

Montserrat Seminar Descriptions

2014-2015

The Montserrat Program is grouped into six different thematic clusters: Contemporary Challenge (C); Core Human Questions (Q); The Divine (D); Global Society (G); The Natural World (N); and The Self (S). Each cluster contains seminars examining the theme from a variety of perspectives.

⌘ Contemporary Challenges ⌘

This is Humanity? (fall)

Ever since the beginning of the 17th century, social and political philosophers have focused on the challenge of how to make society/the world/this life better for humans. Whether the answers lay in new forms of political, social, historical or economic order, the project has always been to relieve the burdens of humans' estate. This can only be accomplished, however, based on an understanding of what a 'human being' is (i.e., a discrete individual who freely chooses to enter into a social unit? a mode of an already existing collective? a productive animal? a rational animal?). This semester focuses on exploring various modern answers to the question about what a 'human being' is such that improvement in living conditions is possible and desirable.

This is Progress? (spring)

In the wake of revolution (be it industrial, technological, or political), many have questioned the very ideal of progress we explored in the Fall. If not the ideal itself, at least the specific ways in which this ideal has been put into practice have led philosophers, writers, and social scientists to critique this ideal as ideology and/or utopian thinking. Do these critiques amount to a kind of *specific* discontent with the existing order (while still valuing the ideal of progress), or do they amount to a more radical and all-encompassing critique of the very ideal itself (compelling us to think differently about what it means to be human)? This semester focuses on the different forms of discontent that have been expressed as critiques of the ideal of progress.

Conflict and Cooperation (fall)

What is the condition of social interaction in a world where the things that we need and value are often in short supply? Our life outcomes depend on how we relate to those around us. But should we view other people as our rivals in competition for scarce resources or as allies without whom our success and survival would not be possible? This seminar will examine behavior that occurs in groups, communities and markets and will consider how psychological, economic and evolutionary theories of behavior offer different perspectives for understanding social interaction.

Rights and Duties (spring)

This semester, we extend our exploration of how human beings behave toward their rivals and/or allies to consider what various political and moral frameworks suggest about how human beings *ought* to behave toward one another. Different visions of the proper relationship between the individual and the community are based on divergent understandings of human nature, freedom, and the highest good. We will delve into these underlying assumptions and their implications in order to better understand the different political models that stem from them. Readings will be drawn from the history of political philosophy as well as some literature and social science.

Morals and the Market (fall)

In a competitive market individuals pursuing only their economic self-interest can contribute to the common good because the market channels their behavior in socially acceptable ways. Could we comprehensively organize society in this manner – never asking people to sacrifice their interests for the sake of morality or virtue? Or, do markets have limits? Is society without virtue possible? Some of the earliest proponents of a free market took morals and virtues seriously. Adam Smith was a moral philosopher as well as the first economist. Benjamin Franklin encouraged frugality, diligence and other “bourgeois virtues,” even while celebrating the economic and political freedoms of America. This course will explore the relationship of virtue and self-interest in the great books associated with the rise of capitalism.

Religion and the State (spring)

The modern state arose in an era of religious warfare. In some cases, suppressing religion appeared to state-builders as the only path to securing peace and a mutual respect for individual rights. Concomitantly, the state itself became glorified using quasi-religious symbolism. Even those state-builders who were more willing to accommodate religion demanded a strict separation of church and state, relegating religion to the private sphere. Can religion thrive in such circumstances? What is the proper role of

religion in a liberal, democratic regime? This course will explore these questions by comparing church-state relations in the United States, Germany, and Turkey.

War and the Human Condition (fall)

How can it be that one of the oldest and most common human activities is at the same time one of the most brutal and dehumanizing? And how, over time, have people dealt with this tragic paradox? In this seminar we will consider explanations for the persistence of war, examining such questions as: Are humans intrinsically bellicose? That is, is war rooted in the human condition, or is it a social construction that can be eradicated? Is the world as prone to war as it has always been, or have there been trends that provide some reason for optimism?

War and Society (spring)

War has not only been one of the most persistent aspects of human experience, it has been one of the most profoundly influential. In this seminar we will examine the interrelationship among war, politics, and society. Among the questions we will address: How has war shaped societies and political orders – and vice-versa? What role has it played in defining the identities of states and nations? Is that role changing, and if so, why? What is the proper relationship between a society and its military? Is that relationship changing? What is combat like, and how have those who've experienced it attempted to convey that experience? How have those portrayals changed over time?

