

Phil 470

## Comparative Conceptions of the Self

Prof. Edward Slingerland

**Instructor**

Prof. Edward Slingerland  
Buch D304  
Tuesday/Thursday 3:30-5:00

**Winter Session, Term 1 2024**

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Also virtual, by appointment:

<https://ubc.zoom.us/j/4422938752?pwd=aGxFRVU5bkZvUS9kUWxSMmFsWktCdz09>

Meeting ID: 442 293 8752

Passcode: 520254

Course Description

This course is intended to introduce students to the various ways in which the “self” has been portrayed (implicitly or explicitly) in both Eastern and Western religious traditions, as well as how these differing conceptions of the self have resulted in quite disparate manners of understanding ethics, the relation of the self to society, and the valuation of particular human abilities. The main theme will be the history of the construction of the modern western, liberal conception of the self, some of the problems endemic to this conception, and how western conceptions of the self compare with those from the Warring States period of early China.

The idea is to help the student see: 1) that he or she *has* a conception of him-/herself, whether he or she was previously aware of it or not; 2) where this conception of the self came from, and what some of its tensions are; 3) how any conception of the self is inextricably tied up with theories about

human nature and some sort of religious worldview; and 4) how pairing particular thinkers from the West and from early China can highlight both important similarities and deep differences. Thinkers to be treated include Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Nietzsche, Freud, Confucius, Zhuangzi and Iris Murdoch.

### Required Texts

Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self*

Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (trans. Paton)

Freud, Sigmund, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (trans. Strachey)

Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Beyond Good and Evil* (trans. Kaufmann)

The *Analects* of Confucius (trans. Slingerland), Hackett Publishing Company

The *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings* (trans. Watson), Columbia University Press

Murdoch, Iris. *The Sovereignty of the Good*.

Additional readings in Course Pack

### Class Requirements

This is a seminar style class, so class attendance and participation are crucial. Attendance will be taken daily. One unexcused absence will be tolerated, but each absence after that will result in 8% being deducted from the “class participation” portion of one’s grade.

It is critical that you do all of the readings before class, every week. There are, of course, things I want you to take away from the readings etc., but this information is far more likely to stick in your heads if you put in the work to get there yourselves through guided discussion. Given this approach, you will not only need to “do the readings” but understand them to the point of being able to actively teach them to your classmates, ask informed questions, and synthesize higher-level points across readings. Discussions will be supplemented by occasional lectures to introduce new material, but even lecture periods are expected to be interactive.

Every week when there are assigned readings, after any initial lecture to provide background information, you will be put into a small group, randomly assigned a portion of the reading to analyze together, and given 10 minutes or so to discuss your assigned section. One member of your group will then present on the section of the reading to the entire class, and your group as a whole will lead the discussion on that section. Presentations will be given a simple check, check plus, check minus rating, and every student must take a regular turn at serving as presenter for their group. At the end of the term you will be asked to anonymously rate your peers in terms of how helpful they were in your group discussions/presentations, and this rating will be combined with your presentation marks and attendance to make up your class participation grade.

**No electronic devices will be allowed in the classroom.** Please plan to take notes manually, purchase the required course readings and course packet, and bring the books we will be discussing to class.

Each student will be responsible for writing one ungraded paper that will then be analyzed on the final exam.

There will also be seven (7) quizzes over the course of the semester, with the two lowest grades being dropped, as well as an in-class midterm essay and a final exam. Grading will be as follows:

Class participation and preparation*:	15%
Quizzes (10% each)	50% (two lowest grades dropped)
Midterm	15%
Final exam	20%

\* based on attendance, presentation, and peer feedback

The final exam will mostly follow the format of the quizzes and be comprehensive, although it will also include a short essay as well as a narrative section where students will analyze the “spiritual autobiography” (paper #1) they wrote at the beginning of the class, drawing upon our semester’s readings. The midterm will involve a short, handwritten essay analyzing and comparing more than one of our primary texts. Both the midterm and final will require you to bring our major assigned texts to class and cite them in your answers (so, Kant, Nietzsche, and Freud for the midterm, those three plus the *Analects*, *Zhuangzi* and Murdoch for the final).

### **Class Policies**

Students who need to request accommodations based on a disability are required to register with Access and Diversity (<http://students.ubc.ca/about/access>) within the first week of class.

