Scholar's Electives 1100F: On Certainty/Uncertainty and Meaning/Meaninglessness (2019-2020, Fall Term)

Wednesdays, 16:30-18:30 (Section 001) SH 3317 & 18:30-20:30 (Section 002) SH 3317

Instructor: Professor Laurence de Looze, UC 2310. Office hours: T: 1:30-2:30, Th: 4:30-5:30; tel: x85859
Email: ldelooze@uwo.ca
TAs: Busra Copuroglu (bcopurog@uwo.ca), office hours: TBA; Megan Sherritt (megan.sherritt@uwo.ca). office hours: TBA

Description:
This course interrogates the limits of human knowledge in the arts, the social sciences, and the sciences and it asks questions about the tools we use to arrive at “meaning.” It poses the question not only of how we know what we know, but also of how we can be sure that we know what we know. What, in other words, does it mean “to know”? Do we control outcomes, or are they due partly or entirely to chance? Does our world actually have meaning or do we just create meanings? How, finally, does the creation of meaning take place?

We will examine a number of approaches to these questions in different periods of Western culture, from Ancient Greece to the late 20th century. In the course of the semester we will consider some modern scientific attempts to understand our world, various views on the role of chance in our experience, and discussions of the relationship between language/writing and reality.

Learning Outcomes:
This course is designed to guide you in learning to engage critically with readings and with issues and to formulate cogent responses both orally and in writing. By the end of the course you should have acquired and/or refined your ability to grasp the salient points of an argument whether of an oral or written nature and to summarize, reiterate, and analyze those points. You should also be in a position to appreciate the complexity of the causes and influences that have made for major shifts in thinking at different points along the historical timeline.

Assignments:

a) 30% -- a 150-200 word summary of the key points or issues in the readings for the week. Due by the beginning of each class on Tuesday. Full sentences – no bullet/point form. (You will email these to your TA)

b) 20% -- participation. Participation entails not only reading the weekly material but also taking notes on it as an aide-mémoire. If a student was in class every week, and was clearly prepared, but was so shy about speaking that s/he never said a word, s/he would nevertheless come very close (78) to the A range for participation.
For the student who is always prepared and always in class and also speaks up, it can only get better. In other words, I am interested to hear your ideas, but I understand that some people are more comfortable with speaking aloud than others. You are also free to email me with your ideas, and I will count that as participation. I consider participation not just in quantitative terms but also qualitative ones.

c) 50% -- two 850-1000-word (approximately) essays (25% each), the first being due by 30 October and the second due on or before the last day of class (4 December). You will need to delineate a topic that picks up issues and/or themes from at least two of our class readings/sessions. You are required to discuss any potential topics with your TA or the professor before you begin writing. The second essay will need to use material from weeks 8-13 of the course.

NB: All assignments must be completed. The weakest assignment from a) will be dropped from the final mark, but only if you do them all.

Penalties:
Any assignment submitted late will be penalized 5%/day and will not be accepted at all 5 days after the due date.

Readings:

With one exception, all of the readings are available on the Weldon library website or on the course OWL site online. The one exception is the play Copenhagen, which must be bought at the university bookstore.

Tentative program

I: Humanity and Its Limits

Week 1: 11 September

Introduction: Aeschylus: Prometheus Bound http://oli.ucsd.edu/documents/aeschylus.pdf (also on Owl)

Week 2: 18 September

Aeschylus: Prometheus Bound (contd.) http://www.radiolab.org/story/91512-musical-language/ (podcast)
Robert Jourdain, Music, The Brain, and Ecstasy, chapt. 3: “…to melody…” (on Owl)

NB: We are meeting in Talbot College this day

Week 3: 25 September

Oliver Sacks, “In the Moment: Music and Amnesia” from Musicophilia (2007), 201-31. (on Owl)

Week 4: 2 October

Rebecca Smith, SAFEtalk

**II: The Nature of Meaning**

Week 5: 9 October:


[https://books.google.ca/books?id=cBZCOD8SVzMC&pg=PA3&lpg=PA3&dq=jonathan+culler+linguistic+foundation&source=bl&ots=sR8cyj5dbh&sig=0nzdYGMel5UqljrRbFOLMTkQYxpw&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CD0Q6AEwBWoVChMI1mrzfNukxwIVhl2SCh1NvgC#v=onepage&q=jonathan%20culler%20linguistic%20foundation&f=false](https://books.google.ca/books?id=cBZCOD8SVzMC&pg=PA3&lpg=PA3&dq=jonathan+culler+linguistic+foundation&source=bl&ots=sR8cyj5dbh&sig=0nzdYGMel5UqljrRbFOLMTkQYxpw&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CD0Q6AEwBWoVChMI1mrzfNukxwIVhl2SCh1NvgC#v=onepage&q=jonathan%20culler%20linguistic%20foundation&f=false)

J.L. Borges, “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins” (on Owl)

Week 6: 16 October

Nominalism and Realism

You have a choice between a pair of podcasts or a reading selection (or both)

The podcasts: [http://www.historyofphilosophy.net/problem-universals](http://www.historyofphilosophy.net/problem-universals) and [http://www.historyofphilosophy.net/gilbert-poitiers-individuation](http://www.historyofphilosophy.net/gilbert-poitiers-individuation)


(The reason I am giving a choice is because some of the students last year thought the podcast tried to be humorous but didn’t succeed).

**II: Uncertainty and “thinking”**

Week 7: 23 October

Henri Poincaré: “Chance” *Science and Method* (1908) (on Owl)


Extra reading for those who want it: *Darwin’s Dice: The Idea of Chance in the Thought of Charles Darwin* (Chapt. 5)

Week 8: 30 October

Heisenberg, "The Copenhagen Interpretation of Quantum Theory", *Physics and Philosophy* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1959) (on Owl), or:


[of these 3 the last is the most entertaining]
*Copenhagen* (play): Act I

Week 9: 6 November

No class (Reading Week)

Week 10: 13 November

*Copenhagen* (play): Act II
http://www.radiolab.org/story/91859-the-multi-universes/ (podcast)

**IV: Relativity and the Construction of Meaning**

Week 11: 20 November

https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3600/3600-h/3600-h.htm
Book I, chapters xxii and xxx

Week 12: 24 November

Albert Camus: “Absurdity and Suicide” and “The Myth of Sisyphus” [the first is at the beginning of the book, the second is toward the end, just before the appendix] in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (1942; Eng trans. 1955) (on Owl)
Albert Camus: “The Guest” (on Owl)

Week 13: 4 December

John Barth: “Lost in the Funhouse” (1968) (on Owl)
Conclusion

**Please Note:** You are responsible for ensuring that you have successfully completed all course prerequisites (or have special permission from your Dean to waive the prerequisite) and that you have not taken an antirequisite course. If you are not eligible for the course, you may be removed from it at any time, and it will be deleted from your record. In addition, you will receive no adjustment to your fees. These decisions cannot be appealed.

**Scholastic Offences:**

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence at the following Web site:
http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_undergrad.pdf
**Plagiarism:** Plagiarism is a major academic offense (see Scholastic Offense Policy in the Western Academic Calendar). Plagiarism is the inclusion of someone else’s verbatim or paraphrased text in one’s own written work without immediate reference. Verbatim text must be surrounded by quotation marks or indented if it is longer than four lines. A reference must follow right after borrowed material (usually the author’s name and page number). Without immediate reference to borrowed material, a list of sources at the end of a written assignment does not protect a writer against the possible charge of plagiarism. All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between The University of Western Ontario and Turnitin.com (http://www.turnitin.com).

**Absenteeism**

For UWO Policy on Accommodation for Medical Illness and a downloadable SMC see: http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/accommodation_medical.pdf [downloadable Student Medical Certificate (SMC): https://studentservices.uwo.ca/ under the Medical Documentation heading]

Students seeking academic accommodation on medical grounds for any missed tests, exams, participation components and/or assignments worth 10% or more of their final grade must apply to the Academic Counselling office of their home Faculty and provide documentation. Academic accommodation cannot be granted by the instructor or department.

For assignments worth less than 10%, the student will work out a reasonable solution directly with the professor.

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health@Western http://www.uwo.ca/uwocom/mentalhealth/ for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.