

HUM-478

Emotion and value I

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Cursus	Sem.	Type
Humanities and Social Sciences	MA1	Obl.

Language of teaching	English
Credits	3
Session	Winter
Semester	Fall
Exam	During the semester
Workload	90h
Weeks	14
Hours	3 weekly
Lecture	2 weekly
Project	1 weekly
Number of positions	60

Remark

Une seule inscription à un cours SHS+MGT autorisée. En cas d'inscriptions multiples elles seront toutes supprimées sans notification.

Summary

Most of us aspire to live meaningful lives. Yet, many of us would struggle to explain what a meaningful life is. This course provides philosophical tools and frameworks useful to understand our aspiration for meaning.

Content**Emotion and Value I : Feeling, Goodness, and Building Oneself****General Description**

Most of us aspire to live meaningful lives. Yet, many of us would struggle to explain what a meaningful life is. This course provides philosophical tools and frameworks useful to understand our aspiration for meaning.

In particular, the course examines the role that emotions and values play in making our lives meaningful. It does by focusing on life-defining moments such as transformative experiences and life's hard choices--big or small. Going to EPFL, falling in love, converting to a religion, emigrating to a new country, or becoming a vampire (should the latter possibility be offered to you) are experiences and choices that may change you profoundly.

The course explores the special and distinct ways in which life-defining moments relate to our emotions and our values. For instance, love may trigger transformation by changing your core values and confront you with hard choices, such as the choice between the *status quo* or moving with your life partner far away from your friends and family. As daunting as life-defining moments are, they may also constitute unique occasions to exercise a special power of ours: the normative power to change our values and, ultimately, who we are. Some philosophers believe that life-defining moments resemble paradigm changes in the sciences, a resemblance that may help our understanding of both personal transformation and scientific transformation.

The course offers a philosophical perspective on the above questions while drawing from other disciplines such as classical studies, cognitive science, economics, law, and psychology. In light of this interdisciplinary approach, a renowned expert in one of these fields is expected to join us for a guest lecture.

Through philosophical reflection on their emotions and values and the emotions and values of others, students will acquire tools enabling them to find meaning in (i) their personal or professional paths and (ii) the varied human communities and organizations to which they belong and that they may come to lead.

Detailed Description*

(1) Transformation, Values in Virtual Reality, and the Emotions of Life-Defining Moments

--With an introduction to philosophy and the philosophical method

We will begin with an overview of the philosophical program of the semester and address all questions regarding the work expected from students. In particular, we will discuss

- (i) transformative experience in connection to paradigm shifts in the sciences (philosophy of the self, philosophy of science),
- (ii) what the possibility of a good life in virtual reality teaches us about value (philosophy of value, value theory, ethics), and
- (ii) what role some emotions may play in life-defining moments (philosophy of mind, philosophy of emotions).

We will raise questions such as the following: Which events have changed you? How has attending EPFL affected who you are? What roles do (your) values play in shaping who you are? Do emotions constitute ways of being in touch with (your) values? These questions will follow us throughout the semester.

During this introductory part of the course, we will also go over grading modalities (writing assignments, discussion chairing, class participation, etc.) and grading criteria. The instructor will introduce students to philosophy as a discipline and to the philosophical method specifically. For instance, the philosophical emphasis on clarity, concision, and truth will be highlighted by considering Edmund Gettier's famous "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?"--a three-page paper that fundamentally changed our understanding of knowledge--and Harry Frankfurt's article "On Bullshit".

As suggested above, the overview of the philosophical program of the semester will reveal that values and emotions play a crucial role in life-defining moments. This result will confront us with two questions: What is (a) value? What is an emotion?

(2) Value

The second part of the course introduces students to the philosophy of value, also called value theory. In this section of the course, we will follow one quest: defining value(s).

Prima facie, values include things such as moral goodness, beauty, the sacred, and justice, and values are related to yet differ from other normative notions, such as the right to vote. Moreover, we will adopt the following working hypothesis:

Something is a (positive) value if and only the more there is of that thing, the better the world is.

