

PHL/COLL 150

Truth: What is it? Why Care About it?

Time: MW 3:30pm-4:50pm
Location: James Blair Hall
Instructor: Aaron Griffith
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Office: 138 James Blair Hall
Office Hours: MW 2:00pm – 3:00pm

Overview

The study of truth has been central to philosophical inquiry. Indeed, every great philosopher has had something to say about the nature of truth. But truth also seems to be central to our everyday lives. We want our politicians to tell the truth; witnesses in court swear to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth; we expect both friends and strangers to tell us the truth when we ask them questions in good faith, etc. This course pursues two, intertwined, lines of inquiry. The first focuses on *the nature of truth*. We will entertain a number of different answers to the question ‘what is truth?’ by considering different theories of truth, e.g., the correspondence theory, the coherence theory, the pragmatic theory, and deflationism about truth. The second is concerned with *the value of truth*, i.e., the question ‘why care about truth?’ We will inquire into the relation between truth and happiness, politics, relativism, lies, and bullshit. This course satisfies the COLL 150 requirement. For more information on COLL 150, see

<http://www.wm.edu/as/undergraduate/curriculum/coll/150/index.php>

Requirements

1. Attendance and Participation (10%)
2. 3 Reading Responses (20%)
3. Midterm Exam (20%)
4. Final Exam (20%)
5. Long Essay (30%)

Materials

There are four required texts for this course:

- Michael Lynch, *True to Life*. Bradford Books, 2005.
- Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*. Princeton University Press, 2005.
- Albert Camus, *The Fall*. First Vintage International Edition, 1991.
- Various other readings will be assigned and will be available as PDFs through the course website.

Grading Scale

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- A: 90-100 (90-93: A-, 93.5- 100: A)
 - B: 80-89 (80-83: B-, 83.5-86: B, 86.5-89: B+)
 - C: 70-79 (70-73: C-, 73.5-76: C, 76.5-79: C+)
 - D: 60-69 (60-63: D-, 63.5-66: D, 66.5-69: D+)
 - F: 0-59

Assignments

Attendance and Participation (10%)

Students are expected to attend and come prepared for every class. This entails having read the assigned material for each day and being ready to discuss it in class. I hope that everyone will feel comfortable speaking in class, but I realize that this won't be the case for everyone. Outside of in class participation, you can earn your participation grade by emailing me questions/comments about our reading before class, which I will (anonymously, if you prefer) work into the day's discussion.

3 Reading Responses (20%)

In this course you are required to submit three reading responses. For each response you are to focus on one of our readings assigned to that point in the class. Responses should be 2 pages double-spaced. On page 1 you are to outline the argument, i.e., identify premises, supporting evidence, and conclusion. This will not involve any evaluation of the argument; your job is simply to present the author's view as clearly, charitably, and objectively as possible. On page 2 you are to offer reflection on the reading. This can take the form of raising an objection to the argument, pursuing a line of thought in the reading further, saying why you agree/disagree with the author, or offering further analysis of a specific passage in the reading, etc. Responses should be typed out and a hard copy handed in, in class. Reading responses will be graded on the following scale:

- 10: Excellent
- 8: Satisfactory
- 6: Unsatisfactory
- 0: No Credit

Midterm and Final Exams (20% and 20%, respectively)

Two in-class exams will be given, one at the mid-way point of class and the second during finals week. Exams may be comprised on multiple choice, short answer, and essay questions.

Long Essay (30%)

10 pages. In the second essay for this course you will need to develop and defend an original thesis about one of our main themes. That is, you must defend a thesis about the *nature* of truth and/or the *value* of truth. The essay must engage with the course readings. **You are required to submit a rough draft of your essay and revise it in light of comments from the professor and one of your peers.**

Essay instructions and formatting:

- Double spaced, 12pt Times New Roman (or similarly sized) font
- Margins: top, bottom 1 inch; left, right 1 inch
- Do not quote long portions of the text. If you need to refer to a passage from a text simply put (Author's Name, page number) at the end of your sentence.
- You need to supply a bibliography for your paper.
- Do not collaborate with others. You may discuss ideas with your professor and peers, but do not write your papers together.
- Late papers will be docked 1/3 of a letter grade for each day late.
- A hard copy of your paper must be handed in on the day on which it is due.