↪ CORE HUMAN QUESTIONS ↪

Art's Birth & the Power of God (fall)

This interdisciplinary seminar on art, theology, and philosophy has three parts. Part one recalls the birth of art during the Renaissance, mainly through a variety of texts by and about painters. Part two follows developments in the theology of God's power during the Reformation, consulting representative theologians and spiritual masters. We shall come to ask whether God's power is eclipsed by the power of the artist. Part three discovers a correlation between the development of aesthetics (theories of taste and art), and critiques of traditional Christianity during the Enlightenment—namely that art and God are both misremembered.

Art's End & the Death of God (spring)

This interdisciplinary seminar on art, philosophy, and theology has three parts. Part one discusses philosophical proclamations of art's end and God's death in nineteenth-century German philosophy. Modern people are commanded to forget art and forget God. Part two examines the emergence of the artistic avant-garde in nineteenth century France and its continuation in the twentieth-century American painting, as the avant-garde reflects the modern imperatives to forget art and God. The final part introduces a late twentieth-century variety of theology called theological aesthetics, which constructively responds to art's end and God's death by critically reaffirming the beauty of old.

Loss and Forgetting (fall)

What do we owe the past, as thinking and feeling beings with the capacity to discern the passage of time? When is our desire to forget events from the past evidence of some measure of ethical irresponsibility? On the other hand, when is forgetting necessary, and even, of some consolatory benefit to ourselves, and those around us? In the end, how should we live, when we know that some forgetting and forgetfulness are inevitable? In this reading-intensive seminar, we'll focus on these questions via readings and discussions of the literature of forgetfulness: fictions with "unreliable" narrators; poetry committed to the management of loss and grief; experimental films and plays that explore the consequences of not remembering or learning from the past; and, nonfiction essays on forgiveness and forgetting.

Preservation and Memory (spring)

In what ways do we serve the past by remembering it? Is the cognitive task of remembering past events the extent of our responsibility? What do we owe the past, beyond remembering it? In this reading-intensive seminar, we'll focus on these question via readings and discussions of the literature of remembering: fictions devoted to the preservation of a highly-detailed recollection of everyday life; elegy as poetic form; documentary film; memoir; drama devoted to meditations on history; and nonfiction accounts of physical, psychological and genetic memory.

Farming and/or Food Industry? (fall)

Where does the food we eat come from? Have we forgotten? Have there been significant changes relatively recently in what kinds of food we eat and in how that food is produced? Are there significant differences between traditional farming and the modern food industry? What does one mean by the term "modern food industry?" Does our society remember enough to even answer these questions? What is the Green Revolution? Does it have long-term consequences that we, as a civilization, need to consider? How does modern technology enter into the answers to these questions?

Community and/or Me? (spring) One of the more troubling aspects of how modern technology affects us is the rapidity with which we forget how people much like us used to live. While much has been gained technologically in recent years, many feel that much has been forgotten and lost about human living in the process. To appreciate what has been almost entirely lost, we need to reflect on what we mean by modern technology, how we now live, and important ways in which our way of life differs from how other humans have lived. The changing meaning of *community* will be a recurring theme during the semester.

Math, Music and Memory (fall)

Music is powerful. Elder patients suffering from Alzheimer's and severe memory loss have responded miraculously to personalized playlists intended to stimulate brain activity. Mathematics is also powerful. It is the queen of the sciences and our technological world would collapse without it. What then, is the connection between these two giants? How does mathematics help us understand the beauty and structure of music? Why does one collection of pitches sound more pleasing than another, and how does memory effect our musical preferences? Does solving math puzzles or playing a musical instrument make us better thinkers? As we explore these and other related questions, students will acquire the pertinent mathematical skills and knowledge of musical concepts.

Math, Music and Identity (spring)

Can mathematics be considered an *art*? While Bach was an incredible composer, was he also a great *mathematician*? How do composers express themselves through music? What do our musical tastes reveal about our identity or our culture? Building on the foundational work from the first semester, this course will explore the creative and artistic connections between math and music, with an emphasis on how some composers use mathematical ideas in their works. The semester will culminate with each student writing and performing (or finding someone to perform) their own mathematical/musical compositions.

Staging Memory (fall)

Artistic artifacts are key elements in the formation of individual memory and the formulation of group identity. Classical, Renaissance, and Enlightenment notions of art and beauty helped to define western society and constitute our shared cultural patrimony. Students in this course will explore traditional aesthetics in order to develop the requisite historical and theoretical perspective for critical analysis. Readings of selected philosophers will be used to facilitate our consideration of contemporary performances and exhibitions. In this seminar we will investigate the applicability and effectiveness of employing a classical aesthetic to critically assess art in the twenty-first century.

