

# 2017-2018 First Year Preceptorial Courses

## FALL 2017 FYP COURSES

### **FPR-100-01: Goodness, Happiness, and Truthiness**

In this course, we are going to look at the relation of goodness and happiness -- does being morally good make a person happy? Or could we be happier if we threw off the chains of moral constraints? We will examine how some philosophers, fiction writers, political theorists, religious traditions, and psychologists have seen the relation of goodness and happiness. At the end of the course, we will also turn to truth(-iness). Is there "real" "objective" truth? Or is everything a matter of social convention or personal choice?

### **FPR-100-02: Technology; Bane or Boon or Both?**

Does technology free us from our base needs so we can pursue our higher callings? Or does it dehumanize us, reduce us into "cogs in the machine," and isolate us? What is technology likely to do next, either for us or, perhaps, to us? If we ever get to a point when technology and artificial intelligence can perform any job better than a human, what kind of economy and society should we have? How can varied perspectives and habits of thought contribute to our understanding of these questions? We will discuss works of fiction written at different stages of technological development (e.g., H. G. Wells, Kurt Vonnegut, and George Saunders). We will also explore several disciplinary perspectives, recognizing that social scientists have come to grips with these questions as society has changed, and that biologists and psychologists have worked to identify constant features of our relationship to technology.

### **FPR-100-03: Collapse and Resilience: Lessons from the Past**

Part of the allure of studying the past is the spine-tingling realization that even the most advanced societies can fall apart -- sometimes with breathtaking rapidity. What does social collapse look like in the archaeological and written record, and why does it happen? Do societies really collapse, or simply change form? What value judgments do we make when we decide a society has "failed" or "succeeded"? What makes a society resilient, and how can we prepare ourselves for crisis? We address these questions by examining a series of case studies from time periods and places around the world, such as the Late Bronze Age Aegean, the Assyrian Empire, the Roman Empire, Norse Greenland, the Maya, the Pueblo peoples of Chaco Canyon, and Rapa Nui (Easter Island). We also use these case studies to try to understand collapse in the world today -- from the decline of American cities, such as Detroit, to mass migrations stemming from violent conflict, as in the case of Syria. Throughout the course, we discuss how our understanding of social collapse in the past shapes the way we think about the strengths and vulnerabilities of our own society and the modern institutions we take for granted.

### **FPR-100-04: Ethics for College**

The course looks at some ethical issues which college students often face including: sex and relationships; hook-up culture; date rape; abortion; sexism, racism and other bias; affirmative action; liberties and their abuse; hate speech, free speech, trigger warnings; drugs, including alcohol; downloading and piracy; violence in video games; cheating. Readings will be taken primarily but not exclusively from *College Ethics: A Reader on Moral Issues That Affect You* (Bob Fischer, editor; 2016).

### **FPR-100-05: Extinct!**

Every species that has lived, or will ever live, will go extinct. Extinction occurs at gradual rates throughout Earth history, but every once in a while there is an extreme event that causes a spike in the extinction rate. We call these events "mass extinctions" -- when 75% of all life goes extinct in a geological instant. Historically they are caused by natural disasters like glaciers, massive volcanic eruptions, or meteor impacts. But our current extinctions have a more unnatural cause: humans. Whether we call this a mass extinction or a biodiversity crisis does not matter; what matters is that we are causing extinction at rates far above what we have evidence for in the fossil record.

To some extent, extinction is natural and inevitable -- though when extinctions are caused by humans, we tend to feel obligated to interfere. But should we try to prevent extinctions? Should we use genetic engineering to help endangered species adapt to our changing world? Should we bring extinct species back from the dead? Is it possible to preserve nature in a world with an ever-growing human population? Why do we even care if species go extinct? Should we let nature run its course? How much money should be invested in saving

species from extinction when so many of our fellow humans live without basic necessities like clean water and enough food? This class will look at writings from scientists, journalists, and ethicists to investigate this topic. The class will tie in scientific concepts with the underlying philosophical and ethical questions. You will also gain experience reading, writing, and thinking scientifically, which is a benefit for all citizens of planet Earth!

#### **FPR-100-06: Growth and the Good Life**

Does growth make us better off? Most economists (and many of us) would answer “yes -- of course,” and could point to dramatic improvements in standard of living made possible by the expansion of markets and improvements in technology as evidence that growth does indeed make us better off. Others question whether improvements in material well being mean that we are moving closer to living “the good life.” Does having more “stuff” mean that we are happier? Isn’t there more to life than working, shopping and consuming?

