

Concourse Seminar
Fall semester, 2014
THE CONCOURSE OF CORE QUESTIONS AND IDEAS
MIT
Friday 12:00-2:00
Concourse Lounge, 16-128

Our fall seminar is an opportunity to develop the inquiry into human life and human endeavor that begins in our humanities classes and to expand that inquiry across a range of disciplines. We seek to find and explore the crucial questions or investigations that span the disciplines and also underlie our pursuit of all worthwhile activities. The fall seminar is thus devoted to the common ground and common themes of knowledge. In the spring, we will examine the ways in which different disciplines approach these questions differently. Most Fridays, you will have a short reading assignment, which is either already linked below or will be posted ahead of time on the seminar stellar site. Also posted on the stellar site each week will be a question for you to address in a paragraph or so (no more than one page), which you will hand in at the start of the seminar. We'll begin with lunch and then, after about 40 minutes, begin the discussion. Concourse faculty will lead the discussion, but we want you to be active participants. Come hungry – physically and intellectually!!

I. Welcome Picnic

September 5

II. Familiar Words; New Meanings

September 12

What is education (do we live in a cave?)?

Reading: selection from Plato's *Republic*

September 19 – NO CLASS (career day)

September 26

What is Knowledge?

Reading: Walt Whitman: When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer
Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Bacon (selections)

October 3

Motion and Energy

Reading: Aristotle's *Physics* (excerpts)
Galileo Galilei, *Dialogues Concerning Two New Sciences* (excerpt)

October 10

Evidence and Proof

Reading: Euclid, Book IX Proposition 21

Plato, *Republic* (excerpt)

Carl Sagan, *The Varieties of Scientific Experience* (excerpt)

October 17

Definitions, Models and Truth

Readings: Andrew Abbott, *Method and Discovery*

Plato, *Meno* (Meno's paradox), *Republic* (Book IV, tripartite soul)

III. Justice, Morality and Human Nature

October 24 (family weekend)

The Civic Role of Religion

MIT Chaplains

Readings: Hobby Lobby decision

Zacchary Fine, "My So-Called Opinions"

Invocation at MIT Commencement

Survey of Incoming Freshmen

October 31

What is happiness?

Reading: Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, prologue (section 5)

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, chapter 7

TED talk: http://www.ted.com/talks/dan_gilbert_asks_why_are_we_happy.html

November 7

Science and human nature

Reading: Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table* (Hydrogen, Potassium, Carbon)

November 14

Love

Reading: Love Letters (selections)

IV. Problems and Promises of Modernity

November 21

Modern science and modern life

Reading: Yuval Levin, "The Moral Challenge of Modern Science"

(<http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/the-moral-challenge-of-modern-science>)

Mark Helprin, "The Acceleration of Tranquility," *Forbes Magazine*

November 28 – NO CLASS (Thanksgiving)

December 5

The Modern Temper:

Reading: Wallace Stevens, *Sunday Morning*

(http://masi.cscs.lsa.umich.edu/~crshalizi/Poetry/Stevens/sunday_morning.html)

December 12

The Limits of Knowledge

Readings: Bible (selections)

David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (excerpt)

Sean Carroll, "Quantum Time" (*From Eternity to Here*)