Staging Identity (spring)

Modernism and postmodernism have transformed what constitutes the art object and the relationship of the viewer to the artifact. The absolutes of traditional aesthetics have been challenged and transformed by the onslaught of the avant-garde. In this seminar students will survey the development of modern theories of art from the post-Enlightenment ideals of Nietzsche to the postmodern theories of the French philosopher Derrida. Utilizing the vocabulary and theories of modern aesthetics, we will survey and critique contemporary art works on campus and in the larger community outside of the campus.

Ideological Destruction of Art (fall)

A great deal of ancient art was commissioned to honor rulers, gods or elite groups and to extend their legacy, but political and religious conflict often produced the opposite result, the destruction of memory. This course will consider the destruction of ancient art, like the disfiguring of disgraced Roman emperors' portraits and the 4th Century CE Christian destruction of pagan cult statues and temples. For additional perspective, we will consider cases from later periods of history, including the Taliban demolition of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan (2001); and the highly publicized toppling of a statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad at the beginning of the Iraq War (2003).

Stolen History (spring)

Archaeology recovers voices previously lost to history. One of its guiding concepts is context: an artifact is significantly diminished in worth if we do not know the circumstances of its production or its original physical context. But if archaeology helps us to recover lost voices, it is also frequently subject to abuse. The antiquities trade encourages looting and therefore the destruction of archaeological evidence. People and nations use, distort and destroy the material culture of the past in order to bolster ethnic and national agendas; and war often leads to the destruction of archaeological sites and museums. This course will examine these various different forces as they conspire to destroy our knowledge of the past.

Community and Conviction (fall)

A two-semester Community Based Learning course, with "hands on" experience (three hours weekly) of a Catholic parish near campus with many services for the inner-city population. Fall semester, get to know the people, activities, and service programs, and find your "niche." Develop an understanding of the community's faith response to the needs of its people, and learn about the larger context from readings in history, social analysis, ethics, and theology. How did the parish form? What institutions and convictions have shaped it? What can it teach us about interrelationships and boundaries between community, faith, and the city? Observation reports, blogs, and discussions will help construct a "big picture" understanding. *This course entails a commitment to a Community Based Learning project.*

Faith and Response (spring)

Second semester, the three-hour weekly on-site commitment continues. Knowing the community a bit better, we focus on "why they do what they do." What's the relationship between members' beliefs and the activities they organize and support? How relevant is the church here? What is it trying to do, and is it succeeding? What are its special challenges, and gifts? We will engage in more focused research into specific questions that our collective experiences have raised, and work toward producing a report of what we learn that can be shared with members and staff of the parish. Continued reading, discussing, and writing will keep our particular parish experiences within a larger context. *This course entails a commitment to a Community Based Learning project.*

Descent into Darkness (fall)

Depictions of hell have served multiple purposes historically and continue to influence humanity today. Whether as explanations of a moral cosmos, literary devices to foreshadow the terrifying possibilities of the future, or teaching strategies for the ethicization of society, images and stories of hell pervade many of the world's religious, philosophical, and ethical traditions. In this course, we will take a comparative approach and examine different representations of hell from Eastern and Western traditions. Topics will include stories and images of hell in sacred texts as well as secular literature, visual representations of hell in art and film, and contemporary recreations of hell such as the Christian 'Hell House' and Buddhist hell 'theme parks.'

Heavenly Ascension (spring)

Heavens have often served as a major (if not the ultimate) goal of religious life. Some may view heaven as a blissful eternity in a higher realm. Others, such as Rastafarians, might consider heaven the perfection of human social and political life here on Earth. Still others, like many Buddhists, might believe in heaven as a lesser goal to the greater achievement of Nirvana. In this course, we will examine the variety of ways in which heavenly realms have been depicted across cultures, in both Eastern and Western traditions. Course materials will include sacred texts as well as popular literature and film.

Exploring Difference (fall)

One of the most important tasks for the human person as a moral being is to come to "know thyself," as the ancient philosophers recommend. But how do we do this? The African ethic of Ubuntu suggests that persons come to know themselves through other persons, that is, through relationship within diverse communities. Our willingness to place ourselves outside the boundary of our "comfort zone" and compassionately encounter difference, disability, and "otherness" may paradoxically lead us to a more honest and merciful knowledge of self. Through film, readings in theology and literature, and Community Based Learning project in the Worcester community, we will consider difference and disability and how such encounters with others in their "otherness" bring us to a more challenging and deeper knowledge of ourselves. *This course entails a commitment to a Community Based Learning project.*

Modifying Technologies (spring)

