

HCOL 085
The Pursuit of Knowledge
Fall 2016

Class meetings:	Professor
Plenary lectures: Wednesdays, 5:05-6:20 p.m., Billings Lecture Hall (unless otherwise noted)	Office hours:
Email:	Phone:

The world is a complex and confusing place. How do we try to understand it without oversimplifying the complexity? In HCOL 085, we explore what it means to “know,” through classic and contemporary texts that present a wide range of perspectives on what we can know about the world and how we know it.

At the core of the course, we explore three foundational Western approaches to knowledge. First is René Descartes, whom many consider to be the founder of a “modern” approach to knowledge as springing from the mind (“rationalism”). Descartes is followed by David Hume, an important thinker in a tradition that opposes Descartes’ rationalism by claiming that we come to know the world first and foremost through our senses (“empiricism”). A third approach argues that we construct our knowledge of the world by creating narratives – that is, we build stories, assign specific patterns to our experiences, in order to give them coherence and meaning. We’ll examine the relative merits of these three approaches by reading primary texts and a range of accompanying material. The latter includes Elizabeth Kolbert’s *The Sixth Extinction*, an unsettling and powerful account of species extinction in the context of global climate transformation.

In the latter section of the course, we’ll delve into a fascinating stream of contemporary research, much of it conducted in the disciplines of psychology and economics, aiming to describe how humans actually perceive the world and make decisions. We conclude with a brief examination of some of the moral and ethical considerations involved in the pursuit of knowledge by reading an essay by the great twentieth-century philosopher Hannah Arendt, and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

We will, ourselves, be constructing some knowledge as we go, and you will contribute by expressing and supporting your ideas and your interpretations of our readings. HCOL 085 is not a lecture course: it relies on your active and informed participation in every single class session. To deepen this informed participation and build your confidence about the ideas you bring to the table, HCOL 085 is designed as a writing course as well. In addition to long-form expository essays, we’ll be doing a good deal of shorter, more informal writing, designed with a few core purposes in mind:

- To bring your thoughts and questions from course readings and plenaries to seminar discussions;
- To build a habit of reading actively, critically, and with curiosity;
- To turn a collection of observations about a text into a concise summary;
- To develop your (appropriately) tentative initial thoughts and opinions from seminar discussions into a confident voice on the page, and into focused, well-supported arguments;
- To use feedback and new perspectives in revising an initial draft.

This practice will lead to a multi-draft writing assignment that asks you to engage critically (and creatively!) with course texts (and, if you like, with additional material), in a longer essay. That assignment will start as a draft, undergo a substantial revision after feedback from me and your seminar colleagues, and eventually take the form of a final term paper for the course.

The Plenaries

All first-year Honors College students attend a seminar section of HCOL 085. Meanwhile, the entire first-year group comes together on Wednesday evenings for a plenary session, from 5:05-6:20, usually in Billings Lecture Hall. While the content of plenaries vary, most feature speakers telling their own stories, explaining their research or other creative work, and thinking for us about the nature of knowledge. A few take advantage of having us all in a room together to provide you with useful information about making the transition to college and navigating the first year successfully.

Required texts

Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction* (Picador, 2014)

René Descartes, *Discourse on Method* and *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1637, 1641; Hackett 4th Ed., 1998)

David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1777; Hackett 2nd Ed., 1993)

Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011)

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818; Oxford World's Classics Edition, 1994)

Course packet (in the UVM Bookstore, as are all the books on this list)

Note: **Most** of the required readings are either in the books listed above or in the course-pack. Over the course of the semester, I may also assign short additional readings at my discretion. The class also features readings labeled “Recommended;” I may decide to require some of these. All of them can be found on the class Blackboard page.

Assignments and grades

Students must attend **all** class meetings and plenary lectures having read assigned material, having completed any assigned homework, and being ready to discuss the material in class. Other requirements are:

- **Four short papers** (about 700 words, double spaced). Designed to improve your thinking and writing, these papers will ask you to engage with the course material in different ways. The first short paper, due on the first day of class and ungraded, deals with our summer reading, *The Sixth Extinction*. For the others, assignments are distributed at least one week before the due date.
- **Capstone paper** (five to ten pages, double spaced). This paper allows you to explore a course-related topic of your interest in more depth. The first draft (worth one-third of the paper grade) is due in mid-November, and the final draft (worth two-thirds of the paper grade) is due on the last day of class. Students will choose topics well in advance of these dates. Precise due dates are listed below.
- **Homework.** Frequently during the course you'll have short, informal assignments. These will be announced in class and can be accessed via the “Homework Assignments” link on our class Blackboard page. The assignments will often deal with our readings, but they may also be related to class discussions, plenaries, and things that surface during the semester. They will consist of different types of assignments: low pressure responses to questions, participation in discussion groups, exercises that ask you to analyze or research an issue more deeply, etc.