The final exam time and location will be announced in class as soon as it is available, and students will then have one week from the time of announcement to report any potential scheduling conflicts to the instructor; after this period, no alternate exam accommodations will be made. In any case, exam accommodations will only be made for conflicts with exams in other classes; personal travel plans cannot, under any circumstance, be accommodated, so please do not make vacation travel plans until the exam date is announced.

Academic concessions concerning make-up exams, class absences, etc. are granted only rarely and at the sole discretion of the instructor, and any concessions that are granted must also be officially cleared by Academic Advising (<http://students.arts.ubc.ca/advising/academic-performance/help-academic-concession>).

The instructor strictly adheres to the guidelines for Discipline for Academic Misconduct published in the UBC-Vancouver *Calendar* (<http://www.calendar.ubc.ca/vancouver/index.cfm?tree=3,286,0,0>) for plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty. It is the responsibility of the student to familiarize him- or herself with these guidelines.

Please disable all cell phones, beepers, personal communications devices, and any other sound-producing appliances before entering the classroom. **Also please note that use of electronic devices, including laptop computers, is not permitted during class**; students needing a special concession in this regard must consult with the instructor the first week of class.

Notes or class videos may only be made for the purposes of individual or group study, or for other non-commercial purposes that reasonably arise from your membership in this class. Permission to make recordings of discussions must be requested from the instructor. Notes and recordings of this

class may not be exchanged or distributed for any commercial purpose, for compensation, or for any purpose other than your personal study. Unless authorized by the University in advance and explicitly and in writing permitted by the instructor, commercial or any non-personal use of class notes or recordings constitutes an unauthorized activity, and students who violate this policy are subject to University discipline.

### **Schedule of Classes/Readings**

*Conceptions of the self, the good life and their relationship to ethics*

09/03 No class because of Imagine Day

09/05 Course Introduction: “Inescapable Frameworks.”  
Bellah et al., pp. 3-35 (Course pack). **Paper #1 assigned: spiritual autobiography.**

*Conceptions of the Self*

09/10 Charles Taylor: *Sources of the Self*, Chapter One (pp. 3-24).

09/12 Charles Taylor: *Sources of the Self*, Chapter Two (pp. 25-52). **Paper #1 due**

09/17 Charles Taylor: *Sources of the Self*, Chapter Three (pp. 53-90). **Quiz #1.**

*A Pre-Modern Western Self*

09/19 Aristotle and the social, embodied self. Course Pack: *Nicomachean Ethics*:

*Creation of the Western Liberal Self*

09/24 Individualism: Descartes, Locke, utilitarianism, and the “affirmation of ordinary life.” *Sources of the Self*: 143-176, 289-294, 321-327.

09/26 Descartes *Meditations 1-2* (Course pack: pp. 9-19).

10/01 The Rationalist Self: Kant, with background reading: *Sources of the Self* pp. 363-367. Kant *Groundwork* 55-73, 92-96.

10/03 The Rationalist Self: Kant *Groundwork* 108-110, 114-131. **Quiz #2.**

*The Tragic Modern Self*

10/08 Freud. Freud. *Civilization* 10-36. Lecture: Romanticism and Post-Romanticism, with SS 441-455 as background.

10/10 Freud. *Civilization* 37-74.

10/15 Freud, *Civilization* 75-112. **Quiz #3.**

*The Postmodern Self*

10/17 Nietzsche: *Beyond Good & Evil* 9-32.

10/22 Nietzsche: *Beyond Good & Evil* 35-76.

10/24 Nietzsche: *Beyond Good & Evil* 97-141; modernism and post-modernism in the wake of Nietzsche: *SS*: 472-490. **Quiz #4.**

**10/29 In-class midterm**

10/31 Lecture: background to Warring States thought.

*Confucianism: The Cultivated Self*

11/05 Confucius. *Analects* pp. 1-51.

11/07 Confucius. *Analects* 52-110

11/12 Confucius. *Analects* 111-137, 174-212. **Quiz #5.**

*Daoism: The Empty Self*

11/14 Zhuangzi. *Zhuangzi* pp. 24-48

11/19 Zhuangzi. *Zhuangzi* pp. 49-88

11/21 Zhuangzi. *Zhuangzi* pp 89-141 **Quiz #6.**

**11/26 Class cancelled**

*A Modern Virtue Ethic*

11/28 Murdoch. *Sovereignty of Good*, pp. 2-44

12/03 Murdoch. *Sovereignty of Good*, pp. 45-74

12/05 Murdoch. *Sovereignty of Good*, pp. 75-101. **Quiz #7.**