The second half of the year will focus on the ways in which advances in modern western reproductive and genetic medicine and technologies challenge our notions of "normal" and "disabled," and how we understand the boundary between them. As these advances bring us the hope of cure as well as more choice and control over our bodies and minds, what might be lost with the diminishment of difference and diversity? With the help of readings in bioethics and social ethics as well as continued involvement in Community Based Learning (CBL), we will consider the following question: Can the human community thrive while those who are outside the "norm" are increasingly stigmatized, isolated and perhaps eliminated? *This course entails a commitment to a Community Based Learning project.*

Greek Gods & Mortals (fall)

In this semester we will read closely texts such as Hesiod's *Theogony*, Homer's *Iliad*, and selected dialogues by Plato, with an eye on the authors' presentation of the gods, and on how that presentation reflects their understandings of the human condition. At the same time we will consider the ways in which literary characters such as Homer's Achilles, as well as real historical figures such as

Socrates and the participants in mystery cults, made efforts to breach the boundary between human and divine, mortal and immortal.

Roman Lives & Afterlives (spring)

The course continues as we turn to Greece's geographical and cultural neighbor Rome, whose literature and physical monuments also confront the nature of the divine, and are similarly steeped in the desire for a sort of human immortality. We will look closely at the philosophical letters of the Stoic Seneca and St. Augustine's autobiographical *Confessions*, as well as the countervailing voice of the antitheist philosopher Lucretius. Attention will also be given to memorializing objects such as honorary busts and funereal monuments, as well as the afterlife of Roman literature, visual art, and thought in modern times, in, for example, 20th-century poetry and American political discourse.

Transcending Self-Reflection (fall)

Socrates' admonition, "Know thyself" challenges us to understand and articulate our identity, our origins and our ultimate purpose and destiny in relationship to the transcendent. We will examine how ancient authors employ epic, lyric and epinician poetry, drama, historical narrative, philosophical reflection, letters and memoirs to shape "self" image in light of this tripartite goal. The critical lens of transvaluation will help us consider how various cultures offer contemporary interpretations of that reflective process as expressed through gesture, masks, tests, disguises and artistic depiction, personal friendship and more corporate social endeavors.

Model Christian Discerners (spring)

"Discernment of spirits" is central to St. Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises where he invites retreatants to deepen their relationship with God through a series of meditations divided into four "weeks." Rooted in the biblical and pagan traditions of self-reflection that we read last semester, "discernment" remains a central concern throughout two millennia of Christian experience. St. Ignatius's writings will serve as our critical lens for examining how authors, ranging from St. Augustine to St. Ignatius Loyola and St. Theresa of Avila to Thomas Merton, employed autobiographies while contemporary authors and artists use biography, film, letters, novels and memoir to enhance our understanding of "discernment." Students will engage in the process of "discernment" through critical and creative assignments.

Cults & Sects (fall)

The terms "cult" and "sect" carry with them particular assumptions about what constitutes "normal" or "healthy" religiosity. In this course, we will examine a number of movements popularly understood as outside the mainstream: People's Temple, The Branch Davidians, The Church of Scientology, The Children of God, Jehovah's Witnesses, as well as Catholic sectarian movements such as the Sedevacantists. In addition to considering themes such as brainwashing and the purported connection between new religions and violence, we will consider the term "cult" itself, and how it reflects implicit social boundaries regarding appropriate religious expression.

Mormonism (spring)

Early in its history, Mormonism was considered to be a threat to basic American values. Now, Mormonism is understood to be a quintessentially American religion. The history of Mormonism tells us much about how religious and social boundaries change over time. This course will present a broad overview of the history of Mormonism, beginning with Joseph Smith and the establishment of a Mormon theocracy in Utah under Brigham Young to candidacy of Mitt Romney. We will read selections from Mormon scripture, including The Book of Mormon and Doctrine & Covenants, and consider key elements in Mormon doctrine, such as eternal progression to godhood. Special attention will be given to Mormon culture as expressed in literature and film.

🌀 GLOBAL SOCIETY 🌀

Anthropos + Logos (fall)

For the human being (anthropos) the evolution of language (logos) creates another space-time beyond the limits of immediate perception and situates the biological organism within a symbolic web of meaning that over determines the conditions of its existence. In this course we will draw on work from anthropology and closely related disciplines to consider how the logic of this limit—which at its heart concerns the difference between what is spoken and what is said—is fundamental for human sociality as such. Topics include the evolution of language and the brain, economy, gift exchange, kinship, ritual practice, witchcraft and magic, and social inequality.

