

HUM-478

Emotion, value, and life-defining choices 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**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. The philosophical ideals of clarity and truth will guide us throughout the semester.

In particular, the course examines the role that **emotions** and **values** play in defining the **self** (i.e., roughly, who we are) and making our lives meaningful. It does so 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 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.

The exploration of philosophical theories about **emotion, value, the self, and its transformations** will not provide students with definite responses about what they should do to lead meaningful lives. However, through philosophical reflection on these topics, students will acquire essential tools to find--autonomously--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.

The course has the following three parts.

(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 semester's philosophical program 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 semester's philosophical program will reveal that values and emotions play a crucial role in defining the self and its transformations. This result will confront us with two questions: What is 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).

At first sight, 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 if 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. Nevertheless, 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.

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.

At first sight, 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 beliefs, 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 (e.g., it is appropriate to be proud of completing one's master's degree).

However, 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, who view emotions as being, ultimately, sensations of pleasure and displeasure or those who view emotions as being, ultimately, value judgments.

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. Nevertheless, 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. 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. Furthermore, the instructor will provide advice on how to read efficiently, particularly on how to read *philosophy* efficiently.

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 College of Humanities.

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 can take the course HUM-479 *Emotion, value, and life-defining choices II* in Spring 2025 to prepare and submit their master's projects.

Important concepts to start the course

No mastery of philosophical concepts is expected at the start of the course. The instructor is aware that many students in the class will not be familiar with philosophy and its methods. Additionally, the instructor is aware that many students will likely not have read philosophical texts or written essays recently. Therefore, the instructor will gradually introduce students to all concepts, methods, and skills required to complete the course, including through class exercises.

Learning Outcomes

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

- Interpret 1. Autonomously read, analyze, and assess complex text.
- Defend 2. Defend a claim or point of view effectively with arguments, including logical reasoning, counterexamples, and thought experiments in oral and written form.
- Compose 3. Write a paper instantiating the philosophical values of clarity and concision.
- Critique 4. Critique a claim or point of view effectively with arguments, including logical reasoning, counterexamples, and thought experiments in oral and written form.
- Assess / Evaluate 5. Evaluate arguments and claims. Detect flaws in argumentation, nonsense, and what Harry Frankfurt calls "bullshit".
- Solve 6. Problem-solve in new and creative ways.
- Create 7. Develop effective examples to illustrate ideas.
- Manage 8. Guide and structure a discussion involving opposing views.
- Distinguish 9. Distinguish between philosophical demonstrations and scientific demonstrations.
- Develop 10. Develop philosophical demonstrations.
- Optimize 11. Identify meaning (e.g., goals and missions) for individuals and organizations more effectively.
- Present 12. Present complex ideas in a compelling way.
- Negotiate 13. Collaborate on sophisticated tasks and discuss complex topics with others.

Transversal skills

- Plan and carry out activities in a way which makes optimal use of available time and other resources.
- Communicate effectively with professionals from other disciplines.
- Give feedback (critique) in an appropriate fashion.
- Take account of the social and human dimensions of the engineering profession.
- Demonstrate a capacity for creativity.
- Continue to work through difficulties or initial failure to find optimal solutions.
- Access and evaluate appropriate sources of information.
- Use a work methodology appropriate to the task.
- Assess progress against the plan, and adapt the plan as appropriate.

- Set objectives and design an action plan to reach those objectives.
- Chair a meeting to achieve a particular agenda, maximising participation.
- Communicate effectively, being understood, including across different languages and cultures.
- Evaluate one's own performance in the team, receive and respond appropriately to feedback.
- Identify the different roles that are involved in well-functioning teams and assume different roles, including leadership roles.
- Keep appropriate documentation for group meetings.
- Negotiate effectively within the group.
- Demonstrate the capacity for critical thinking
- Manage priorities.
- Assess one's own level of skill acquisition, and plan their on-going learning goals.
- Make an oral presentation.
- Summarize an article or a technical report.
- Respect the rules of the institution in which you are working.
- Respect relevant legal guidelines and ethical codes for the profession.
- Use both general and domain specific IT resources and tools

Teaching methods

Structure of sessions

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

During Hours 1 and 2, students are encouraged to participate actively by asking questions, raising objections, and defending their own views. 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 be short, but students must complete the readings.