Environmentalists argue that environmental degradation and natural resource depletion caused by rapid economic and population growth are moving us closer to disaster, not closer to the good life. Critics of the market system point to inequalities of income distribution and the plight of groups “left behind” or “left out” during periods of growth as evidence that growth doesn’t result in a good life for many in our society.

We will take an in-depth look at issues related to growth and the good life in this precept section. This course is organized around the following questions: What is the good life? Can economic growth bring us closer to the good life? How can growth undermine the good life? What can we do to help ensure a bright future -- a better life -- for ourselves and our children?

#### **FPR-100-07: \*\*\*\*ing Up: Failure Is an Option**

Though we are not encouraged to say so, some of history's greatest figures were once considered colossal failures. An absent-minded misfit started Western philosophy. A live-at-home carpenter with serious family issues, the world's largest religion. A bunch of unemployable cranks and misfits, Romanticism. Drifters, dreamers, and delinquents, rock and roll. And so on. We will look at these and other losers to examine the politics and aesthetics of, well, \*\*\*\*ing up.

#### **FPR-100-08; Radical Thinkers**

This course surveys the works of some eloquent advocates of ideas that in one way or another challenge the foundations of traditional Western culture. We will begin with Machiavelli, who argues that the ethical principles of Christianity and Humanism are incompatible with effective political governance. We will read Rousseau, who argues that civilization has led not to progress but to the moral debasement of the human species; Karl Marx, who attacks capitalism and calls upon the poor to revolt and establish a communist society; Friedrich Nietzsche, who assaults (among other things) Judeo-Christian theology and ethics, rejects every form of metaphysics, and substitutes "perspectivism" for eternal truth; and Sigmund Freud, who argues that the price of order and civilization is the purposeful mutilation of our instinctual desire. We will also read the Marquis de Sade who challenged fundamental social mores in his philosophically grounded pornographic writings. We will then turn to our own time and look at McLuhan and Sontag, who were among the first to understand the transformative role of mass media, technology, photography and film, on our notions of what it means to be modern. We will conclude with Ta-Nehisi Coates, who offers a stinging indictment of the American Dream and of structural racism in contemporary America.

#### **FPR-100-09: Media Accuracy, Credibility, Fairness, and Reliability**

According to a published report by The American Society of Newspaper Editors, “78 percent of U.S. adults believe there is bias in the news media.” In order to carry our social responsibilities, we ought to be able to think critically and evaluate the information we get through the media: Radio, TV, Internet, Movies, Books, Newspapers, and Magazines.

This course will focus on an increased awareness of inaccuracies in the media and the tools to search for different opinions and perspectives. Students will critically reflect on increasingly complex social, political, and cultural issues, and will learn how to read between the lines and form their own independent opinion despite the proliferation of media outlets and PR tricks, including WMD (Weapons of Mass Distraction). As citizens and future leaders, we will be better equipped to protect great values such as democracy, civil liberties, peace and justice if we are well informed.

### **FPR-100-10: Crossing Boundaries: Science and Literature**

The theme of the chosen readings, and our approach to them, will be intersections between the humanities, especially literature, and science. "Chemistry", "Biology", "English", "History"...these are some of the categories into which our education is divided for us, and we tend to separate our learning, knowledge, and interests into these distinct categories. This course will examine how writers and thinkers have crossed the boundaries between science on the one hand and the humanities on the other hand. Whether a novelist takes on a scientific subject or a scientist turns to writing a novel; whether a feminist historian reimagines the history of science, a chemist writes his autobiography, or a journalist examines the geology of Iceland and California, they are all reinventing how we understand the world and the human experience by crossing traditional boundaries. We will also ask how scientific subjects and methods of inquiry have affected literature, and how non-scientists have shaped society's views and understanding of science. Readings will include a variety of literary forms including fiction and non-fiction, autobiography, short stories, essays, novels, and some that do not fit traditional categories.

### **FPR-100-11: Coming of Age in the Non-Western World**

In this course, we will explore the coming of age experience in a non-western setting -- both in terms of geographical space and migrant cultures. We will consider different cultural meanings associated with the coming of age experience and how these experiences vary with respect to gender, race, class, religion, sexuality and geographic location. We will try to understand how and in what contexts are "coming of age" stories told and how does popular culture represent and shape coming-of-age experiences through study of memoirs, works of fiction, websites, films, television shows, and our own personal narratives.

### **FPR-100-12: On Monsters and Monstrosities**

Monsters have always been powerful symbols of social anxieties. From the mythologized roots of zombies and vampires to the chronicled evolution of serial killers, "monstrous" figures have been a foundational component of cultural imaginations. As a result, they have consistently inspired fear and fascination. During the term, we will be examining various cross-cultural and transhistorical representations of the monstrous—in literature, folklore, graphic novels, film, music, and television. We will ask questions about the relationship between images of monsters and cultural tensions regarding race, gender, class, sexuality, and disease. We will critically consider the relationship between fictional monsters and "real-life" monsters.