- **Final Exam.** The schedule for final examinations will be determined by the Registrar, and the date and time for this section's final will be communicated to you as soon as the Registrar publishes the schedule. **Please note: it is not possible to reschedule the date or time of your final exam. Keep this in mind when making travel arrangements for the winter break.**

Final grades are derived using the following weights: short papers 30% (10% per graded paper), homework 15%, capstone paper 20%, final exam 20%, and class participation 15%. Please do talk to me at any time during the semester if you have questions about my evaluation of your work.

Course Objectives

You should finish this course having:

- begun the transition to college in an intellectually rigorous, safe, and supported environment
- explored some of the ways knowledge is deployed in varying contexts
- experienced some healthy disruption of your own disciplinary comfort zone in order to foster greater intellectual curiosity
- gained practice in reading and annotating texts for effective understanding and critical thinking
- gained proficiency in paraphrasing and summarizing the arguments of others
- learned to draw connections between different texts and different ways of thinking
- practiced developing an argument from evidence
- practiced using the feedback of others, new information, and your own changing ideas to revise your written work
- practiced locating ideas and information relevant to a research question in UVM's digital and print archives
- gained experience in evaluating the effectiveness of an argument (both yours and others')
- improved your ability to communicate ideas, both in conversation and in writing

In short, we hope by the end of the semester that you will have cultivated a set of academic "habits" crucial to success as a student and a career professional, particularly *active and critical reading, writing as a learning process, and engaged participation.*

Classroom Rules and Expectations

- **Screens.** No phones on the table, ever, unless you're looking something up at the class's specific request. No texting, ever. If I see you, assume your participation grade for the course just dropped. You can use a laptop for notes, but you must turn off the wireless radio.
- **Attendance** is mandatory: you must come to every class and every scheduled plenary. Any unexcused absence will affect your participation grade. Habitual tardiness will also affect your participation grade.
- **Listen** carefully and respectfully to others; **contribute** to class discussion regularly (but be careful not to dominate); learn everyone's name, and use those names in class.
- **Engage** with others in the class. All comments and questions in discussion should *not* be addressed to me.

- Always **come prepared for class**—that means not only that you’ve done your reading, but also that you’ve had enough sleep the night before and something to eat before class begins. I’d prefer that you not eat during class but it is fine to bring a cup of water, coffee, or tea.

Introduction

Date	Reading	Writing Assignment
T Aug 30	Robert Nash, “Fostering Moral Conversations in the Classroom,” from <i>Journal on Excellence in College Teaching</i> (1996) [course-pack]; Honors College Compact; Kolbert, Chapter 1.	Paper #1 due
W Aug 31	PLENARY, 5:05-6:20: Introductory Plenary	
R Sep 1	Kolbert, Chapters 5, 6 and 10	

Framework I: Rationalism

T Sep 6	Thomas Aquinas, <i>Summa Theologica</i> , Vol. 1 (written 1267-1273; this edition pub’d 1952), “The Existence of God,” p. 10-14; [course-pack]; Russell Shorto, <i>Descartes’ Bones</i> (2008), pp. 12-29 [course-pack]; Descartes, <i>Discourse on Method</i> , Part 1	
W Sep 7	PLENARY, 5:05 – 6:20: Dr. Jim Hudziak, “The Neuroscience of Brain Development during the College Years: How to Build a Healthier Brain”	
R Sep 8	Descartes, <i>Discourse on Method</i> , Parts 2, 4 and 6.	
T Sep 13	Descartes, <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i> , Meditation 1 and 2.	
W Sep 14	PLENARY, 5:00 – 6:20: Elizabeth Kolbert	
R Sep 15	Descartes, <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i> , Meditation 6;	

	Excerpts from <i>The Correspondence Between Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes</i> (Shapiro ed., 2007), pp. 61-69 [course-pack].	
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Framework II: Empiricism

T Sep 20	David Hume, <i>Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding</i> , Sections II and III	Paper #2 due
W Sep 21	PLENARY, 5:05 – 6:20: Susan Piver, Title TBD	
R Sep 22	Hume, <i>Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding</i> , Sections IV and Section V, pp. 27-37.	
T Sep 27	Hume, <i>Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding</i> , Section XII.	
W Sep 28	PLENARY, 5:05 – 6:20: TBD	
R Sep 29	Alison Gopnik, “David Hume and the Buddha,” from <i>The Atlantic</i> (2015) [course-pack].	
T Oct 4	Emile Durkheim, “What Is A Social Fact?,” from the <i>Rules of Sociological Method</i> (1895) [course-pack]; Kolbert, Chapter 2.	
W Oct 5	PLENARY: 5:05 – 6:20: Prof. Chris Danforth, “Measuring Happiness: Social Media as Laboratory”	
R Oct 6	Kolbert Chapters 3 and 4.	