A distinctive feature of this working hypothesis is that it seemingly treats value like a quantity or a magnitude. But we will see that in many regards, values differ from familiar empirically measurable quantities or magnitudes. For instance, while the mass of any object A is equal, greater than, or smaller than the mass of another object B, some philosophers believe that the value of an object A may be neither equal, nor greater than, nor smaller than the value of a (different) object B; the two objects may be, to put it roughly, incommensurable value-wise. The possibly life-defining choice between going to EPFL or attending a prestigious Law school may be hard for that precise reason: the two options may be incommensurable value-wise. So, something in the nature of values seems relevant to the structure of at least some transformative decisions and hard choices.

And as we progress in our quest to define value, we will come across types of values less commonly known than those already mentioned. For example, the traditional opposition between instrumental value and intrinsic value has shaped much of value theory. Indeed, some things have value only in virtue of what they can help us obtain (i.e., instrumental value; think of, e.g., money), whereas other things have value in themselves (i.e., intrinsic value; think of, e.g., happiness). In contrast to things that have only instrumental value, things that have intrinsic value are traditionally thought to provide a foundation for our moral lives. Another important distinction is the contrast between the personal value of, say, a quickly snatched picture of you and your friends at the entrance of EPFL's Rolex Building and the impersonal value of a professionally taken, much more sophisticated picture of the entrance of the same Rolex Building. With such distinctions, we will be able to ask which specific types of values are at stake in life-defining moments and which emotions, if any, give us access to these specific types of values.

(3) Emotion

The third part of the course introduces students to the philosophy of mind while paying special attention to the affective domain within the mind. In this section of the course, we will follow one quest: defining emotion.

Prima facie, emotions include phenomena such as hope, joy, grief, compassion, love, nostalgia, shame, and pride. But we will see that some of these phenomena may not be emotions: indeed, we will distinguish emotions from other mental states, such as belief, and other affective phenomena, such as moods and "sentiments". Our starting point to define emotion will be the following working hypothesis:

Any instance of an emotion is (i) about something relatively specific (e.g., typically, one is proud *of something*, say, of completing one's master's degree), (ii) feels a relatively specific way that resembles how other instances of the same emotion feel (e.g., experiences of pride resemble each other in the way they feel, but they feel different from experiences of shame), and (iii) may be appropriate or not (it is appropriate to be proud of completing one's master's degree, and it is typically inappropriate to be proud of failing to complete one's degree).

But we will see that this working hypothesis about emotion is rather ambitious. Finding a definition of emotion that satisfies (i), (ii), and (iii) has proved difficult for many philosophers, including those, for instance, that view emotions as being, ultimately, sensations of pleasure and displeasure or those that view emotions as being, ultimately, value judgments.

And as we progress in our quest to define emotion, we will come to consider the following intriguing possibility: emotions give us access to values and may thus constitute an affective compass to navigate our moral lives. Sometimes that compass helps us protect ourselves from "mental corruption" by reminding us of our values. But at other times, this compass helps us face life's hard choices and transform who we are by embracing new values.

Guest lecture: TBC.

A word about philosophy and philosophy courses in general

Philosophers have long been famous for their *disputationes* (i.e., debates). Indeed, exchanges play a central role in philosophy. Students should come to class prepared to discuss the mandatory reading assignments. The selected mandatory readings are, generally speaking, short and accessible, and they stand out as pleasant, if not entertaining, reads that shaped the subsequent philosophical discussion.

Specifically, mandatory readings will amount to a maximum of 20 pages per week. This maximum will only be reached for the most accessible readings. The more difficult the readings will be, the fewer pages will be assigned so that students have time to engage with the readings and reflect on them.