Hyperactivity & its Discontent (spring)

We will use hyperactivity as a conceptual point of departure for attending to "acts" of creation and destruction, wherein anthropos

attempts to go beyond the limits of language and the exigencies of social life, which, as we saw last semester, subject the human to an irreparable loss. Our work this semester—on timely issues like PTSD, political protest, adolescent suicide, internet addiction and compulsive gambling, and recent acts of violence: e.g. school shootings, Boston marathon bombing—calls into question one’s ethical relationship to others in the world, and helps students further develop a “voice” by encouraging them to identify with their writing and to assume responsibility for its consequences.

Ciphers and Heroes (fall)

How are secret codes constructed? What weaknesses allow many of them to be cracked by clever analysts? Welcome to *cryptology*, the scientific study of encoding and decoding secret messages. We will explore the mathematics behind several cryptosystems, while investigating their strengths and weaknesses, and surveying their historical developments, setbacks, and implications. This semester we focus on cryptosystems such as the shift ciphers used by Caesar, the Vigenere cipher used during the Victorian era, and most thrillingly, the ENIGMA cipher used during World War II. Along with the mathematics of these ciphers, we will discover fascinating facts about their creators and the clever analysts who crack the codes, including the Polish and British heroes who cracked the seemingly unbreakable ENIGMA. Students in this course should have a strong competence in high school algebra, and an aptitude for analytical thinking.

Privacy in the Digital Age (spring)

How does Amazon.com keep your credit card information secure when you order online? What weaknesses can hackers exploit, in their quest to steal your identity online? Secure electronic communication is vital to today’s society, and modern cryptosystems are at the heart of this enterprise. Most of these systems are based on the mathematics of elementary number theory, and the stunning development of *public key cryptography*, a revolutionary concept born in the computer revolution of the 1970s. This semester we focus on these modern cryptosystems, the visionaries who created them, and the advances in computing that have made them secure. Students in this course should have a strong competence in high school algebra, and an aptitude for analytical thinking.

English Goes Global (fall)

How did English become the dominant international language that it is today? It came to some countries, such as China, along with dominating colonizers, and in some places, such as Slovakia, people worked to learn it for economic advantage. In the process, the language escaped the control of its countries of origin, and people developed varieties that mingled it with other languages, such as Spanish, and gave themselves new expressive resources. Now, non-native speakers in Asia, Africa, South America and Europe have used English to create literary art. We will read examples of this art in novels and memoirs, and study the history of English’s global migrations.

Coming to the American Dream (spring)

People emigrating to the United States in pursuit of the American Dream must learn English: how does it work out for them? Along with the language, new speakers have to learn new cultural content, moral attitudes, and philosophical viewpoints. This adjustment can be difficult and disorienting, as we’ll see in novels and memoirs by Chinese, Korean, South Asian and European Jewish immigrants; we’ll also consider the fate of international adoptees. Along with struggle and dislocation, however, come fierce determination to succeed in the new land, to achieve the perennial American Dream.

Imagining Latinos in U.S. Film (fall)

Given Hollywood’s proximity to Mexico, the development of the US film industry is closely tied to the popularizing of stereotypes about Mexicans and Spanish speakers generally. As the paradigmatic “other,” they have been portrayed as “Latin lovers,” exotic “hot tamales,” classy “señoritas,” Mexican “bandidos,” childlike peasants, virtuous maids and nannies, inner city “greasers” and drug lords. Rather than focus on film as mere entertainment, this course looks at both the aesthetic and sociopolitical dimensions of films featuring “Latinos” from the 1920s to the present. How have these images shaped the generic conventions of blockbusters and smaller independent productions alike? How has the entrance of filmmakers of Hispanic heritage into the industry affected cinematic conventions? Expect to spend 4-6 hours per week at film screenings outside of class.

Lat Am Cinema and Hollywood (spring)

The history of filmmaking in Latin America, as in other parts of the world, has largely taken place in Hollywood’s shadow. Whether seeking to adapt US cinematic conventions to a different cultural context or experimenting with radically new paradigms that turn conventional filmmaking on its head, Hollywood has been an indispensable reference point. We will focus on the Golden Age of Mexican cinema in the 40s and 50s, the revolutionary “New Cinema” movement of the 60s and 70s, and other significant trends such as new approaches to the traditional woman’s film and the increasing globalization of the industry, to the point that the very concept of “national” cinema has lost much of its resonance. Expect to spend 4-6 hours per week at film screenings outside of class.

Bridging the Gaps Between Us (fall)

Have you ever known someone so well that you know what they're going to do before they do it? What does it mean to really understand another person? It's usually more difficult to understand someone who belongs to a different religion or culture. Why do these differences make a difference? In this seminar, we will think about what it means to understand another person, and whether and how we can bridge the gaps between us. The course will draw on a wide range of resources, including philosophy, psychology, and literature.