Framework III: Narrative Knowledge

T Oct 11	Aristotle, from <i>Poetics</i> , sections 1-8, 9.4, 10.5 and 10.6 [course-pack], translated and edited by Malcolm Heath; Penguin (1997); TBA	Paper #3 due
W Oct 12	PLENARY: 5:05 – 6:20: TBA	
R Oct 13	Jerome Bruner, “The Narrative Construction of Reality,” from <i>Critical Inquiry</i> (1991) [course-pack]; Philip Ball, “The Story Trap,” from <i>Aeon</i> (2015) [course-pack].	

T Oct 18	Bruner, continued Kidd & Castano, “Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind,” <i>Science</i> , Oct. 2013; Belluck, “For Better Social Skills, Scientists Recommend a Little Chekhov,” <i>New York Times</i> , Oct. 3, 2013.	
W Oct 19	PLENARY: 5:05 – 6:20: Paul Van de Graaf, US Attorney’s Office, “How Stories Work in the Courtroom”	
R Oct 20	Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story,” at http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story Galen Strawson, “I am not a Story,” from <i>Aeon</i> (2015) [course-pack].	
T Oct 25	Hayden White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” from <i>Tropics of Discourse</i> (1978) [course-pack]. Recommended: Aimee Bender, “What Writers Can Learn From ‘Goodnight Moon,’” <i>New York Times</i> , July 19, 2014.	
W Oct 26	PLENARY: 5:05 – 6:20: Prof. Darrin McMahon, “Pursuing Happiness through the Ages”	
R Oct 27	Patricia Nelson Limerick, “Haunted America,” from <i>Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West</i> (2000) [course-pack].	
T Nov 1	Kolbert, Chapters 7, 8 and 11.	Paper #4 due
W Nov 2	PLENARY: 5:05 – 6:20: Prof. Emily Bernard, “People Like Me”	
R Nov 3	Kolbert, Chapters 12 and 13. Capstone writing workshop: topic development and source acquisition.	

How Do We Think? The Contemporary Study of Rationality, Reasoning and Error

T Nov 8	Kahneman, Chapters 1-4, and 7	Capstone paper <i>proposal</i> due!
W Nov 9	PLENARY, 5:05 – 6:20: Dr. Bob Macauley, “The ICU: Introduction to Clinical Uncertainty”	
R Nov 10	Kahneman, Chapters 9, 11, and 12;	

T Nov 15	Barry Schwartz, "Self-Determination: The Tyranny of Freedom," from <i>American Psychologist</i> (2000) [course-pack]. Kathryn Schultz, <i>Being Wrong</i> , pp. 320-339 (2010) [course-pack].	
W Nov 16	PLENARY: 5:05 – 6:20: Prof. Lizzy Pope, TBD	
R Nov 17	Schultz, <i>Being Wrong</i> , cont'd. Shankar Vedantam, "Why Our Brains Weren't Made to Deal with Climate Change" http://www.npr.org/series/423302056/hidden-brain ; George Marshall, "Climate change—the greatest story never told" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wB1Tu9Tpvvo .	
F Nov 18	Capstone draft due	

Thinking and Moral Considerations

Nov 21 – 25	Thanksgiving - No classes	
T Nov 29	Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," from <i>Social Research</i> (1971) [course-pack].	
W Nov 30	PLENARY: 5:05 – 6:20: Prof. Josh Bongard, "What Robots can Teach us about Evolution, Language, and the Mind"	
R Dec 1	Mary Shelley, <i>Frankenstein</i> , Preface and pp. 192-97 (Intro to 1831 edition), then read pp. 1-68	
T Dec 6	Shelley, <i>Frankenstein</i> , pp. 69-123.	
W Dec 7	PLENARY: 5:05 – 6:20: TBD	
R Dec 8	Shelley, <i>Frankenstein</i> , pp. 124-191 Craig Venter, "On the Verge of Creating Synthetic Life," at http://www.ted.com/talks/craig_venter_is_on_the_verge_of_creating_synthetic_life	
F Dec 9	Capstone draft due	
Dec 15	Final Exam 10:30 a.m.-1:15 p.m.	Note: dates and times of final exams are set by the Registrar and cannot be changed