Department number PHI 199SEM-LAW

Registration 20922

UB Seminar - 3 credits

Fall 2018

Date(s)/Time(s): MoWeFr 11:00 – 11:50

Location: Talbert 103

3 credits

**Dr. James Lawler, 131 Park Hall, jlawler@buffalo.edu**

Course title: **Morality, Reality, and the Meaning of Life in Popular Film and TV**

Course Description:

Contemporary popular culture TV programs and films often involve the same issues, questions, and probing reflections that philosophers have explored since the time of Plato: How do we know what is a morally right action? How do we know whether something is real or only an illusion or dream? Is there more to reality than what we can experience with our senses? Do individuals have a purpose or destiny arising from external conditions or supernatural forces, or is this a matter for individuals themselves to decide in freedom?

Bringing together pop culture and philosophy is beneficial to both sides. Stories told with skill and imagination in popular culture provide compelling illustrations of ideas treated abstractly and systematically by philosophers. Connecting popular culture with the concepts developed by philosophers makes the concepts seem less abstract, more real. At the same time, by seeing the presence of profound conceptual content in the works of pop culture, we will take these works more seriously—as more than mere entertainment. Sometimes, the best of pop culture provides explorations that take philosophical ideas to unexpected levels, and so occasions a fresh stimulus for deeper philosophical reflection.

And so, bringing together some of the most prominent works in contemporary popular culture with relevant classical texts from the history of philosophy is both entertaining and intellectually fruitful.

The course will examine episodes from the TV series, *The Simpsons* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, as well as the films, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, and *The Matrix*.

**Course materials:**

Course text: James Lawler, *The God Tube: The Hidden Spiritual Message in Pop Culture* (Chicago: Open Court Publishers, 2010).

**Schedule of Lectures**

First four weeks:

Episodes from *The Simpsons*, and chapter one of text.

Topics: Ways of making moral decisions: Intuition (Homer and Marge), Utilitarianism (Bart), Reason (Lisa). Does doing what is right have to conflict with the desire for happiness?

Classroom assessments: weekly quizzes, weekly journal reflections.

Weeks 5-6:

*The Matrix*, and chapter two of text.

Topics: How do we know we aren’t dreaming? What is the nature of virtual reality? Does modern science enable us to distinguish between reality and illusion? What beliefs support morality? Can moral duty and personal happiness be reconciled?

Classroom assessments: weekly quizzes, weekly journal reflections

Weeks 7-8:

Episodes from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and chapter three of text.

Topics: Is there more to reality than what can be perceived by sensation? Can we know things as they are in themselves? What is the experiential basis for belief in heaven and hell, as well as for God (gods), angels, devils, and vampires?

Classroom assessments: weekly quizzes, weekly journal reflections

Weeks 9-10

Woody Allen’s *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, and chapter four of text.

Topics: Is life fundamentally just, or can we really get away with murder? Is there an objective meaning and purpose to life, or is life just what we make of it? Do we live in a dog-eat-dog world of individual competition, where morality is futile? What is the role of the imagination in leading a good life?

Classroom assessments: weekly quizzes, weekly journal reflections

Weeks 11-12

*Matrix Reloaded* and *Matrix Revolutions* and Chapter five of text.

Topics:Can everyone be “the One”? Is there a fundamental choice to make in life? Does our technological civilization blind us to the meaning of existence—and what does love have to do with this? Is there a direction and purpose to human history?

Classroom assessments: weekly quizzes, weekly journal reflections

Weeks 13-14

(etext: Really Good Noodles: Empiricism, Rationalism, Kant and the Matrix)

Topics: The history of modern philosophy from Descartes’ rationalism and Hume’s Empiricism to Kant’s philosophy. This section provides the philosophical background to Kant’s philosophy, which has provided the framework for investigating the issues of the course up to this point.

Classroom assessments: Weekly quizzes, weekly journal reflections

Course Requirements

* Weekly quizzes consisting of true/false, multiple choice, and short essay responses. The lowest two quizzes will be dropped. (25% of final grade) Otherwise, missing quizzes will require a valid excuse for health or other reasons with evidence.
  + Students need to be on top of assigned readings for purposes of informed class discussion and journal writing.
* A one page journal entry per week, available for group discussion and for evaluation by instructor. (20% of final grade)
  + The journal should focus on one topic of particular interest to the student, show comprehension of class readings and lectures, and develop a personal evaluation. The journals will provide a basis for class discussion.
  + The student should focus on possible themes for his/her ePortfolio.
  + Writing assignments will be graded using the Philosophy Department’s rubric for writing assignments, which can be found here: <http://www.buffalo.edu/content/cas/philosophy/undergrad-study/learningoals/ug_rubrics/_jcr_content/par/download/file.res/PHI-Rubric-1.pdf>.
* One 5-10 minute oral presentation at an assigned time so as to coincide with the course presentations. (20% of final grade)
  + Use of PowerPoint is encouraged for such presentations
* Final exam during final exam period (3 hours). (25% of final grade) The final exam date for this class is December 10, 2018 (Monday) from 11:45 to 2:45, in Talbert 103.
  + A list of possible major topics covered in the semester will be distributed in advance of the final exam. The student can prepare outlines for use in the exam—two page “cheat-sheet” with 6 pt minimal font allowed during exam
  + Essay questions will be graded using the Philosophy Department’s rubric for grading essay questions, which can be found here: <http://www.buffalo.edu/content/cas/philosophy/undergrad-study/learningoals/ug_rubrics/_jcr_content/par/download_0/file.res/PHI-Rubric-2.pdf>.
* Class participation (10% of final grade)
  + Use of journals will be emphasized as the basis of class discussions.
  + Failure to have timely journals available will result in a loss of 2% of final grade for each omission, to a maximum of 10%.
  + Timely participation will be graded as 100%