### **FPR-100-13: Attachments: Humans, Animals, and Places**

In this course we will consider three interrelated concepts of attachment: human-to-human, human-to-animal, and human-to-place attachments. Alongside several classic literary works, we will read about and discuss a variety of attachment theories and apply those theories to the ways in which attachment bonds inevitably shape human identity, create meaning, and facilitate actions. We will consider disruptions in attachment bonds and how those disruptions affect our trust, security, identity, sense of well-being, and our future interactions with others. We will also discuss the ways in which our attachments to ideas influence our perceptions of self and otherness and what happens when those ideas are challenged. Our course readings will include Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Innocent Erendira*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, and several essays and book chapters discussing topics such as place identity, cognitive ethology, affective neuroscience, and parental deprivation.

### **FPR-100-14: Narrative Medicine: Honoring Stories of Suffering**

What makes one a good listener? As human beings, we often consider ourselves born with the inherent ability to connect with others in their time of need. Most of us, however, listen for the dilemma and strive to "fix" it. We forget to "witness" the person speaking and find it difficult to sit with stories of pain, suffering, and illness. We distance and disconnect ourselves from each other. Such interaction is experienced all too often in medical settings between patients and care providers, as well as between physicians and hospital staff. The emerging field of Narrative Medicine advocates a new mode of communication that privileges the patient's experience. This course explores the main tenets of Narrative Medicine through works by Rita Charon, Craig Irvine, Maura Spiegel, Rainer Maria Rilke, Jorge Luis Borges, Franz Kafka, and Nellie Hermann in order to strengthen students' empathy, critical listening, writing, analytical, and reflection skills.

### **FPR-100-15: Food, Culture, and Society**

Many of us are fortunate enough to be able to choose, several times each day, when and what to eat. But how do our food choices, and our society's policies and practices around food, affect our community and the communities where our food is produced, whether close to home or around the world? Do our food choices help or harm indigenous communities, the poor, the disadvantaged? What about the effects on the animals,

plants, and the natural world? And how can we balance these different concerns, when they come into conflict with each other? We will examine classic and contemporary works by Wendell Berry, Michael Pollan, Vandana Shiva, and others, as we work out our own answers to these complex questions.

#### **FPR-100-16: Constructing the Self**

Who are you, really? What makes you unique? What do you and all other humans have in common? How do you learn and form judgments? What makes you peaceful or violent, conservative or liberal, competitive or collaborative, truthful or deceitful? What is the nature of friendship, love, and loyalty? How does technology affect your sense of Self? This course will address these and many other questions by bringing together biology, cognitive science, behavioral economics, ethics, history, psychology, philosophy, religious studies, literature, art, and the latest findings in genetics, to explore the complexities of the Self. Students will watch movies and talks, as well as read about consciousness, free will, sexuality, and artificial intelligence.

#### **FPR-100-17: Living Through Troubling Times**

We will take a close look at how people deal with the big and little disasters of life by examining works of literature from as far back as ancient China (Tao Te Ching) to the futuristic novel *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood. Winnie the Pooh turns out to be a model Taoist who lets his life be guided by the Tao Te Ching, while Atwood gives us a glimpse of the future we may be creating for ourselves as we try to figure out how much we want technology and marketing to control our lives. Rabbi Kushner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* asks us to consider why people believe in divine intervention in human affairs, and Boccaccio's *Decameron* gives us entertaining insight into how people dealt with the Black Death in Florence in the fourteenth century. The short stories of Raymond Carver show how easy it is to be overwhelmed by the modern world and the dangers of isolation, while the contemporary David Sedaris offers humorous takes on serious problems like death and political correctness.

#### **FPR-100-18: What Is the Avant-Garde?**

Perhaps the most famous piece of avant-garde art is Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, which was just a regular urinal displayed as art. This intentional transgression of the "normal" boundaries of art, literature, and film is at the heart of the avant-garde. But what exactly are these boundaries, how do they get established and what does it mean to transgress them? Over the course of the term, we will explore the transnational, interdisciplinary aims of the avant-garde, focusing on the avant-garde's rhetoric of shock, its pervasive DIY ethos, and its critical stance towards the culture industry.

