

Concourse Seminar  
Fall semester, 2015  
**THE CONCOURSE OF CORE QUESTIONS**  
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. Asking Questions**

### ***September 11***

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

Reading: selection from Plato's *Republic*

### ***September 18***

**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](http://www.ted.com/talks/dan_gilbert_asks_why_are_we_happy.html)

### ***September 25***

CAREER FAIR DAY – CONCOURSE COMMUNITY PICNIC

### ***October 2***

**Modern Science: what is the good, the bad, and the ugly?**

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

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

### ***October 9***

**Technology and the good life: can we have and eat the cake?**

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

## II. Pursuing Answers

**October 16**

### Definitions, Models and Truth

Readings: Andrew Abbott, *Method and Discovery*

Plato, *Republic* (excerpt)

**October 23 (family weekend)**

MIT Chaplains (on failure and regret)

**October 30**

### Evidence and Proof

Reading: Euclid, Book IX Proposition 21

Deirdre McCloskey: "Once Upon a Time There Was a Theory"

Plato, *Republic* (excerpt)

**November 6**

### What is Knowledge?

Reading: "Theaetetus" by Plato, 145c-148e

Excerpts from Francis Bacon ("The Great Instauration" and "Novum Organum")

"When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" by Walt Whitman

Excerpts from the Feynman Lectures (Vol 1, Ch 38-6)

**November 13**

### The Limits of Knowledge (What don't we know?)

Readings: Bible (selections)

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

Sean Carroll, "Quantum Field Theory and the Limits of Knowledge"

## III. And Still More Questions...

**November 20**

### What was a 'book' in the Renaissance? What is a 'book' today?

Prof. Jeff Ravel, History

Reading: Marshall McLuhan, "The Printed Word: Architect of Nationalism," in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (MIT Press, 1964, reprint 1994), pp. 170-178.

**November 27** – NO CLASS (Thanksgiving)

**December 4**

### The Civic and the Political

R. Winters