Talking Across Differences (spring)

One important way we get to know each other is by talking. But is language as good a tool of communication as we think it is? Sometimes, putting your thoughts into words seems to distort them. And when it comes to trying to understand someone who speaks a foreign language, is translation really adequate? Philosophers and psychologists have argued that different languages imply different ways of seeing the world. If so, understanding the way another sees the world may require learning her language. In the second half of this course, we will focus on the role of language in understanding each other.

Black Like Who?(fall)

Drawing upon several academic disciplines and cultural practices, this seminar will explore legacies of enslavement and the development of 'new peoples' in the Americas, pursuing across varying media the history of racially mixed peoples in the New World. We will explore cultural, political and religious ideas of racial identity in creation of blended or racially mixed people in the Americas. In 1924, Virginia, for example, defined as black a person with *any* known African ancestry, no matter how many generations in the past. We will understand why by the early 1940s, thirty states that had anti-miscegenation laws, seven using the one-drop theory for prohibiting interracial marriages.

Lynching and Sensibility (spring)

The conventional wisdom holds that lynching is uniquely American and "racial": a means of enacting white supremacy in the turn of the 20th century era when segregation became systematic. The seminar will explore a longer history of lynching, locating its origins as "frontier justice" in colonial America, but also situating it within a global context in which ritualistic violence and torture functioned to define and enforce taboos and consolidate social cohesion and consensus. In addition, the seminar will also look closely at lynching in the American context through first-hand accounts and descriptions, the examination of photographs and other ephemera of the lynch mob, to understand the phenomenon as a collective and visceral experience—sights, sounds, smells—crucial to the advent of a new chapter in American history and in the evolution of American racial ideology.

🌀 NATURAL WORLD 🌀

Our Bodies (fall)

Across the globe, from prehistory to the present, humans have depicted themselves in art. The image has changed with the aspirations of the society and the materials available, such as wood, bronze, marble or paint. Societies developed rituals of food and drink that affected the body. Often they imagined their gods as enhanced people. With scientific advancements, including human dissection, artists acquired an understanding of the physical body; a wide range of personality types and human conditions (gender distinctions, childhood, old age, obesity, or madness) were introduced in art. Both seminars will encourage students to actually participate in making and manipulating imagery through Photoshop and other new technologies. Works of art and landscape on campus, the Worcester Art Museum, and in Boston are part of both semesters.

Our World (spring)

Nature is, indeed, all around us, but we see it selectively. What a society values invariably appears in its art. Landscape was a rare subject in medieval society; it developed only as the age of discovery brought exploration of new worlds. The growth of science in the 15th century made possible the technique of mathematical perspective that dominated painting until the 20th century. A little more than a century ago, our country's political ideology of Manifest Destiny appeared in paintings of huge panoramas of the American West. Photography vastly changed our view of nature. Contemporary artists create installations that become a part of the natural environment sometimes for periods as brief as a day, or they may permanently alter the environment. The class will actually create an installation piece set in the landscape at Holy Cross.

Going Wild (fall)

"Acting natural" sounds like a good idea, but what would it really mean to do that? Ancient philosophers thought that living "in accordance with nature" was the key to a good and happy life. Modern ways of thinking tend to differ, viewing nature as something that needs to be overcome, or controlled, if we are to live free and fully human lives. Does nature limit our freedom, or is it a source

of freedom? Is being free the same as “going wild”? Is there a tension between living a “natural” life and living a civilized life in society? Would “going back” to nature make us more, or less, human? These are some of the things we shall wonder about as we explore philosophical and literary sources from the ancient and modern worlds.

Creation and Creativity (spring)

“I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself.” That is how Thoreau sees it. But while we are part of the natural world, and our lives are shaped by it, we can also stand apart from and reshape it. We are creatures, but we are also creators. So what does it mean to be truly “creative”? Is it a matter of using our technological abilities to manipulate or impose our will upon nature? Our relationship to nature is often one of violent opposition. Does it have to be that way? In this course, we shall explore different ways of understanding our role as creatures *and* creators of our world, and what it would mean to live as both. In addition to philosophy and literature, we shall look to art for answers to these questions.

Boccaccio’s Decameron (fall)

The third decade of the 14th Century brought upon the northeastern Chinese province of Hopei an epidemic that would exact a catastrophic death toll on the Eurasian continent. The Black Death claimed up to 90% of the population as it worked its way west along trade routes through India, Syria, and the Black Sea Region: from there, on Genoese ships, it reached Italy and Europe in 1348. As the plague spread physical and psychological devastation on the fabric of societies and cultures, intellectuals and artists engaged in attempts to understand and come to terms with ‘the Plague’ also as a metaphor for destruction deeply charged with philosophical and ethical implications. Boccaccio’s *Decameron* responded to the effects of the epidemic by imagining a utopian world set in a garden: a symbolic place where Nature and human Ingenuity (instinct, desire and *industria*) join together to provide both prevention and protection against ‘the Plague’.