#### **FPR-100-19: Arguing about God**

People have been arguing for millennia about whether God exists. The contemporary science-vs-religion debate, pitting the New Atheists against advocates of Intelligent Design, is just the latest iteration of this perennial controversy. In her 2010 genre-bending novel, *36 Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction*, philosopher and novelist Rebecca Goldstein explores these debates through her protagonist, Cass Seltzer, a psychologist of religion with his own theories about why belief in God persists despite the advances of science. Along the way Goldstein skewers New Atheism, ID, and traditional theism with equal verve. The course examines the various arguments and refutations put forward by Goldstein/Seltzer, as well as the alleged (ir)relevance of arguments to people's (dis)belief in God. It also considers whether the book, albeit a clever vehicle for Goldstein's own views, succeeds as a piece of literary fiction.

## WINTER 2018 FYP COURSES

### **FPR-100-01: Made in China**

Most of us own many things with the label "Made in China" -- but many of us do not think very deeply about what that means. Team taught by a professor of Chinese history and an environmental biologist, the class will explore the social, political, and environmental consequences -- positive and negative -- of China's rapid economic growth through a variety of readings, films, and discussion geared to developments in particular cities and regions.

### **FPR-100-02: Ethics for College**

The course looks at some ethical issues which college students often face including: sex and relationships; hook-up culture; date rape; abortion; sexism, racism and other bias; affirmative action; liberties and their abuse; hate speech, free speech, trigger warnings; drugs, including alcohol; downloading and piracy; violence in video games; cheating. Readings will be taken primarily but not exclusively from *College Ethics: A Reader on Moral Issues That Affect You* (Bob Fischer, editor; 2016).

### **FPR-100-03: The Modern Quest for King Arthur: Man, Myth, and Messiah**

King Arthur has captured the Western imagination, despite possibly never having existed at all. According to the legend, Arthur emerged from the wreckage of the Roman Empire in the late fifth or early sixth century to lead the British defense against Germanic invaders, only to die (or maybe not!) in the noble but doomed endeavor. He appears in no written records until the early ninth century. From that point on, however, this once and future king features prominently in Western historical writings, literature, and visual art. According to Arthurian mythology, he will return in our hour of greatest need, but in a way, he never left. In this course, we will consider why his image has proven so durable and endlessly adaptable, particularly in the contexts of the Industrial Revolution, World War II, and the New Golden Age of Television.

### **FPR-100-04: Self-Reliance**

One of the most cherished -- and contested -- ideas in American history is the ability to "make something of oneself." Yet what does it mean to be an autonomous individual? What does it mean to be "self-reliant"? Are we truly free to shape our own destiny, to pursue our own happiness and choose not just an occupation but also an identity? Or are there limits to such freedom?

In this seminar, we will read the work of thinkers and writers who celebrate self-reliance alongside those who are critical of the idea. We will listen closely to what others have said about what it means to be an individual, and we will develop our own views in response. Course readings for the Fall of 2017 include Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, as well as Jon Krakauer's non-fiction account *Into the Wild* and Barack Obama's memoir, *Dreams from My Father*. We will also read several shorter works of social, political, and cultural thought.

"Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens." --Ralph Waldo Emerson

### **FPR-100-05: Do We Control Technology or Does Technology Control Us?**

The answer to both questions is surely "yes," and that raises other questions. Who controls technology and who is controlled? When technology is in control, who gave it permission? Is technology inevitable? Is it reversible? The theme of this course is the relationship between humans and technology. William Wulf, past President of the National Academy of Engineering, has asked, "What is it that identifies humans?" and answered, "The use of tools [technology]." Humans make tools and humans use tools; tool-use defines humanity; but when and how do humans control their tools? This course will examine the relationship between humans and technology through literature, history, and the work of current scientists, engineers, and futurists.

### **FPR-100-06: Literature, Ethics, and Environment**

In this course we will consider and explore the intersections of human cultures and the environment, with an emphasis on the social and cultural dynamics of the environment and environmental action. Some questions we will consider: What are the ethical questions that we pose and wrestle with as we interact with and within our environment? What is the place of literature in community, literacy, and environmental activism? To what extent does place matter in our conceptions of what nature is? What are the connections between race, class,

and environmental degradation and environmental activism? How do class and gender enter into the nexus of ethical considerations that shape our environment? What global perspectives might we consider when we make decisions about our local spaces?

We will consider the concept of “nature” as we consider the concept of human culture. How does the language we use when writing about nature affect what we do in, for, and to nature?

This course is collaborative in nature, and as such students should bring their interests, curiosities, and discoveries to add to the mix. A partial list of possible readings include those by Terry Tempest Williams, Barbara Kingsolver, Evelyn White, bell hooks, M. Jimmie Killingsworth, Benjamin Alire Sáenz, Luther Standing Bear, Running-Grass, Simon Ortiz, Ana Castillo, Wangari Maathai, possibly readings from Orion magazine.

