



Last updated 1.9.2024

SEMINAR IN SELECTED TOPICS: TRYING, PERSISTING, QUITTING

PHIL 390.001 Spring 2024

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill



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COURSE INFORMATION

Credit Hours: 3

Pre or Co-Requisites: 1 philosophy class

Target Audience: all students

Meeting Pattern: TTR 12:30 – 1:45pm

Instructional Format: in-person, discussion-based

Classroom or Location: Peabody Hall, Rm 3018

This course counts toward the major core as an elective. However, with approval of the Department's Director of Undergraduate Studies, it may count toward one of the four distribution areas.

INSTRUCTOR INFORMATION

Name: Professor Shanna Slank (she/they)

UNC Email Address: sslank@unc.edu (Please use email rather than Canvas to contact me.)

Office Location: 10 Caldwell Hall (It's in the basement of the building!)

Office Hours: Tues 2-3:30, Thurs, 11-12:30 (in person), or by appointment (in person or via Zoom)

Zoom Room ID: <https://unc.zoom.us/j/2408183777>



Last updated 1.9.2024

COURSE CONTENT

Course Description

There is a wide range of things that you and I *do*. In everything from flipping light switches to getting college degrees to going to the moon, we make things happen by way of our own agency. Impressive!

In this course, we will consider philosophical questions that arise in the context of complex agency—that is, the sort of agency that we use to get college degrees and to get to the moon (but not necessarily when we flip light switches or make a sandwich). Understanding this kind of agency is important since it is behind the parts of our lives that we often care most about: making art, having romantic partnerships, raising children, nurturing communities, pursuing justice.

Here are the questions we'll address: What does it mean to try? What does it mean to fail? Is it possible to *rationaly* choose to do things that you should be quite confident will be difficult to do? What about things that we should think we are *extremely* unlikely to succeed at—can we rationally choose to do these things? How can we keep going when, in the middle of doing something, it gets really hard? And importantly: When should we quit?

Course Texts & Materials

All course readings will be available as PDFs on Canvas.

Course Goals & Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs)

All our philosophy courses aim at the acquisition and nurturing of basic philosophic skills. One of the main goals of our philosophy curriculum is to instill and enable the development of skills that are distinct to philosophy, but which are foundational to all forms of knowledge.

These **basic philosophical skills** involve being able to:

- Think critically;
- Deploy philosophical concepts and terminology correctly, in either a historical or contemporary setting;
- Represent clearly and accurately the views or argument of particular philosophers, in either a historical or contemporary setting;
- Identify the premises and conclusion(s) of a philosophical argument and assess both its validity and soundness;
- Apply a philosophical theory or argument to a new topic, and being able to draw and defend reasonable conclusions about that topic;
- Develop an argument for a particular solution to a philosophical problem in either a historical or contemporary setting;
- Write clearly, precisely, and persuasively in defense of a philosophical thesis;
- Participate in respectful, critical, and reflexive dialogues about difficult philosophical positions;
- Read, interpret, and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of different philosophical texts and the philosophical positions presented them





Last updated 1.9.2024

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS & ASSESSMENTS

Expected Time Dedicated to the Class

I expect that you will spend 9-12 hours outside of class time per week dedicated to the work for this course.

Assignment Descriptions

1. Pre- and post-reflection

In the first week and last week of the semester, I will give you a short set of open-ended questions on themes related to the course. In the pre-reflection, you'll answer the questions. In the post-reflection, you'll copy your pre-reflection answers into the body of the paper, and then write on whether or how your views have evolved from beginning to end of the semester.

1-page each (2 total)

Capacity: Writing, metacognition

DUE: Sun, 1/14 and Fri, 5/3 by 9pm

2. Class journal

At the end of every class meeting, you'll be given the last five minutes to write freely. Ideally, you'll record whatever thoughts are most on your mind after that period's discussion. Maybe it is something you're confused about, maybe it is something you'd like to think more about, maybe it is something that struck you as illuminating. These reflections will anchor the beginning of each class meeting ("initial impressions") as well as our group discussions.

