

PROPOSAL FOR A DISCOVER COURSE DEVELOPMENT GRANT

LAWRENCE NELSON
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

Proposed Course

Philosophy 116 (new course): Ethics, Authenticity, Freedom, and Vocation

I. Introduction

This upper division course will be a philosophical inquiry into the moral ideal of being an authentic individual (an authentic self), the meaning and moral significance of freedom (as exercised by choice informed by experience and reflection aimed at self-definition/creation, interacting with others, and altering the world), and the relation of these to vocation. The moral idea in the background in this course will be moral perfectionism, a type of virtue based moral theory which starts from an account of the good life, or the intrinsically desirable life, and urges the individual to develop the properties which are definitive of humanity and to realize what is central in human nature. The main assumption of the course will be that developing (1) an authentic self, (2) one's understanding and practice of freedom, and (3) one's vocation are three of these crucial properties.

Vocation will be understood in three senses: 1) as an individual's choice of major projects in the world such as career, marriage/single/celibate-religious life, and significant civic, church, and community engagements; 2) as response to the call of that which is outside of me, whether from other individuals, strangers, communities, God/spiritual voices, social institutions, or professions; and 3) as the commonplace act of being summoned by some other seeking attention or acknowledgment and (at least implicitly) requesting some kind of response to the call he or she is issuing.

A central premise of the course is that anyone who will ever ask or is asking the classic questions of vocation (What am *I* good at doing? What am *I* passionate about doing? What are *my* values? Where do *I* find meaning in life? Where do *I* and the needs of the world and the other intersect?) should reflect systematically on what it means to be an authentic self and what it means to be an agent with freedom of choice, as well as the basic moral values that attach to authentic freedom. The portion of this course on freedom will not be a study of the metaphysics of freedom or political freedom, but rather a reflection on the experience of freedom and choice in the life world.

The course will be designed to be accessible to students who are not philosophy majors and will be geared toward juniors and seniors. Approval from the Core Curriculum Ethics Committee will be sought for the course to satisfy the Core ethics requirement.

II. How the Course Pedagogy Will Address Students' Vocational Development

It is commonly said that young people go to college, inter alia, to find themselves, to discover who they are, to figure out what areas of academic study interest them—either as inherently interesting and mind-expanding or (and) as sources of method and content that can be used in a profession or job once out of school, and to find a place for themselves in the world they must enter after graduation. This course is intended to offer its target audience (juniors and seniors) ideas, arguments, and insights from a variety of sources (primarily philosophical, but also literary and artistic) that they can encounter, attempt to understand, and reflect upon in addressing these “goals” of college as they move forward through the final years of their higher education and toward the post-college world. It is intended to challenge each individual to simultaneously direct attention inside herself to consider who her authentic self might be and outside of herself to determine what her connections with others and the life-world she inhabits might be. The fundamental movement of the course will be toward each student creating, constructing, choosing, engaging her self, her life-world, and her vocation—but also positing that none of this can be cut out from whole cloth.

III. Tentative Syllabus with Possible Texts, Activities, and Assignments

At this point, I believe the course will address at least three thematic areas. The first will address authenticity and freedom as more than the expression of an individual self or assuming one's assigned place in the world, and reflect on the experience of being a self in the life world. The second will explore the inner-directed, self-help model of freedom and choice which tends to conceptualize freedom as a mesh between what the self wants and what the self reflects upon, as a value unto itself, as an unconnected, unrooted upsurge of the individual that can negate or shed all history, character, relationship, and bodily motivation. The third will consider freedom and authenticity as grounded or founded in the intersubjective world and in dialogue with others and the life world.

A. Texts

Philosopher Charles Guignon's recent book, *Being Authentic* (Routledge, 2004), looks like it could be an excellent source for the study of authenticity as it presents a historical examination of the views of philosophers such as Socrates, Augustine, Descartes, Rousseau, Heidegger, Bernard Williams, and Alasdair MacIntyre and of other writers and intellectuals such as Dostoevsky, Rilke, Jung, Freud, Geertz, and Calhoun. Further reading may include portions of philosopher Charles Taylor's books *Sources of the Self* and *The Ethics of Authenticity* and his article “Responsibility for Self.”

The philosophy of freedom and may be approached by examining excerpts from the work of some 20th century and contemporary philosophers, such as Harry Frankfurt, Susan Wolf (*Freedom within Reason*), Gary Watson (*Agency and Answerability, Free Will*), and Sartre (*Being and Nothingness*). Certain to be included are portions of Paul Ricoeur's *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, a magnificent work in existential phenomenology that describes human freedom as a dialectic of the creative leap of individual choice and the limited, embodied, historical existence each of us must have. This is one of the few works in

philosophy I have read which has deeply affected my personal life, the way I think about myself and my agency in the world, and my vocation (it—and Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* were the subjects of my dissertation). I will look into using John Cottingham’s book *On the Meaning of Life* as it is in the same series as Guignon’s, all of which are written to be accessible by students outside of philosophy.