Hour 3: Supervised research in teams and individually; work towards assignments for the Fall semester (HUM-478) and for the master's project to be submitted by the end of the Spring semester (HUM-479).

Students will form small teams of ca. 5 people. As part of the assignment, each team will select a general theme related to the course materials and gradually define a more specific topic and claim based on that theme. The instructor will provide examples of themes at the beginning of the Fall semester and help each team identify a topic and claim as the semester unfolds.

Assignments

A. Writing assignment prepared in teams and individually (maximum of 3 pages in total).

(i) Work in teams on 2 pages (maximum): research, reflection, and development of a short essay.

(ii) Individual work on 1 page (maximum): research, reflection, and development of a personal addendum to the short essay prepared in teams. The personal addendum allows every student to complement the work submitted as a team with a personal contribution (e.g., by addressing something left out in the team's 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 team.

Both (i) and (ii) above constitute the writing assignment for the Fall semester and help prepare the master's project due by the end of the Spring semester.

B. Team presentation of a mandatory reading and chairing of a philosophical discussion following the presentation (20 minutes maximum)

(i) Work in teams for the presentation and chairing: each team will briefly present a summary of one of the mandatory readings (10 minutes maximum) and chair a short discussion on the relevant reading after the presentation (10 minutes

maximum) during one session of Semester 1. The instructor will assign sessions and topics at the beginning of the semester based on a fair method.

Note: The instructor may reasonably adapt, among others, the assignments and the size of the teams depending on the needs of enrolled students.

Expected student activities

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)

Mandatory reading assignments, active participation in class discussions, 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.

Note: For students expecting to be substantially absent from class, graded in-class activities may be substituted with equivalent graded activities. The instructor's permission is required. Students expecting to be substantially absent from class must immediately and spontaneously contact the instructor to discuss the mentioned accommodations.

Assessment methods

(i) 50% of the Fall semester grade; Written exam on class materials and mandatory readings at the end of the semester (2 hours).

The exam will take place during one of the last sessions of the semester. The instructor will determine the exact date with students at the beginning of the semester to avoid scheduling conflicts. The first hour of the exam 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) 30%: Team essay, plus personal addendum (maximum of 3 pages in total).

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

(iii) 20%: Team presentation of a mandatory reading (10 minutes), chairing of the philosophical discussion following the presentation (10 minutes), and general participation in class

Note: For students expecting to be substantially absent from class, graded in-class activities may be substituted with equivalent graded activities. The instructor's permission is required. Students expecting to be substantially absent from class must immediately and spontaneously contact the instructor to discuss the mentioned accommodations.

Supervision

Office hours	Yes
Assistants	Yes
Forum	Yes
Others	Office hours: the instructor will communicate the exact time and place at the beginning of the semester.

You may contact the instructor in the following ways:

- (i) Primary method: during supervised research hours.
- (ii) Secondary method: during office hours or by appointment (in person or on Zoom).
- (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 instructor will communicate the list of mandatory readings at the beginning of the semester. Additionally, students will have access through Moodle to research tools and optional references to support their work on the course assignments.

(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) One longer book on value:

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

Ressources en bibliothèque

- [Deonna, J. A. & Teroni, F. 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](#)
- [Rasmussen, T. 2021. The Value Gap](#)

Notes/Handbook

Further course materials will be available at 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>
- [http:// https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNnxekMyPek](http://https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNnxekMyPek)
- [http:// https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=agMwrzO1SoY](http://https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=agMwrzO1SoY)

Prerequisite for

Please see the recommended course above.