Roughly: 1-2 paragraphs each,
around 16 entries

Capacity: Writing, metacognition

DUE: Fri, 5/3 by 9pm

3. Reading expertise

There are twelve readings in the semester for which we will have student experts. Each reading will have two experts. And you are responsible for two readings. During the weeks in which you are a reading expert, you will (1) prepare a 10-minute presentation of the reading with your co-expert and (2) be responsible for motivating and directing our class discussion.

n/a

Capacity: Collaborating

DUE: you select the readings you want to present; see schedule below

4. Papers (x3)

You'll write three short papers for this course, based on the readings and our class discussions.

With each paper, you must include a self-assessment, which will be no more than 1 page. It will end with a suggested grade.

3-4 pages each (9-12 total)

Capacity: Writing

DUE:

Paper 1	Sun, 2/18, 9pm
Paper 2	Tues, 3/19, 9pm
Paper 3	Mon, 5/6, 4pm



Last updated 1.9.2024

6. Participation

See Appendix A for a more detailed description of what I expect from you for this component.

n/a
DUE: n/a

Capacity: Collaborating, presenting

Assessment breakdown

Assignment/Assessment	Final Grade (%)
Pre- and post-reflection	7.5%
Class journal	7.5%
Reading expertise	10%
Papers	60% (20% each)
Participation	15%

Table a: Course Assignments/Assessments Table

Grading Scale & Schema

Late Work

My policy is not to accept late work unless there are extenuating circumstances. If you find yourself in such circumstances, it is best to be in communication with me about your situation. The earlier you do this (read: **well before the night before a due date**), the better.

Grading Rubrics

1. Pre- and post-reflection

This is a low-stakes writing assignment that will be assessed for good-faith effort and careful writing.

2. Class journal

This is a low-stakes writing assignment that will be assessed for good-faith effort and careful writing, as well as for completion. You will lose 5 points for every entry less than the 20 entries that are considered a complete journal.

3. Reading expertise

You will be assessed according to

- (1) your comprehension of the reading
- (2) your ability to explain the reading without merely summarizing its sections
- (3) the questions that you raise to the class about the reading's arguments
- (4) the extent to which you help engage and direct discussion for the week



Last updated 1.9.2024

5. Papers

I will provide you with a specific assessment rubric for each paper. But in general, an excellent paper has the following virtues:

Concision	author has shown care to say only what she needs to, has avoided superfluous content or language
Clarity	clear paper structure, clear paragraph structure, clear sentence structure, careful word choice
Accuracy	reasonable description of philosophical concepts and arguments that demonstrate an increasingly mature understanding
Logic	paper demonstrates a grasp of the dialectic and the logical relationship among the statements considered/advanced
Insight/creativity	assignment presents a well-developed response, demonstrates an ability to integrate new concepts into the author's own thinking and perspective
Good Faith Effort	assignment clearly demonstrates that the author engaged seriously with the material and presented the best work that they are capable of

6. Participation

See Appendix B for a more detailed description of what I expect from you for this component.

Grading Scale

Numeric Grade (%)	Letter Grade
93.5 and above	A
89.5 – 93.4	A-
86.5 – 89.4	B+
82.5 – 86.4	B
79.5 – 82.4	B-
76.5 – 79.4	C+
72.5 – 76.4	C
69.5 – 72.4	C-
66.5 – 69.4	D+
59.5 – 66.4	D
59.4 and below	F

Table b: Grading Scale Table



Last updated 1.9.2024

COMMUNICATION AND OTHER COURSE NOTES

Meeting with me

COME to Office Hours! I have Office Hours on **Tuesdays and Thursdays**. If that doesn't work for you, I'm happy to meet one-on-one whenever we can find the time. Send me an email to figure that out. I'm also happy to meet over Zoom rather than in my office, but you'll have to ask me to set that up.

Messaging me

Please email me. During the workday, I'll do my best to respond to you in a timely manner. After 6pm during the week and throughout the weekend, I try to give my full attention to my family, which means detaching from the Internet. I will certainly keep the costs of this policy to you in mind, should any course-related emergencies arise.

Checking email

If you don't already, you should be checking your UNC email regularly. At minimum, once a day.

Note: I encourage you to get in the habit of using professional email decorum. It is the way that you indicate to the person that you're communicating with that you appreciate the time and the attention that they are giving to you. What are (some of) the rules of the decorum?

1. Begin every initial email in a communication chain with a salutation that addresses in name the person whom you are writing. For example, "Dear Professor X," or "Hi Professor X."
2. Be direct, use careful and complete sentences, and keep your tone measured.
3. Close every initial email in a communication chain with your name and perhaps a salutation. For example, "Sincerely, John," or "Thanks, Judy."

