

Religious Studies 65

ON BEING HUMAN:

RELIGIOUS AND PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTIONS OF THE SELF

<i>Semester</i>	Spring 2015
<i>Time</i>	C hour, MWF 10:00-10:50
<i>Location</i>	Wilson Hall 309
<i>Instructor</i>	Thomas A. Lewis Department of Religious Studies 59 George Street, Office 301 Phone: 401-863-3571 Thomas_Lewis@brown.edu
<i>Office Hours</i>	Monday 12-1 and by appointment
<i>Description</i>	<p>This course explores influential classic and contemporary views on what it means to be human. We focus on religious and philosophical explanations of human action and character. To what extent are we free, and in what ways are we determined by traditional authority, our own pasts, irrational impulses, or our physical natures? What is the relation between reason and emotion? What is the significance of embodiment, memory, and desire? How well do we know our own motives? To what extent are we hidden to ourselves?</p> <p>How we answer these questions generally has a strong impact on our views about what it means to live well. Should we aim for independence from the culture and traditions that have shaped us or do we live well through harmonious integration in these traditions and community? Should we live according to metaphors of self-control and discipline or those of organic growth and flourishing? What techniques, practices or training make this flourishing possible?</p> <p>As philosophers and theologians reflect on these matters, issues of faith further complicate the picture. Some hold that a transcendent being plays a role that enables us to reach our proper end, while others aver that we are capable of doing so “on our own” or through the guidance of a community. These claims provoke further questions: Does freedom consist in acting in accord with our every desire, with reason, or with the will of a transcendent being? Even if God plays some role in making flourishing possible, what role do we play in the process? What role does a community play?</p>

This course explores these issues by considering a number of powerful religious and philosophical statements about the nature of the human being and human excellence. Each text introduces an influential perspective for thinking about the topic and has been chosen in part for its enduring relevance to contemporary debates in philosophical and religious ethics. We engage these texts critically, to learn from them as well as to critique them. Together, the readings constitute a conversation filled with sometimes competing and sometimes complementary views on the questions at hand.

We will complement these texts with a number of films that explore the same issues. Considering the texts and the films in relation to each other will highlight the contemporary presence of these classical ideas, provide a new perspective on the underlying questions, and raise novel questions about the films.

Texts

(available at the Brown University Bookstore and on reserve)

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Terence Irwin translation, 2nd edition only).

Augustine, *Confessions* (Henry Chadwick translation).

Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818 text, Norton or Oxford edition).

Charles Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*.

Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (3rd Norton Edition).

The rest of the readings are available on reserve through OCRA.

Requirements

Lecture: Preparation and Participation: You are expected to come to lectures having read the assigned reading carefully and prepared to discuss and ask questions about the material.

Section Participation: The Friday meeting of the course will usually be devoted to discussion sections. *Please consult the schedule to see which weeks will have a Friday lecture and which will have a section.* Not all of the sections will meet on Friday at 10:00. Thus, on section weeks, some of you will *not* be meeting on Friday at 10:00 *but rather* at another time, which will be determined when section assignments are made. Section assignments will be made during the second week of the semester.

Section Preparation: Every other section meeting, by 24 hours before your section, you are required to post to the course website a question regarding the reading. Your question should be connected to a specific passage from the week's reading. Indicate the passage, and write a paragraph developing your question. The question should address an important issue within the material and should be designed to generate discussion. *Alternately*, you may post a response to another student's question. If you

choose this option, be sure to provide 1-2 paragraphs of thoughtful response no later than 24 hours prior to section. Before your section meeting, you are required to read the questions submitted by other members of the section. Participation (in lectures as well as discussion sections) is worth approximately 20% of the final grade.

Three Short Papers: Suggested topics will be distributed in class. The first paper should be approximately 2-3 pages in length and is worth approximately 10% of the final grade. The second and third papers should be 3-4 pages in length and are worth approximately 15% and 20% of the final grade respectively. Papers are due at the beginning of class on the dates indicated on the schedule.

Final Exam: The final exam is **Friday May 15 at 2:00 pm**. The location will be assigned by the registrar. The final exam is worth approximately 35% of the final grade.

Schedule

NB: The schedule and assignments may be revised over the course of the semester.

Introduction

W 1/21

F 1/23 What does it mean to study the “self”?

Aristotle: Cultivating virtuous dispositions

M 1/26 *Nicomachean Ethics*, books 1-2.

W 1/28 *Nicomachean Ethics*, books 3 and 5. Read the discussion of at least one virtue in book 4.

F 1/30 *Lecture*
Nicomachean Ethics, books 6-7.

M 2/2 *Nicomachean Ethics*, books 8 and 10.

8:00 pm: Screening of *Groundhog Day* (location TBA)

W 2/4 [class meets, but no additional reading required]

F 2/6 *Section*

Augustine: Lusts, grace, and memory

M 2/9 First paper due at the beginning of class.

Confessions, book 1.

W 2/11 *Confessions*, books 2-5.

F 2/13 *Section*

M 2/16 Holiday – no class

W 2/18 *Confessions*, books 6-8.

F 2/20 *Section*

M 2/23 *Confessions*, books 9-11.

Immanuel Kant: Reason overcoming tradition

W 3/25 “What Is Enlightenment?” (OCRA).

F 2/27 *Section*

Mary Wollstonecraft: Education, reason, and equality

M 3/2 *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, pages 5-56.

W 3/4 *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, chapters 4 and 9.

F 3/6 *Section*

M 3/9 *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, chapters 11-13.

Mary Shelley: Man, monster, and nature

W 3/11 *Frankenstein*, preface and the first three letters in volume 1.

F 3/13 *Section*

M 3/16 Second paper due at the beginning of class.

Frankenstein, volumes 1-2.

W 3/18 *Frankenstein*, volume 3.

F 3/20 *Section*

M 3/23- spring break

F 3/27

Charles Taylor: Freedom, authenticity, and individuality

M 3/30 *The Ethics of Authenticity*, chapters 1-3.

W 4/1 *The Ethics of Authenticity*, chapters 4-7.

F 4/3 *Section*

M 4/6 *The Ethics of Authenticity*, chapters 8-10.

8:00 pm: Screening of *Pleasantville* (location TBA)

W 4/8 [class meets, but no additional reading required]

F 4/10 *Section* [Taylor]

Saba Mahmood: Disciplining the self

M 4/13 Third paper due at the beginning of class.

W 4/15 *Politics of Piety*, chapter 1.
Politics of Piety, chapter 3.
Recommended: chapter 2.

F 4/17 *Section*

M 4/20 *Politics of Piety*, chapters 4-5 and epilogue.

Conclusion and Review

W 4/22 [class meets, but no additional reading required]

F 4/24 [no class is currently scheduled for this day]