Manzoni’s The Betrothed (spring)

Alessandro Manzoni’s masterpiece, *The Betrothed* (1840), tells the story of Renzo e Lucia, a young couple who wishes to marry. The novel is set in the 1600s in Spanish-occupied northern Italy, a period in Italy’s history that was marked by famine, war, and epidemic. One of the elements that makes this historical novel a classic of Italian, and world, literature is its emphasis on human nature. The characters in *The Betrothed* come from different social classes, and several important characters are members of the clergy. Several questions emerge from their interactions: What do the various characters want out of life? How do they go about pursuing their goals? How do they react when they encounter obstacles? Manzoni pays particular attention to the themes of power, justice, and redemption in his depiction of human relations. Furthermore, *The Betrothed* lends itself to a discussion of nature as it pertains to the land, beginning with a detailed description of the Northern Italian region where it is set and emphasizing the landscape at critical junctures in the novel. Our reading of critical articles and work with maps will contribute to an understanding of these themes in Manzoni’s work.

The Idea of Wilderness (fall)

Wilderness, whether understood as a concept in the American imagination or as the reality of a resource-rich hinterland available for exploitation, is central to the American experience. This course will trace the incorporation of wild, ostensibly unsettled, lands into the expanding American republic from the nation’s founding through the mid-twentieth century. This process was accompanied by evolving religious and cultural attitudes toward nature and wild lands, culminating in the 1964 “Wilderness Act,” which insured that significant tracts of land would be preserved in their natural condition.

The Last Wilderness (spring)

Significant expansion in the acreage of national parks and wilderness areas became problematic in the polarized political climate of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The second semester brings forward a number of the themes laid out in the first. Indian removal from desirable landscapes came to include removal from the first national parks in the period between 1870 and 1930. Thoreau’s retreat to Walden Pond is contrasted to Anne LaBastille’s solitary life in the late 20th century on a remote lake in the Adirondacks. Scott Wallace’s account of an expedition in 2000 in search of the Amazon’s last uncontacted tribes provides a powerful counterpoint--two hundred years on--to Lewis and Clark’s expedition.

🌀 SELF 🌀

The Meaning of Death (fall)

What is death, and is it the same for everyone everywhere? When medical technologies can keep us alive, is there ever a right time to die? Do people in the late-modern West live in denial of death? What is it like to have a job that immerses you in death and grief? Is it possible to laugh about, or even in the face of, death? Drawing from history, anthropology, philosophy, psychology and especially sociology, students in this class will learn to view death as a social process, consider the politics of late-modern death and dying, and give thought to their own encounters with death.

The Meaning of Birth (spring)

What is the American way of birth? How does it shape birth practices, outcomes and experiences? What are the personal, social and ethical implications of hospital births? What role do alternative birth narratives play? How might giving birth impact one's sense of self? How does infertility influence social and personal selves? Why do some people choose to be child-free? Is it possible to mourn in the face of birth? What is the social significance of deaths from miscarriage, still birth, or sudden infant death syndrome? Drawing from history, anthropology, and sociology, students will learn to view birth as a social process, consider the politics of post-modern births and birthing, and give thought to their own assumptions about and encounters with birth.

Competing Visions of Freedom (fall)

Americans have long cherished freedom as one of the core ideals of their democracy. Yet from the very earliest days of European colonization right up to the present day, Americans also have fought over the meaning and definition of the word. Who is entitled to freedom? Is every citizen of a republic entitled to the same measure of freedom? Is freedom centered on the self/individual, or must it take into account the common good? This course will examine several key moments in the nineteenth century when different factions of Americans challenged each other's definitions of freedom and in the process, redefined its meaning. These moments include the abolitionist crusade against slavery, the women's rights movement's efforts to secure the vote and more rights, and the struggle of Native Americans to preserve their way of life in the face of western expansion.

Struggles for Justice (spring)

Building on our work in the first semester, this course will examine several social justice movements in the 20th and 21st centuries, including those for the labor movement and its fight to gain economic justice for workers, African American Civil Rights, and Gay Rights. Much attention will be paid to the life stories of people involved in these movements, especially the development of their self-awareness as members of an oppressed group and commitment to bringing about social and political change in the service of justice. As part of this study, students will also participate in a Community-Based Learning placement that will involve weekly volunteering with organizations engaged in local social justice initiatives in the Worcester area such as those focused on education, poverty, refugee services, domestic violence, and the environment.