The philosophical readings will be supplemented by at least one source on vocation (probably Parker Palmer’s *Let Your Life Speak* as I read it when I took the vocation summer seminar a couple of years ago) as well as passages from literature, nonphilosophical sources, and some films or film segments in order to give the students different experiences with and perspectives on the course’s central subjects and themes. Possible literature includes Camus’ *The Plague* and *The Fall*, Sartre’s *The Wall*, Dostoevsky’s *The Grand Inquisitor*. Films are at this point TBA, but I will consult with film aficionados like Paul Fitzgerald, Shannon Vallor, and Mike Meyer.

One possible nonphilosophical source may be William Spohn’s *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (especially his commentary on the parable of the Good Samaritan and answer to the question “who is my neighbor?”) as it has very good content about virtue ethics. If used, I would present this as one religiously informed way of looking at moral perfectionism ethics. Spiritual and religious aspects of vocation will be included in the course in some manner, and class discussion may include it, but the primary course materials will be secular and philosophical. The instructor likely will at some point relate something of his own experiences, both personal and academic, in contending with self, authenticity, freedom, and vocation.

B. Activities

All students will be expected to read the assigned materials for each class and be prepared to enter into discussion of the main concepts presented and to ask questions about the text, about others’ interpretations of the text, and about the “cash value” of the text in the sense of how it contributes to a practical understanding of self, authenticity, freedom, choice, and vocation. I will rarely lecture, although I will likely provide handout from time to time aimed at helping the students grasp the more difficult texts. I may hand out study questions before certain readings assignments, assign students into groups, and have them discuss some of the questions in their small group before class, either in person or online in Angel. Some films may be used, but I will need to do further research on this during my release time.

C. Assignments

Each student will be required to maintain an online Personal Vocation Journal with the expectation that she will write in it at least once each week. The PVJ will only be accessible by the student and me. Students will be expected to reflect on the material studied that week and relate it to her own life, sense of self, concept of freedom, and ideas about vocation. The PVJ should help the students integrate the readings and class discussions into their own personal reflection on themselves, their choices, and their vocation. I will comment on all PVJ entries.

I will develop some 5 to 7 open-ended, but thematic, questions related to the key readings, post these as Discussion Fora on Angel, and each student will be expected to write at

least one original post on each question and one response to the original post of another student. In accordance with my usual policy, I will not participate in these online discussions unless invited to do so by a student.

Each student will be required to write a 6 to 10 page paper on a theme or problem from one of the three thematic segments of the course (as presently envisioned). One of the tasks I will set for myself during the release period is refining the prompts for the papers as I don't want the students to flounder around trying to find a topic but rather want them to grapple with some of the major themes, problems and questions related to authenticity, selfhood, freedom, and vocation.

I want to have one more assignment in this course, but am undecided on its precise content and format. I may give a take home final exam with challenging, somewhat open-ended essay questions that will require the students to integrate their own conclusions with the readings and other materials from the course (I typically require them to make 6 or 8 citations to the readings in the course of answering a question).

IV. How Student Learning Will be Assessed

The PVJ entries will not receive a letter grade, but each will receive from me not only comments on the content, but also a narrative evaluation based on the effort I see in it, the amount of reflection on the subject the entry indicates, the degree of active engagement with and understanding of the crucial concepts of the week, clarity of written expression, and utilization of critical judgment. I will also evaluate the entries on the degree to which the student is actively engaged in serious *self*-reflection, i.e., I will be looking for expression of personal, individual engagement with authenticity, selfhood, freedom, choice, and ethical conviction. In sum, the PVJ journal is to be devoted to questions about vocation and more personal responses of the student to the course's content in an effort to have them understand that not all academic areas are meant to be studied at scholarly arm's length.

I will review all Angel Discussion Forum posts and consider them according to the criteria mentioned above when assigning the student a final, all-things-considered grade (which is my usual procedure).

The paper will be graded using my usual criteria: (a) clarity of thesis, arguments, objections, and replies; (b) strength of thesis, arguments, objections, and replies; (c) evidence of understanding and applying philosophical analysis and concepts; (d) creativity in formulating arguments, objections, and replies; (e) organization; and (f) lack of significant grammar and spelling errors.

The final assignment, depending on its form and content, will be assessed using criteria like the ones aforementioned.

During the release period I will develop specific learning outcomes for the course and devise an extended SALG evaluation to assess the students' own perceptions of their learning.

V. Plan regarding When and How Often the Course Will be Offered

I have discuss this with my chair, Elizabeth Radcliffe, and we agreed that if this proposal is approved, I would develop the course during the 07-08 academic year and offer it for the first

time in the 08-09 academic year. We anticipate that I would offer it every two or possibly three years thereafter, depending on the department's needs and the effect on our UD offerings of implementation of the new Core Curriculum (assuming that goes forward as approved by the faculty).

5/15/07