Technology rules

1. No cell phones.
2. If you must have a laptop out, please use it for course-related work. And please turn off your internet for class.



Last updated 1.9.2024

COURSE SCHEDULE

Class Session (Date/Week)	Topic	Readings	Assignments/Notes
Week 1			
TR 1.11	Introduction: A brief tour of philosophy of action	No required readings. <i>Optional:</i> S. Paul, "Introduction, Introduction to Philosophy of Action"	Due: Sun, 1/14 Pre-reflection
Week 2			
T 1.16	Prelude: decisions	M. Titelbaum, ch. 7 of <i>Fundamentals of Bayesian Epistemology</i> , excerpts	Guest: Reuben Stern (Duke)
TR 1.18	"	"	
Week 3			
T 1.23	The anatomy of action: intentions	D. Velleman, <i>What good is a will?</i>	
TR 1.25	"	"	
Week 4			
T 1/30	The anatomy of action: trying	F. Adams, "Trying" J. Hornsby, "Trying to act"	
TR 2.1	"	"	
Week 5			
T 2.6	Difficult action	B. Marusic, "Belief and difficult action"	
TR 2.8	"	"	
Week 6			
T 2.13			Well-being Day – No classes
TR 2.15	Persistence – empirical perspectives	A. Duckworth et al., "Grit" C. Dweck, TBD	Due, Sun, 2/18 by 9pm: Paper 1
Week 7			
T 2.20	Persistence	J. Morton & S. Paul, "Grit" B. Marusic, "No grit without freedom"	
TR 2.22			



Last updated 1.9.2024

Week 8			
T 2.27	Persistence and hope	C. Rioux, "Hope as a source of grit"	
TR 2.29			
Week 9			
T 3.5	Philosophy lab	<i>No new readings, writing workshop</i>	
TR 3.7	Philosophy lab	<i>No new readings, writing workshop</i>	
Week 10			
T 3.12			No classes - Spring break
TR 3.14	--		No classes - Spring break
Week 11			
T 3.19	Persistence and faith	L. Buchak, "Faith and Traditions"	Due by 9pm: Paper 2
TR 3.21			
Week 12			
T 3.26	Agency gone awry	M. Biss, "On trying too hard"	
TR 3.28			No classes - Well-being Day

Week 13			
T 3.2	Agency gone awry?	H. Battaly, "Quitting, Procrastinating, and Slacking Off"	
TR 3.4	"		
Week 14			
T 4.9	Trying the impossible?	N. Southwood & D. Wiens, "Devoting ourselves to the manifestly unobtainable"	
TR 4.11			
Week 15			
T 4.16	What is success? (atelic action)	K. Setiya, "The midlife crisis" <i>Bhagavad Gita</i> , excerpts	
TR 4.18	"		
Week 16			
T 4.23	Evaluating failure	B. Clack, <i>How to be a failure</i> , excerpts	



Last updated 1.9.2024

TR 4.25			
Week 17			
T 4.30	When to quit	No new reading; Slank presents	Due: Fri, 5/3 by 9pm: - Post-reflection - Class journal
Monday, May 6, 4pm	Course wrap-up meeting (during scheduled final exam period) *final paper due		



Last updated 1.9.2024

POLICY STATEMENTS

Below are policy statements required by the university to be included in all syllabi.

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Statements for Undergraduate Classes Spring 2024

Attendance Policy

University Policy: As stated in the University's [Class Attendance Policy](#), no right or privilege exists that permits a student to be absent from any class meetings, except for these University Approved Absences:

1. Authorized University activities: [University Approved Absence Office \(UAAO\) website](#) provides information and [FAOs for students](#) and [FAOs for faculty](#) related to University Approved Absences
2. Disability/religious observance/pregnancy, as required by law and approved by [Accessibility Resources and Service](#) and/or the [Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office](#) (EOC)
3. Significant health condition and/or personal/family emergency as approved by the [Office of the Dean of Students](#), [Gender Violence Service Coordinators](#), and/or the [Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office](#) (EOC).

