



Philosophy of Science 2: 'Neuroexistentialism'

Course information:

Course #: PHIL 441
Term: Winter 2024
Course pre-requisites: None
Course schedule: Mon/Wed 08:35-09:55
Course location: SH680 room 491

Instructor information:

Name: Dr. Oran Magal
Email: oran.magal@mcgill.ca
Office hours: Mon 10:00-11:00, Thu 14:30-15:30
Office location: LEA 940



Umberto Boccioni. *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*. 1913 **CLOSE**

Description:

The goal of this advanced class in philosophy of science is to explore the interrelations between science, philosophy, and society with a focus on one particular scientific area, namely neuroscience (broadly construed). What philosophical lessons can we draw from neuroscience and related scientific fields, especially evolutionary biology, concerning a number of key philosophical, social, and legal questions? Specifically, concerning whether a meaningful life is possible with free will in question; the nature and origin of morality; personal responsibility, both as a matter of moral theory and as a legal matter; and more.

Required Background:

There are no formal prerequisites. Students *can* take this course without having taken a previous course in philosophy of science. However, since this is a 400-level course, it is assumed that students have some previous experience writing essays in philosophy.

Required Course Materials:

Most of the readings will be from the following anthology, available electronically through the library: Gregg D. Caruso and Owen Flanagan (eds.), *Neuroexistentialism: Meaning, Morals, and Purpose in the Age of Neuroscience*, Oxford University Press, 2018. The other readings will be available on MyCourses or via a link to an electronic text accessible through the library.

Instructional Method:

The course will be based on lectures and in-class discussion, there will be no tutorial conferences. To succeed in the course, students should read the assigned readings for each week *before* coming to class. Every topic will also have optional readings; these are recommended for deeper understanding, but not required for success in the course.

Important note: this course is meant to be a *seminar*, which means it is based in part on student collaboration and active participation in the class. There is no separate grade item for participation, but students *are* expected to have read the materials in advance and to be ready to contribute to the discussion in the classroom.

The classroom assigned for this course does not include the possibility of lecture recording through McGill's system. Please make an effort to attend all classes. For my part, I will try (no guarantee) to record the class for students who are unable to participate due to health or similar reasons.

Schedule of Topics and Readings

The required readings for each week are listed below. Optional readings will be posted on *MyCourses* for each topic for students who are interested in learning more. Unless otherwise specified, the readings below are from *Neuroexistentialism*, available electronically through McGill's library. Otherwise, a link or PDF will be available on MyCourses.

Week	Dates	Topic	Readings + assignments
1	M Jan 8 th W Jan 10 th	Introduction	For Monday: please read the syllabus. For Wednesday: W. Sellars, "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man"
2	M Jan 15 th W Jan 17 th	Setting the stage: Modernity and the "Disenchantment of Nature"	Max Weber, excerpts from <i>Science as a Vocation</i> Optional: J. Josephson-Storm, excerpts from <i>The Myth of Disenchantment</i>
3	M Jan 22 nd W Jan 24 th	Are "reactive attitudes" a kind of self-deception?	Pamela Hieronymi, excerpts from <i>Freedom, Resentment, and the Metaphysics of Morals</i> Optional: P. F. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment"
4	M Jan 29 th W Jan 31 st	On the relation between neuroscience and Existentialism	Flanagan & Caruso, "Neuroexistentialism: Third Wave Existentialism" (Ch. 1)
5	M Feb 5 th W Feb 7 th	What can findings in neuroscience mean for the foundations of ethics?	Patricia Churchland, "The Impact of Social Neuroscience on Moral Philosophy" (Ch. 2)
6	M Feb 12 th W Feb 14 th	Neuroscience and Phenomenology: "Sedimentation"	Jesse Prinz, "Moral Sedimentation" (Ch. 6)

7	M Feb 19 th W Feb 21 st	Can there be existentialism with freedom in question?	Neil Levy, "Choices Without Choosers – Toward a Neuropsychologically Plausible Existentialism" (Ch. 7)
8	M Feb 26 th W Feb 28 th	Authenticity in the age of neuroscience	Gallagher, Morgan & Rokotnitz, "Relational Authenticity" (Ch. 8)
9	M Mar 11 th W Mar 13 th	Can we live without believing in free will?	Pereboom & Caruso, "Hard-Incompatibilist Existentialism: Neuroscience, Punishment, and Meaning in Life" (Ch. 11)
10	M Mar 18 th W Mar 20 th	Purpose and freedom under a scientific worldview	Sean M. Carroll, "Purpose, Freedom, and the Laws of Nature" (Ch. 16)
11	M Mar 25 th W Mar 27 th	Can there be moral and legal responsibility without free will?	Robert M. Sapolsky, excerpts from <i>Determined: A Science of Life Without Free Will</i>
12	M April 1st W April 3 rd M April 8 th	A dissenting view: putting meaning back into the natural world	Philip Goff, excerpts from <i>Why? The Purpose of the Universe</i> Note: April 1 st is a holiday (Easter Monday).
13	W April 10 th Th April 11 th	Topic: TBA	Note: Thursday, April 11 th follows a Monday schedule.