Indeed, the main mission of students with regard to readings and class materials is to *reflect* on them and come up with their own questions, thoughts, objections, claims, and arguments. The goal of this course is not for the students to remember every detail of the readings or the course materials. Readings and class materials are starting points to help students develop their own thoughts on emotion, value, and the self. In fact, some of the best extant philosophy results from "misunderstanding" or "misreading" some idea in past philosophical works and building on that misunderstanding to get closer to the truth of a certain matter.

**Note: The instructor may adjust the content and structure of the course described above to a reasonable extent, in particular at the beginning of the semester, when the instructor will be able to assess more accurately the needs of enrolled students. The guest lecture mentioned above is yet to be confirmed and is subject to approval by the Collège des Humanités.*

Keywords

Mind, self, transformation, transformative decision, personal choice, mental corruption, meaning, core preferences, preference aggregation, empathy for others, empathy for future selves.

Ethics, moral philosophy, value, values, core values, instrumental value, intrinsic value, final value, personal value, impersonal value, norms, incommensurability, incomparability, parity, normative powers.

Emotion, affect, mood, sentiments, valence, emotion appropriateness, being moved, being struck by value.

Learning Prerequisites

Required courses

None.

Recommended courses

After completing this course, students must take the Master's Project seminar HUM-479 *Emotion and Value II* in Spring 2023-24.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, the student must be able to:

- Autonomously read and analyze complex text.
- Defend a claim or point of view effectively with arguments, including logical reasoning, counterexamples, and thought experiments in oral and written form.
- Write a paper instantiating the philosophical values of clarity and concision.
- Establish a reference list for an article in an accepted standard format.
- Evaluate arguments and claims. Detect flaws in argumentation, nonsense, and what Harry Frankfurt calls "bullshit".
- Develop effective examples to illustrate ideas.
- Guide and structure a discussion involving opposing views.
- Distinguish between philosophical/a priori questions and empirical/ a posteriori questions.
- Distinguish between philosophical/a priori and empirical/a posteriori argumentative strategies
- Identify meaning (e.g., goals and missions) for individuals and organizations more effectively.
- Problem-solve in new and creative ways.
- Autonomously read and analyze complex text.

Teaching methods

For Semester 1, see below. For Semester 2, see HUM-479 *Emotion and Value II*.

Structure of sessions

Hour 1 and 2: Lectures; active discussion of the reading assignments and course materials.

During Hour 1 and 2, students are encouraged to participate actively by asking questions, raising objections, and defending their own views. Moreover, depending on classroom dynamics, the instructor may adapt the structure of Hours 1 and 2: for instance, the instructor may ask students to brainstorm reading assignments and course materials in groups before lecturing in order to foster student participation in classroom discussions. Mandatory readings will not exceed 20 pp. per week, but students must present to class having completed the readings.

Hour 3: Supervised research in groups and individually; work towards assignments for Semester 1 and for the Master's Project to be submitted by the end of Semester 2.

Students will form small groups of ca. 5* people and choose one topic based on the list annexed to the syllabus published at the beginning of Semester 1. Each group must select a different topic. If necessary, the instructor may form groups or assign topics based on a fair method (such as drawing lots).

Assignments

A. *Writing assignment prepared in groups and individually (maximum of 3 pages).*

(i) Group work on 2 pages: Reflection and research for the development of an abstract (i.e., roughly, a summary of the envisaged Master's Project, maximum of 1 page) and an outline (maximum of 1 page).

(ii) Individual work on 1 page: Reflection and research for the development of a personal addendum (1 page maximum) to the abstract and outline prepared in groups. The personal addendum allows every student to complement the work submitted as a group with a personal contribution (e.g., by addressing something left out in the group work or by presenting an argument of their own). Importantly, the personal addendum may concur with or dissent from the views

defended in the writing assignment prepared as a group.

Both (i) and (ii) above constitute the writing assignment for Semester 1 and help prepare the Master's Project due by the end of Semester 2.