Honor Code

All students are expected to follow the guidelines of the UNC honor code. In particular, students are expected to refrain from "lying, cheating, or stealing" in the academic context. If you are unsure about which actions violate that honor code, please consult honor.unc.edu.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Policy – CAS units only

Instructors should specify the details of AI Use Policies for the particular course, either by indicating that:

Use of generative AI tools of any kind is not permitted in this course. Any use of these tools will be considered an instance of academic dishonesty and will be referred to the Honor System.

- or -

The following uses of generative AI tools are permitted in this course: *Categories of possible permitted use include, but are not limited to: topic selection, brainstorming and idea generation, research, source validation, outlining and planning, drafting, media creation, peer review, revising, and polishing.*

Syllabus Changes

The instructor reserves the right to make changes to the syllabus including project due dates and test dates. These changes will be announced as early as possible.

Accessibility Resources and Service

[Accessibility Resources and Service](#) (ARS – ars@unc.edu) receives requests for accommodations, and through the Student and Applicant Accommodations Policy determines eligibility and identifies reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities and/or chronic medical conditions to mitigate or remove the barriers experienced in accessing University courses, programs and activities.

ARS also offers its Testing Center resources to students and instructors to facilitate the implementation of testing accommodations.

Counseling and Psychological Services

UNC-Chapel Hill is strongly committed to addressing the mental health needs of a diverse student body. The [Heels Care Network](#) website is a place to access the many mental health resources at Carolina. CAPS is the primary mental health provider for students, offering timely access to consultation and connection to clinically appropriate services. Go to their website <https://caps.unc.edu/> or visit their facilities on the third floor of the Campus Health building for an initial evaluation to learn more. Students can also call CAPS 24/7 at 919-966-3658 for immediate assistance.

Title IX and Related Resources

Any student who is impacted by discrimination, harassment, interpersonal (relationship) violence, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, or stalking is encouraged to seek resources on campus or in the community. Reports can be made online to the EOC at <https://eoc.unc.edu/report-an-incident/> or by contacting the University's Title IX Coordinator (Elizabeth Hall, titleixcoordinator@unc.edu) or the Report and Response Coordinators in the Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office (reportandresponse@unc.edu). Confidential resources include Counseling and Psychological Services and the Gender Violence Services Coordinators (gvsc@unc.edu). Additional resources are available at safe.unc.edu.



Last updated 1.9.2024

APPENDIX A: PARTICIPATION RUBRIC

Here are guidelines for “High caliber participation” (“HCP”), which I use to assess your participation grade at the end of the semester. An ‘A’ participation grade satisfies all below.

1 Be present

Showing up for class is not merely required by university policy but a critical prerequisite for learning.

2 Be present

Okay good. You’ve made it to class. The next element in HCP is a matter of how you are in class. Is your phone out? What windows/programs do you have open on your laptop? Are you half asleep? Are you non-verbally communicating to me that you are paying attention? (Eye contact helps!) When you’re in class, you should be all in. For 50 minutes, you are directing your mind to attend to the activity of learning.

***Note about technology:*

Your phone should never be out during class. Not even under the desk.

I strongly encourage you to be in class without a laptop. However, if you rely on your laptop for taking notes or for access to readings, that’s okay. But! You should do so responsibly. Responsible use starts with turning off your Internet.

3 Be prepared

Being prepared means that you’ve done the reading for the week, you have your reading with you (hard copy or on your computer), and you have reviewed your notes prior to class.

A note on reading philosophy: It’s hard! Comprehending the ideas that other people are trying to express to you with their words is *very* difficult, in general. In philosophy, it can be even more difficult because authors are wrestling with complex questions and exploring nuanced answers to them. You will have to practice persistence and patience. A lot of the time you may have the feeling that you don’t know what’s going on in a piece. That’s okay. The beginning of understanding is often messy.

4 Regularly and responsibly contribute.

For HCP, both the quantity and quality of your contributions matter. Be willing to say things that you are not sure of or don’t know how to say well. Be mindful of how what you’re thinking of saying will be received by others—sometimes offense is not a matter of what you say, but how you say it. Ask questions! It’s great to ask questions—of me, and of others. Especially if you don’t understand something that is being said. Being able to articulate what you don’t understand is an advanced cognitive skill.

For much of the course, you’ll be dialoguing quite a bit with your classmates. Part of HCP is engaging with others bountifully, respectfully, and earnestly. You’ll do this in think-pair-shares, small- and whole-group discussions, and writing labs. We want to make our space one where everyone wants to present their ideas. Philosophy is best treated as a team sport.