



“Introduction to Philosophy”, Fall Semester 2017-18

Room: FIL 2, 16-19 (see calendar below)

Dr Alberto L. Siani (alberto.siani@gmail.com)

Synopsis

In order to get a general introduction to philosophy, we will begin with Thomas Nagel’s brilliant book (reading 1), a text easily accessible for people without a background in philosophy, but at the same time stimulating for everyone.

After this brief overview of the main issues of philosophy, we will then proceed to a concrete demonstration of the aims, methods, and impact of the philosophical work by confronting a challenging question of our time, namely that of religious offence and the limits of free speech/expression. The right to freedom of speech and its institutional protection are a defining feature of modern liberal societies. At the same time, this right can often clash with the right to free religious belonging and expression, and with the desire not to be ridiculed or, worst, morally and politically harmed based on religious creed. We will discuss this point with reference to one of the seminal texts on freedom of speech, namely the second chapter of John Stuart Mill’s 1859 essay *On Liberty* (reading 2), and to some more recent articles (readings 3-5).

The mentioned clash has taken, in the recent years, extremely concerning and violent forms, most notably in the case of the terroristic attack resulted in the murder of the cartoonists of “Charlie Hebdo”, a French satirical magazine (2015). On the basis of the conceptual framework provided by readings 2-5, we will analyse the diverging arguments and theses by philosophers, academics, journalists, and bloggers directly tackling the “Charlie Hebdo” case, thus showing the practical consequences of that clash (readings 6).

Methodology

Throughout the course, we will, on the one hand, reconstruct background philosophical concepts and theories, thus providing an insight into philosophy as an academic discipline. On the other hand, we will collectively discuss a specific concrete issue, thus appreciating the problem-solving potential of philosophy while confronting issues concerning all of us. Spanning across ethics, aesthetics, political philosophy, philosophy of religion, etc., the course aims not only at problematizing philosophically a central issue of our time, but also, more in general, at grasping the nature, the methods, and the aims of philosophy.

Calendar

October 11th, 12th, 18th, 19th and November 2nd, 8th, 9th, 15th, 16th.

Remarks



Given the structure of the course, active participation and the readiness to engage in the discussion of controversial topics are a compulsory requirement. The readings list presented here will serve for our orientation, but adjustments in progress are likely to take place, depending on time constraints and the participants' interests. Students will be evaluated based on their active participation, capacity to introduce and lead a discussion, and a final paper (see below). Students missing more than two classes will automatically fail the course.

Readings

- 1) T. Nagel, *What Does It All Mean? A Very Short Introduction to Philosophy*, Oxford: OUP 1987.
- 2) J. Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, in Id., *On Liberty and Other Essays*, Oxford: OUP 2008, 2nd chapter (*On the Liberty of Thought and Discussion*).
- 3) L. Langer, Introduction, in: L. Langer, *Religious Offence and Human Rights*, Cambridge: CUP, 2014, 1-27.
- 4) R. Dworkin, Foreword, in: I. Hare, J. Weinstein (eds.), *Extreme Speech and Democracy*, Oxford: OUP, 2009, v-ix.
- 5) E. Burns Coleman, M.S. Fernandes-Dias, Introduction. Lines in the Sand, in: E. Burns Coleman, M.S. Fernandes-Dias (eds.), *Negotiating the Sacred II. Blasphemy and Sacrilege in the Arts*, Canberra: ANU, 2008, 1-8.
- 6) A series of short articles/blog entries by various authors on the “Charlie Hebdo” case (will be provided during class).

Evaluation

The highest possible grade in the Italian system is 30. Your final grade is composed as follows: 1) up to 10 points for active participation in the discussions; 2) each student will be required, at each meeting, to introduce and lead a discussion based on one of the readings from point 6 (up to 5 points); 3) up to 15 points for the final paper.