B. Chairing of one philosophical discussion (ca. 30 minutes)

(i) Group work in preparation for the chairing of a ca. 30-minute class discussion: Each group will be in charge of chairing and guiding a class discussion during one session of Semester 1. The instructor will assign sessions and topics at the beginning of the semester based on a fair method.

**The instructor may reasonably adapt the format of the groups and of the assignments depending on the needs of enrolled students.*

Expected student activities

For Semester 1, see below. For Semester 2, see HUM-479 *Emotion and Value II*.

ECTS 3 credits for Semester 1: ca. 75-90 hours workload (i.e., roughly 3 hours in the classroom and 3 hours outside the classroom)

Semester 1: mandatory reading assignments, active participation in class discussions (or equivalent to be determined with the instructor if attendance is impossible), chairing and guiding of one class discussion; in-class supervised research, discussion chairing preparation, and writing; additional research, discussion chairing preparation, and writing outside the classroom.

Assessment methods

For Semester 1, see below. For Semester 2, see HUM-479 *Emotion and Value II*.

(i) Written exam on class materials and mandatory readings during the last session of the semester (2 hours, 50% of the grade for Semester 1).

The first hour of the last session will consist of a "Stress and Cookies" tutoring session. Students will have the opportunity to ask any questions remaining before the exam, enjoy cookies, and use any time left to finish preparing for the exam. The two following hours will consist of the written exam.

(ii) Group abstract and outline, plus personal addendum (maximum of 3 pages in total, 30%).

This grade is attributed individually based on an assessment of the work submitted as a group and individually. The personal addendum is partly meant to ensure and check that all group members contribute fairly to the group work.

(iii) Chairing of one philosophical discussion and general participation in class (20%)

Supervision

Office hours	No
Assistants	No
Forum	No
Others	

A schedule of supervision will be published at the beginning of Semester 1.

You may contact the instructor in the following ways:

- (i) Primary method: during supervised research hours.
- (ii) Secondary method: by appointment in person or on Zoom/equivalent.
- (iii) For official and urgent matters: by email at alain.pecurto@epfl.ch.

Resources

Virtual desktop infrastructure (VDI)

No

Bibliography

The references provided here will be available at the library. They are *not* mandatory readings. However, they constitute excellent complements to the course materials. The list of mandatory readings will be published at the beginning of Semester 1.

If needed, additional pointers to references useful for the group and individual assignments will be communicated after groups are formed and topics selected.

(A) Three relatively short books on emotion, value, and transformative experience:

Deonna, J. A. & Teroni, F. 2012. *The Emotions: A Philosophical Introduction*. Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge.

Orsi, F. 2015. *Value Theory*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Paul, L. A. 2014. *Transformative Experience*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

(B) A short introduction to the philosophical method in general (not specific to the topics covered in the course).

Williamson, T. 2020. *Philosophical Method: A Very Short Introduction*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

(C) Two longer books on value, value relations, and hard choices:

Chang, R. 2014. *Making Comparisons Count*. Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge.

Rønnow-Rasmussen, T. 2021. *The Value Gap*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ressources en bibliothèque

- [DEONNA J. & F. TERONI \(2012\). The Emotions : a philosophical Introduction](#)
- [Orsi, F. 2015. Value Theory](#)
- [Paul, L. A. 2014. Transformative Experience](#)
- [Williamson, T. 2020. Philosophical Method: A Very Short Introduction](#)
- [Chang, R. 2014. Making Comparisons Count](#)
- [Rønnow-Rasmussen, T. 2021. The Value Gap](#)

Notes/Handbook

Course materials will be available starting from the beginning of the semester on Moodle (see link below).

The video links provided below are indicative only. It is not mandatory to watch the relevant videos, but students may do so to discover some of the questions and topics that the course will cover.

Moodle Link

- <https://go.epfl.ch/HUM-478>

Videos

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8GQZuzIdeQQ>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMO2bDVhyHs>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTnL3s2OQGM>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNnxekMyPek>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=agMwrzO1SoY>