Reading and Assignment Schedule

The following schedule is tentative and subject to change. PDF readings are available on the course Black Board page. All other readings come from the Lynch book, the Frankfurt book, or the Camus book.

2016-2017 Academic Calendar:

http://www.wm.edu/offices/registrar/documents/calendars/2016_2017ugcal.pdf

Week 1

Wednesday 1/18: Introduction; Syllabus; M. Lynch, "Introduction"; Patrick Stokes, "No, You're Not Entitled to Your Opinion": <http://theconversation.com/no-youre-not-entitled-to-your-opinion-9978>

Week 2

Monday 1/23: M. Lynch, "Truisms about Truth"; Robert Nozick, "The Experience Machine" (PDF)
Wednesday 1/25: M. Lynch, "Is the Truth Unattainable?"; Chuang Tzu, The Butterfly Parable (PDF)
Rene Descartes, *Meditation 1* (PDF)

Add/Drop period ends Friday 1/27

Week 3

Monday 1/30: Greewald and Banaji, "Mind Bugs" and "The Hidden Costs of Stereotypes" (PDF)
Wednesday 2/1: Richard Feldman, "Reasonable Religious Disagreement" (PDF)

Reading Response #1 Due

Week 4

Monday 2/6: M. Lynch, "Is Truth Relative?"; Jesse Prinz, "Dining with Cannibals" (PDF)
Wednesday 2/8: James Rachels, "The Challenge of Cultural Relativism" (PDF)

Week 5

Monday: 2/13: John Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation" (PDF)
Wednesday 2/15: Keith Ward "Truth and Diversity of Religions" (PDF)

Reading Response #2 Due

Week 6

Monday 2/20: M. Lynch, "The Truth Hurts"; M. Lynch, "Truth as a Means to an End"
Wednesday 2/22: William James, "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth" (PDF); Linda Alcoff, *Real Knowing: New Versions of the Coherence Theory*, Introduction (1-17) (PDF)

Week 7

Monday 2/27: Richard Rorty, "Truth without Correspondence to Reality" in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (PDF)
Wednesday 3/1: Review and **Midterm**

Week 8

Monday 3/6: Spring Break: NO CLASS

Wednesday 3/8: Spring Break: NO CLASS

Week 9

Monday 3/13: M. Lynch, "Truth and Scientific Image"; Michael Devitt, *Realism and Truth*, chapter 3
"What is Truth?"

Wednesday 3/15: M. Lynch, "Truth as Fiction"; Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a
Nonmoral Sense" (PDF); Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Chapter 1,
sections 1-6 (PDF)

Reading Response #3 Due

Friday 3/17 last day to withdrawal from course

Week 10

Monday 3/20: M. Lynch, "Truth and Happiness"; Albert Camus, *The Fall*

Wednesday 3/22: Albert Camus, *The Fall*

Week 11

Monday 3/27: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1 (PDF); Derrick Parfit, "What Makes Life Go
Best" in *Reasons and Persons* (PDF)

Wednesday 3/29: Writing Instruction

Reading Response #4 Due

Week 12

Monday 4/3: M. Lynch, "Sweet Lies"; Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*

Wednesday 4/5: Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* cont.; G.A. Cohen, "Complete Bullshit" (PDF)

First draft of the long essay due in class to professor and peer reviewer on Wednesday 4/5

Week 13

Monday 4/10: M. Lynch, "Truth and Liberal Democracy"

Wednesday 4/12: Richard Rorty, "Ethics without Principles" in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (PDF)

Return comments to partner on Wednesday 4/12

Week 14

Monday 4/17: Hanna Arendt, "Truth and Politics"

Wednesday 4/19: "Post-Truth" Society and Fake News: TBA

**Final draft of long essay due by email Sunday 4/23 at 11:59pm. Bring hard copy to class
on Monday 4/24.**

Week 15

Monday 4/24: Plato, *Republic*: Book VII and Book VIII (PDF); David Lay Williams, "Plato Predicted
'Pizzagate' (or Rather Fake News More Generally)":

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/12/13/plato-predicted-pizzagate-or-rather-fake-news-more-generally/?utm_term=.229bd88bb171

Wednesday 4/26: M. Lynch, "Epilogue"; Ryunosuke Akutagawa, "In a Grove" (PDF)