### **FPR-100-07: Bodies in the Water: Water as Resource, Threat, and Symbol**

Water is a fickle friend. We drink it, bathe in it, transport goods on it, and use it to irrigate our crops; but it can also drown us, poison us, flood our homes, and erode our land. In this course, we will explore how individuals and communities, past and present, negotiate relationships with this protean resource. We will ask questions such as: how does water function as a symbol in literary and visual arts? And what roles can it play in politics, religion, and economics? Our goal will be to hone our critical reading, writing, and speaking skills, while also developing a richer understanding of how we use, conserve, think about, and protect ourselves from the water around us.

### **FPR-100-08**

TBA

TBA

### **FPR-100-09: Happiness and the Good Life**

In 2016 the World Happiness Report declared Denmark the happiest country in the world and according to the annual Well-Being Index by Gallup-Healthways Naples, Florida was the happiest city in the USA. Pets make people happier, according to recent studies, whereas having children often makes people less happy. But what is happiness? Is happiness an emotion or a state of mind? How do we measure happiness? Is happiness necessary for a good life? Or is there something more to life than being happy? We might hope that every decision we make, every single day, is aimed at living the best life possible -- but what exactly are we aiming for? In this course we will look at how philosophers, psychologists, and political theorists over the years have tried to answer these questions.

### **FPR-100-10: The Rules of Madness**

You often feel sad -- do you suffer from depression? You are obsessed with not eating too much -- are you anorexic? You cannot concentrate -- do you have ADHD? In the last two centuries, moral flaws, existential difficulties, and idiosyncratic traits have regularly been reinterpreted as psychiatric diseases. But are these diseases real, and in what sense of "real"? Have they been discovered or invented? And how do we draw the line between the normal and the pathological? History shows that this line has been constantly redrawn under the influence of broad cultural changes, business decisions, or personal interests. After a brief survey of the history of psychiatry followed by a look at some big issues related to psychiatry, this course will focus on a select number of mental disorders and debate the proposition that they are historically constructed.

### **FPR-100-11: The Homeless Experience**

In this course we will explore the emergence of homelessness in contemporary society and its consequences to human life, wellbeing, and health. To do this, we will explore the lived experience of homelessness gleaned from observational studies and research on adolescents and adults primarily in the United States but also in other places around the globe. We will do this in an effort to understand the strategies homeless people historically employ to counter situations of alienation, isolation, and deprivation. We will also pay attention to understanding the history of homelessness both in the United States and abroad through representations of homelessness in contemporary literature, film, and culture. Juxtaposing contemporary assessments and portrayals of homeless people's lives allows us to disentangle fact from fiction and consequently build a more accurate assessment and understanding of this difficult human dilemma.

**FPR-100-12: Finding Hope**

In this Precept class, we will explore the topic of hope, its function and purpose in our lives. Reading texts written in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, where we have witnessed war, genocide, and injustice, we will ask the following questions: Where do we find hope? How do we maintain it in light of the injustice and brutality of the world? How do art and literature play a role in finding it? What happens when we lose it? Please be warned: the subject matters treated in this course could be uncomfortable and disturbing.

**FPR-100-13: Visions and Visionaries**

In this course, we will focus on vision as a fundamental technique that so-called "leaders" use to influence their constituents and achieve their goals for themselves or their communities. We will explore the cultural meaning and significance of vision, the role of the visionary and their community in creating and forwarding the vision, and factors that influence the vitality of the vision. We will analyze presentations of visions in many forms including novels, essays, biographies, and films, and discuss how the presentation of the vision affects our interpretations of leaders and communities. We will examine and debate concepts related to visionary leadership such as power, good, evil, and truth.

**FPR-100-14: Arguing about God**

People have been arguing for millennia about whether God exists. The contemporary science-vs-religion debate, pitting the New Atheists against advocates of Intelligent Design, is just the latest iteration of this perennial controversy. In her 2010 genre-bending novel, *36 Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction*, philosopher and novelist Rebecca Goldstein explores these debates through her protagonist, Cass Seltzer, a psychologist of religion with his own theories about why belief in God persists despite the advances of science. Along the way Goldstein skewers New Atheism, ID, and traditional theism with equal verve. The course examines the various arguments and refutations put forward by Goldstein/Seltzer, as well as the alleged (ir)relevance of arguments to people's (dis)belief in God. It also considers whether the book, albeit a clever vehicle for Goldstein's own views, succeeds as a piece of literary fiction.