Means of Evaluation

The final grade in the course comprises the following (explanation below):

Assignment	Due date	% of final grade
Reading assignments	Best 4 out of 6: Jan. 29 th , Feb 12 th , Feb 26 th , March 11 th , March 25 th , April 3 rd	40
Short Essay:	Feb. 9 th , end of day	20
Discussion of essay	By appointment	Pass/Fail
Revised essay	March 3 rd , end of day	Pass/Fail
Longer Essay:	March 22 nd , end of day	40
Discussion of essay	By appointment	Pass/Fail
Revised essay	April 12 th (final day of classes), end of day	Pass/Fail

- Reading assignments:** You will need to complete 4 out of 6 of the reading assignments that will be distributed on MyCourses throughout the term. (You are welcome to complete all six, in which case the best four will be used to calculate your final mark.) Each reading assignment will be available at least one week before it is due. Please note that because the answer to the reading assignment will be discussed in class immediately after the due-date, late reading assignments will not be accepted. If there are special circumstances (e.g., being sick for more than one day, etc.), the instructor will assign an alternative reading assignment.

- **Essays, discussion, and revision:** the prompt for each essay will be given at least one week before it is due. After each essay is returned to you with feedback, there will be a sign-up sheet to meet with the instructor to discuss your essay (5-10 minutes) via Zoom, or in person if meeting online is not possible. This meeting is mandatory. It will be a chance for you to ask questions about the feedback you received, and you may be asked to explain some of what you wrote. After this meeting, you will be asked to submit a revised version of your essay, reflecting the feedback you received. Full instructions for this will be posted on MyCourses. Note: you must meet the instructor and submit a revised version of the first two essays to get credit for those essays.

Policy on extensions and late work

If you have a valid reason to ask for an extension, please **write to me** (oran.magal@mcgill.ca) **before the relevant work is due**. As a rule, extensions will be given only for medical reasons or serious personal/family issues. Since the public health system is already overloaded, I will not ask you to provide a medical note, but I do require that you take responsibility to communicate with me in a timely manner.

How to Submit Your Work

Submitting work through MyCourses: reading assignments and essay instructions will be distributed through *MyCourses* (in the ‘assignments’ tab of the course page), and students should submit their work only through *MyCourses*. Do not send your work by email to the instructor unless you are specifically asked to do so.

Important: Reading assignments will be submitted through MyCourses as plain text (there will be an input box for you to copy/paste your work from a word processor). Essays and revised essays can only be submitted through MyCourses as a PDF file. It may help to know that Microsoft Word (for PC or Mac) is provided to you for free through McGill and can generate PDF files (an option under ‘save as’). If you are using any other software (Google Docs, Pages, etc.), simply use *export* or *save as* to save your work as a PDF prior to submitting it.

McGill Policies and Statements

Language of Submission

In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded. This does not apply to courses in which acquiring proficiency in a language is one of the objectives.

Conformément à la Charte des droits de l’étudiant de l’Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté (sauf dans le cas des cours dont l’un des objets est la maîtrise d’une langue).

Academic Integrity

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures. (see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/ for more information)

Varia

Mobile computing and communications devices are permitted in class insofar as their use does not disrupt the teaching and learning process. Please do not record the lectures without instructor's permission.

Instructor-generated course materials (e.g., handouts, notes, summaries, exam questions, etc.) are protected by law and may not be copied or distributed in any form or in any medium without explicit permission of the instructor. Note that infringements of copyright can be subject to follow up by the University under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures.

As the instructor of this course I endeavor to provide an inclusive learning environment. However, if you experience barriers to learning in this course, do not hesitate to discuss them with me and the Office for Students with Disabilities, 514-398-6009.

McGill University is on land which has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst Indigenous peoples, including the Haudenosaunee and Anishinabeg nations. We acknowledge and thank the diverse Indigenous people whose footsteps have marked this territory on which peoples of the world now gather.