assignment grade by one notch: for example, if one of your assignment grades is B+, the grade for that assignment goes down to B on the first lowering, further down to B- on the second lowering, and so on
  - concerning *absences*
    - all absences must provide a documented excuse (for example, a doctor's note) or be discussed and arranged with the professor
    - excessive absences especially must be justified medically
    - each unexcused absence lowers an assignment grade by one notch (see explanation above)
- Class participation and discipline will either lower or raise the final class grade – as these reflect the effort the students demonstrate in grasping the material.

**Required Text:**

1)

**Title:** Nausea

**Author:** Jean-Paul Sartre

ISBN: 0811217000

- IN COLLEGE BOOKSTORE

2)

**Title:** Siddhartha

**Author:** Hermann Hesse

ISBN: 081120068X

- IN COLLEGE BOOKSTORE

3)

**Title:** Ultimate Questions: Thinking about Philosophy

**Author:** Nils Ch Rauhut

ISBN: 020573197X

- IN COLLEGE BOOKSTORE

4)

**Title:** Introduction to Philosophy

**Author:** Jacques Maritain

ISBN: 0826477178

- PDF WILL BE PROVIDED, or

<http://archive.org/stream/introductiontoph00mari#page/n7/mode/2up>

**Course Outline & Calendar:**

Week 1 (by Sept 4th): Rauhut, 1-10, Making Sense of The World (philosophy as “the big-picture view of the universe”); Siddhartha, Ch. 1, The Brahmin's Son (Experience Is Dualistic due to Mind/Thinking and Body/Perception, Oneness of All is Unknowable); Parmenides (The Philosophical Question of the Structure of The Whole of What There Is, and The Claim That All Is Unchanging One/Self in Reality, While All Changing Multiplicity Is Appearance and Illusion) – PDF hand-out

Week 2 (by Sept 10<sup>th</sup>): Rauhut, The Mind/Body Problem, 126-140 (Arguments For and Against Substance Dualism); Rauhut, What Do We Know?, 57-60, 67-72 (Two Ways of Knowing: Empiricism, thinking conforms to perception, and Rationalism, perception conforms to thinking)

Week 3 (by Sept 17<sup>th</sup>): Rauhut, Does God Exist?, 156-176, 185-192 (God, Faith, and Reason; Arguments from Religious Experiences, The Cosmological Argument, The Design Argument, The Problem of Evil: The Problems of Knowledge of The Whole Of What There Is)

Week 4 (due on Sept 24<sup>th</sup>): Paper 1: What are the limitations of knowledge – as such and with regard to the question of philosophy – and how does our dual knowing through both the mind and the senses accounts for these limitations?

Week 5 (by Oct 1<sup>st</sup>): Rauhut, 211-231 (Utilitarianism, Duty-Based, and Virtue Ethics – Ethics as Also an Attempt to Rectify the Problems with Knowledge of the Whole of What There Is)

Week 6 (by Oct 8th): Siddhartha, Ch.2, With the Samanas, (Asceticism as Elimination of Striving for Knowledge); Siddhartha, Ch.3, Govinda (Cause and Effect, and the Illusion of Choice); Rauhut, The Problem of Free Will, 77-88, 97-101 (Determinism, Indeterminism, Libertarianism)

Week 7 (due on Oct 15<sup>th</sup>): Paper 2: In what sense does moral responsibility entail choice, and is, then, the concept of cause and effect compatible with responsibility?

Week 8 (by Oct 22<sup>nd</sup>): Siddhartha, Ch.3, Awakening, Ch. 4, Kamala, (Celebration of Multiplicity and Appearances, Empiricism in Knowledge and Ethics, part 1 - benefits); Rauhut, The Problem of Personal Identity (Is there an unchanging identical substance, the person?), 104-124

Week 9 (by Oct 29<sup>th</sup>): Siddhartha, Ch.4, Amongst the People, Ch. 5, Samsara, (Celebration of Multiplicity and Appearances, Empiricism in Knowledge and Ethics, part 2 - harms); Rauhut, 88-97, Compatibilism (Relationship Between Desire and Freedom)

Week 10 (by Nov 5<sup>th</sup>): Paper 3: What are the reasons why desire can pose some problems for morality, personal identity, and freedom?

Week 11 (by Nov 12<sup>th</sup>): Siddhartha, Ch. 5, By the River, Ch. 6, The Ferryman, Ch. 7, The Son, Ch. 8, Om, Ch. 9, Govinda ([Mystical?] Recovery of the Self and All as One)

Week 12 (by Nov 19<sup>th</sup>): Nausea, 4-20 (Experience of the Gap Between Objects We Know and Objects that Exist); Rauhut, Definition of Knowledge, Problems with Perception, The Problem of Induction, Rationalism, 42-47, 60-67, 67-70 (Realism, Indirect Realism, Idealism, Principle of Uniformity of Nature, contingent and necessary truths); Rauhut, 48-57, Skepticism (certain and *prima facie* truths); Maritain, Essence, 189 – 217 (Universality and Necessity of Essences We Know, and Their Requirement for The Possibility of Knowledge); Maritain, Substance and Accidents, 217-239 (Existence is Individual)

Week 13 (by Nov 26<sup>th</sup>): Nausea, 20-57 (Time, and The Requirement of Essence for The Possibility of Adventure), Nausea, 57-94 (Experience, History, and Constitution of Knowledge of Essence)

Week 14 (by Dec 3<sup>rd</sup>): Nausea, 97-126 (Experience of Existence in The Present, Without Essence, and, Therefore, as a Freedom, and Not an Act); Maritain, Act and Potentiality, 239 - 257 (Existence Is an Act)

Week 15 (by Dec 10<sup>th</sup>) Nausea, 127-178 (Experience of Freedom of Existence Without Essence as Boredom and Chaos)

Week 16 (Finals): Paper 4: Why do we have to think of reality as essence, existence, and act – and what happens when we do not (what are the beneficial and the harmful consequences when we do not)?

### Attendance & Plagiarism

- 1) more than 3 absences result in automatic failure of the class
- 2) The state law regarding non-attendance because of religious beliefs (p. 53 in the Bulletin), and your class policies (e.g., attendance, participation, etc)
- 3) if you plagiarize, you fail – no exceptions!
- 4) University Policy on Plagiarism

The faculty and administration of Brooklyn College support an environment free from cheating and plagiarism. Each student is responsible for being aware of what constitutes cheating and plagiarism and for avoiding both. The complete text of the CUNY

Academic Integrity Policy and the Brooklyn College procedure for implementing that policy can be found at this site: <http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/bc/policies>. If a faculty member suspects a violation of academic integrity and, upon investigation, confirms that violation, or if the student admits the violation, the faculty member MUST report the violation.

IMPORTANT NOTE

- 1) bring the needed book to *every* class meeting
- 2) class sessions will be heavily based on the close reading of the text
- 3) students will take turns reading aloud
- 4) the material is difficult, and **YOU WILL BE LOST UNLESS YOU ATTEND CLASS**
- 5) Student Disability Policy

In order to receive disability-related academic accommodations students must first be registered with the Center for Student Disability Services. Students who have a documented disability or suspect they may have a disability are invited to set up an appointment with the Director of the Center for Student Disability Services, Ms. Valerie Stewart-Lovell at 718-951-5538. If you have already registered with the Center for Student Disability Services please provide your professor with the course accommodation form and discuss your specific accommodation with him/her.