Student Learning Outcomes

Having completed a UB Seminar, students will be able to:

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| Course Learning Outcome | Maps to the Following Program Outcomes / Competencies: | Student Achievement Assessed with the Following Method(s)/Assignments: |
| 1. Think critically using multiple modes of inquiry. | UBGE, SUNY Critical Thinking, MSCHE Critical Analysis and Reasoning | Discussion, quiz, oral presentation, essay exam: reflecting inquiry in visual culture and written word. |
| 1. Analyze disciplinary content to identify contexts, learn fresh perspectives, and debate and discuss problems in the field. | UBGE, SUNY Information Literacy | Discussion, oral presentation: reflecting the step by step development of core philosophical ideas from one set of materials to another. |
| 1. Understand and apply the methods of close reading, note taking, analysis, and synthesis. | UBGE, SUNY Critical Thinking, MSCHE Critical Analysis and Reasoning | Oral presentation, essay writing: lecture outlines on PowerPoint will have room for student notes. The class will compare notes on student note-taking by sharing their notes with one another during class time and discuss how they might improve this skill. Students will outline possible answers to the final essay questions using PowerPoint as an outline tool, with sample presentations for class discussion.  At the end of each section of the course students will provide outline answers to a question that will be one of the possible questions for the final exam--using an outline program such as PowerPoint. As there are six sections, there will be six possible questions on the final, two of which will be chosen for that exam. |
| 1. Recognize and debate ethical issues and academic integrity in a variety of settings. | UBGE, MSCHE Values, Ethics, & Diverse Perspectives | Discussion, oral presentation: the ethical issues presented in the course materials will be related to issues of academic integrity. |
| 1. Demonstrate proficiency in oral discourse and written communication. | UBGE, SUNY Basic Communication, MSCHE Oral and Written Communication | Discussion, oral presentation: students will give oral presentations, using PowerPoint slides, together with a regular journal of written reflections on course ideas. |
| 1. Develop essential research and study skills such as time management. | UBGE, SUNY Information Literacy | All assessment methods: students will prepare oral presentations in stages, with an outline due two weeks in advance. Quizzes are frequent, as well as journals, with regular checking on timeliness. The students will be kept to a strict time-table. There are frequent quizzes because if students wait too long before they are tested they have to cram. As section 8 states: All assessment methods will be evaluated on a regular basis, with small group interactions and the instructor’s evaluations. |
| 1. Utilize the eportfolio for at least one assignment. | UBGE, SUNY Information Literacy, MSCHE Technological Competency | The requirement of keeping a regular journal will be connected with the student’s ePortfolio. |
| 1. Understand the academic expectations pertaining to studentship at the University at Buffalo and to higher learning at a research university. | UBGE | All assessment methods will be evaluated on a regular basis, with small group interactions and the instructor’s evaluations. |

Note: \*This course meets or contributes to meeting the SUNY General Education Requirements (GER) for Critical Thinking, Information Literacy, and Basic Communication: (<http://system.suny.edu/media/suny/content-assets/documents/academic-affairs/general-education/GenedCourseGuidelines_20120530.pdf>), as well as areas of general education required by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education.

Grading scale

* 90-100 A 78-79 B- 65-67 D+
* 88-89 A- 77-77 C+ 60-64 D
* 85-87 B+ 70-74 C 59 and below F
* 80-84 B 68-69 C-

Students should be apprised of how various graded activities will be combined to form their single, final grade for the course. How results from various requirements will be combined into a final grade: relative weightings, make-up policy for tests, etc. Grading Policies should also include:

* Consult the Undergraduate Catalog for the [Explanation of Grades.](http://undergrad-catalog.buffalo.edu/policies/grading/explanation.shtml)
* See also: [Incomplete Grade Policy.](http://undergrad-catalog.buffalo.edu/policies/grading/explanation.shtml#incomplete)

Academic Integrity

Academic integrity is a fundamental university value. Through the honest completion of academic work, students sustain the integrity of the university while facilitating the university's imperative for the transmission of knowledge and culture based upon the generation of new and innovative ideas.

* Reference to the university [Undergraduate Academic Integrity Policy](http://undergrad-catalog.buffalo.edu/policies/course/integrity.shtml) and any additional instructor requirements and comments regarding academic dishonesty.

Accessibility Resources

If you have any disability which requires reasonable accommodations to enable you to participate in this course, please contact the Office of Accessibility Resources, 60 Capen Hall, 645-2608, and also the instructor of this course. The Office of [Accessibility Resources](http://www.student-affairs.buffalo.edu/ods/) will provide you with information and review appropriate arrangements for reasonable

accommodations.

**Writing resources:** the Center for Excellence in Writing (<http://www.buffalo.edu/cas/writing.html>) provides support for written work, and several tutoring centers on campus provide academic success support and resources.