Basic Philosophical Question

UCOR 132-03
MWF 10–10:50
Room: Fisher Hall 714
Instructor: Jiho Oh
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Office Hours: Mondays 11–1:00, or by appointment (College 352)

UCOR 132-10
MWF 1–1:50
Room: College Hall 346

Course Description

What philosophy is, cannot be thought independently of the question of life: How we should live? What is a good or a bad life? In this class, students will have a chance to contemplate this question from various angles through the guidance of several major figures in the history of philosophy. Students will thus learn how to develop, express, and communicate their own thoughts philosophically. More importantly, the class will focus on developing the ability of critical thinking. Reading the canonical texts together with non- or anti-canonical texts from various resources, students will learn to critically engage with practical issues important to their daily lives.

The class will begin with Plato’s Apology and Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics and look into what they took to be a good life, or well-being. We will then jump into Descartes’ Discourse on Method and address this revolutionary text in the history of philosophy from the perspective of the values and limitations of personal experiences. We will expand the discussion on personal experience to the problem of personal identity by examining Hume’s skeptical treatment of personal identity. The final weeks of the class will be devoted to Kant’s moral conception of universal humanity.

In order to facilitate a well-balanced philosophical sense and to enrich discussions in the class, fragmentary texts will be used which throw critical or alternative views on each of those major figures. These texts will help students to critically examine the philosophical canons through the lens of contemporary issues, such as racism, sexism, cultural diversity, and environmental problems. Fragments from Mills and Fanon will be read together with Descartes in order to estimate the validity and limitation of his argument on the universality of human reason. Hume’s argument on personal identity will be juxtaposed with the Buddhist theory of the non-self and the deontological and utilitarian moral theory as well. This will help students engage in thinking over the relationship between human beings and the environment. Finally, we will make Kant communicate with various anti-Kantian perspectives on the issues of gender, history, and colonialism.

Regular attendance and active participation will be encouraged. In addition to the midterm and final exams, students will be required to write a paper on one of the topics chosen from the class discussion. Grades will be calculated from the following: attendance and participation (10%); midterm exam (30%); final exam (30%); final paper (30%)