Final Exam

Monday May 1: 9:00am -12:00pm

Exam Schedule:

<http://www.wm.edu/offices/registrar/calendarsandexams/examschedules/spring17exam/index.php>

Of Special Note

Attendance and Absences

Attendance in class as well as regular preparation and participation is mandatory. Students are, however, permitted to miss 2 class sessions without documented excuse for the absence. 3 or more undocumented absences will result in a penalty on the student's final grade. Absences may be excused for the following reasons only: (a) a serious medical issue (i.e., one requiring hospitalization or confinement in the infirmary), (b) a family emergency (i.e., death or emergency hospitalization of an immediate family member), (c) conflicting University-related events, (d) religious observances, or (e) jury duty.

Missed Tests

Make up or alternative tests will not be granted without documented proof of either (a) a serious medical issue (i.e., one requiring hospitalization or confinement in the infirmary), (b) a family emergency (i.e., death or emergency hospitalization of an immediate family member), (c) conflicting University-related events, (d) religious observances, or (e) jury duty. If you miss a test and do not have documented proof of these cases, you will receive a 0 (zero) as your score. (Alternate tests should be scheduled ahead of time for reasons (c) through (e).)

Papers

Papers will be marked down 1/3 of a letter grade for each day they are late. I am happy to help you get an early start on your written assignments. You are responsible for backing up texts composed on a computer, and failures of software or hardware are not acceptable reasons for a late assignment. I highly recommend using Dropbox to back up your files: <http://www.dropbox.com/>

If you do not understand why you received the grade you did, please come see me. Under no conditions will your grade be lowered if you do come see me to discuss a grade you received. *However, if you do want clarification you must submit to me in writing your question or concern before we meet in person.*

I also encourage you to take advantage of the writing resources on campus. The *Writing Resources Center* in Swem Library offers free feedback on your written work, including help with drafting, organizing, and editing your assignments. Find the writing center online at <http://www.wm.edu/as/wrc/>.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is a serious matter and will be handled by the appropriate authorities. According to office W&M policy, plagiarism is “the presentation, with intent to deceive, or with disregard for proper scholarly procedures of a significant scope, of any information, ideas or phrasing of another as if they were one’s own without giving appropriate credit to the original source” (Section IV, C: Honor Code Violations). Turning in any work which is not your own and not properly acknowledged as such will result in a recommendation for failure in the course and subject you to further action by the university. Please review the university policy on academic dishonesty and speak to me if you have questions. See:

https://www.wm.edu/offices/deanofstudents/services/studentconduct/studenthandbook/honor_system/section_VI/index.php

Class Behavior

You are responsible for being prepared for each class session, which means having carefully read the assignment for each day of class and thought of questions you would like to discuss. You are responsible for all material covered in both lecture and the required readings.

I ask that all members of the class conduct themselves in a respectful manner. Respect for others takes a number of forms in this class, and in academic life generally. In the first place, it means that we need to be sensitive to how our behavior in class affects others. For example, I ask that students be conscientious about how your use of technology affects others in class. Take conversations and phone calls outside. Please do not text, chat online, or surf the net in class. If your behavior becomes problematic or disruptive, I will ask you to leave. I ask that you have intellectual respect for others, as well. This means that if you disagree with a position that someone holds, you should assume that the person is at least as smart as you are, and that the person probably has good reasons for thinking as he or she does. Your job is to be a good listener and exchange ideas, not to attack and degrade others.

Students with Disabilities

It is the policy of The College of William and Mary to accommodate students with disabilities and qualifying diagnosed conditions in accordance with federal and state laws. Any student who feels s/he may need an accommodation based on the impact of a learning, psychiatric, physical, or chronic health diagnosis should contact me privately to discuss your specific needs. Students will also need to contact Student Accessibility Services staff at 757-221-2509 or at sas@wm.edu to determine if accommodations are warranted and to obtain an official letter of accommodation. For more information, please see www.wm.edu/sas.

Additional Resources

Not all resources (especially those online) are created equal! You will not need to read or research any other material than the required readings to succeed in this course. However, you may be interested in pursuing our topics further. In addition to the optional readings I will provide on our course website, I recommend two websites in particular:

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: www.plato.stanford.edu/

The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: www.iep.utm.edu/