Me and the Environment (fall)

What kind of person should I be? What do I owe to others, and to myself? These two questions form the core of any ethics class, but we've recently added a third: What, if anything, do I owe to *non-human* others – animals, nature, the environment? We'll always begin with some philosopher's abstract theory – Mill's Utilitarianism (concerned with pleasure and pain), Kant's ethics (concerned with respect), Regan's animal rights – and we'll always end up in some applied issue (factory farming, the new agriculturalism, animal use in medical testing, and anything else you bring up). Throughout, however, the emphasis will be on developing your *own* answers to those three questions.

The Environment and Me (spring)

We'll continue to explore the ethics of our relationship to ourselves, human others, and the non-human others of the environment. We'll still be working with our three questions, but now adding a fourth: what kind of role can those non-human others play in *your own* moral development? There's no question that we affect the environment, but ... how does the environment affect *us*? We'll be working with somewhat deeper, more holistic theories of human nature and the environment in this class – Aristotle's virtue ethics, Schweitzer's reverence for life, Leopold's concerns about ecosystems – and we'll move on to different, more complicated applied issues. In the end, though, it comes back to you: what do *you* believe?

Epic Battles: Immunity v. HIV (fall)

The HIV pandemic has been compared to the darkest days of the bubonic plague. The virus has caused 70 million infections and 35 million people have succumbed to infection. We will investigate this devastating virus from a scientifically literate standpoint, benefitting from the 30 years of research that has gone into understanding HIV. Our starting point will be establishing an understanding of the molecular biology of the cell and we will progress to probing both the awesome power and vulnerability of the human immune system. Ultimately we will investigate the continuing need for chemotherapeutics, how a functional cure for HIV may be close, and why the development of an effective vaccine continues to elude science.

HIV, AIDS and Christian Ethics (spring)

Christians believe that human beings and all of creation are good. We are sustained by a loving God, and yet must also wrestle with elements of the created order that cause human suffering. Among these are illness and disease. How human persons and communities respond to illness can either ameliorate suffering or exacerbate it. This seminar will consider the case of the HIV/AIDS pandemic from the perspective of Christian moral traditions. We will explore issues including stigma, gender inequality, and poverty

through the lens of themes in Catholic social teaching, feminist theological ethics, and virtue theory. We ask, “What are our moral responsibilities to ourselves and one another in an age of HIV and AIDS?”

Self Discovery (fall)

Influenced by Aristotle, John Locke coined the term “pursuit of happiness”. Thomas Jefferson never explained his use of this phrase as stated in the Declaration of Independence. The Social Sciences, however, have plenty to say about it. And, Positive Psychology in particular makes a large contribution to this area of inquiry. Positive Psychology concerns itself with the use of psychological theory, research and clinical techniques toward understanding resilient and adaptive, creative, positive, and emotionally fulfilling aspects of human behavior. As you pursue your own independence at the beginning of your college career, you will explore what the science of happiness has to say about your own pursuit of happiness as you declare your independence.

Flourishing (spring)

So, what is the good life anyway? Who is capable of achieving it? What are the factors that sustain it? How can you achieve it for yourself? How do you know if you’re living it? We all have opinions about these matters, but psychologists approach these questions scientifically, based on objectively verifiable evidence. Through the lens of Positive Psychology, you will tackle these compelling and life-enriching questions as you reflect on your own adjustment to college life, a Community Based Learning project, and exposure to those with serious life issues to address.

Philosophical Autobiographies (fall)

As you embark on your journey through higher education, you will at some point have to decide what shape your life should take. While no one can take this decision for you, this seminar aims to show how others before you have made this decision. In the first semester we will read the autobiographies of some of the canonical philosophers of the Western tradition, in order to understand what led them to a life of the mind. The course will also serve as an introduction to some of the major ideas of the Western tradition. Readings will be taken from the works of Plato, Aurelius, Augustine, Descartes, Erasmus, Rousseau, Hume, Nietzsche, de Beauvoir, and Sartre.

Worldly Autobiographies (spring)

In the second course of the sequence we will expand our purview and read the autobiographies of men and women who spent their lives engaging with and often changing the world they lived in. We will consider what circumstances led these individuals to undertake their struggles for change, and what qualities allowed them to persevere in the face of adversity. We will cover figures prominent in politics, literature, science, art, and music. Figures to be studied in this course will include: Emperor Babur, Beethoven, Henry Adams, Frederick Douglass, Vincent Van Gogh, Hector Berlioz, Gandhi, Virginia Woolf, Primo Levi, Wole Soyinka, Malcolm X, Nelson Mandela, Richard Feynman, and Jean Genet.