Critical Thinking and Methods of Inquiry

Dr. Javier Hidalgo  
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Class Time: 1:30pm-2:45pm, Wednesday and Friday.  
Class Room: Jepson 107.  
Office Hours: I post a sign-up sheet for my office hours on blackboard. Please sign up for office hours there.

Course Description:

We often hold mistaken beliefs and reason badly. We suffer from a wide range of biases that distort our beliefs and we tend to make rational and logical errors. But we can do better. This course will aim to help you to improve your reasoning abilities and to understand the different methods of rational inquiry. This course has another goal as well. The study of leadership is interdisciplinary and it requires the ability to understand the methods and tools of inquiry in many different fields. The course will seek to introduce students to skills that will be useful for studying leadership.

The course will be divided into two parts: fundamentals and applications. In the first part of the course, we will focus on the basic methods of critical thinking. You will learn about biases, strategies of argumentation, fallacies, and logic. In the second part of the course, we will apply methods of critical thinking to important practical problems. In particular, the second part of the course will focus on effective altruism. We will try to answer the question: how can we do the most good in the world? To answer this question, we will study how to understand and assess empirical evidence, and how to construct and defend moral arguments.

Policies:

1. Please do not use your laptop, ipad, or phone during class.
2. I can only offer make up exams in cases of extreme duress like documented medical emergencies and/or religious observance.
3. If you have a documented disability and would like some form of academic accommodation, please contact me as soon as possible to discuss whether such accommodation can be provided.

Course Requirements:

1. Four Problem Sets (15%)  
   a. There are four problem sets due for this class. These problem sets will deal with the material in class or the readings that we discussed the previous week.
b. You can find all of the problem sets on blackboard in the content folders for the relevant week.

2. Reading Responses (10%)
   a. The first seven weeks of the syllabus require you to master certain skills, some of which are technical in nature. Problem sets are better suited for teaching these skills. But after week 7 the readings will be more qualitative. For this reason, we will switch from problem sets to short answer questions about the reading. These questions will ask you to interpret and comments on the readings.
   b. I will divide the class into two groups: A and B. If you are in group A, you will normally write your response papers on the readings for Wednesday. If you are in group B, you will normally write your response papers on the readings for Friday. Exceptions are noted on the syllabus below.
   c. For each response paper, I will give you a prompt that you need to address. You can find the prompts in the weekly reading folders on blackboard.
   d. You must turn in your response papers to me before class.

3. Final paper (20%)
   a. This paper should be about 2000-2500 words long. I will give you suggested prompts for these papers several weeks before they are due. But you are free to develop your own prompt.
   b. If you turn in your paper late, I will drop it by 1/3 of a grade. I will then continue to drop your grade by 1/3 for every two days that pass.
   c. Please email me your essay at hidalgoj@gmail.com by 5pm on the day that the essay is due. If you need an extension, you need to request one at least 24 hours before the paper is due. Computer problems are not a valid excuse for late papers (for this reason, I strongly recommend that you use google drive or drop box to save your work as you write).

4. Midterm (15%)
   a. The midterm will consist in questions about the material that we covered in class from week 1 to week 6. The midterm is scheduled for the following time:
      i. Friday, February 24th 1:30-2:45pm.

5. Final (25%)
   a. The final is cumulative: it will test you on the material since the beginning of the term.
   b. The final exam is scheduled during the following time:
      i. Monday, April 24th 2-5pm.
6. Class Participation and Attendance (15%)
   a. Class attendance and participation are mandatory. You must do the readings and come to class prepared to discuss these readings.
   b. Students will be penalized by one percentage point from their final grade for each unexcused absence after one absence. In other words, your participation grade will take a hit each time that you are absent after your first absence from the class.
   c. In this class we will discuss several sensitive topics, and you may feel uncomfortable participating in those discussions. If you find that you did not participate in a particular discussion you can send me an email up to 24 hours after class. In the email, write 200-300 words about your thoughts on the readings and you can receive participation credit for that day. You do not need to explain to me why you did not participate in the discussion.
   d. Everyone is expected to be respectful and polite, bearing in mind that other students may have different backgrounds and experiences.

Required Texts:

All other readings are available on the blackboard page for this class. I may make some modifications to the syllabus as the semester progresses. I’ll announce any changes to the syllabus in class and you can always find the updated syllabus on blackboard. It’s your responsibility to make sure that you have the updated version of the syllabus.

Week 1: Introduction

Wednesday, January 11\textsuperscript{th}:
   • Lewis Vaughn, *The Power of Critical Thinking* (PCT), chapter 1, pages 3-29.
   • Peter Singer, “The Logic of Effective Altruism.”

Friday, January 13\textsuperscript{th}. Obstacles to Critical Thinking
   • PCT, chapter 2, pp. 30-47.
   • PCT, chapter 4, pp. 128-137 (read from “Innumeracy and Probability” to “Claims in the News”).
   • Will Stor, “The Invisible Actor at the Centre of the World.”

Week 2: Making Sense of Arguments
Wednesday, January 18th:
  • PCT, chapter 3, pp. 58-85.

Friday, January 20th:
  • PCT, chapter 3, pp. 86-106.

Week 3: Fallacies and Persuaders

Monday, January 23rd:
  • Problem set 1 due at 5pm. Please submit the problem set through blackboard. You can find the assignment in the content folder for this week.

Wednesday, January 25th:
  • PTC, chapter 5, pp. 155-190.

Friday, January 27th:
  • Review reading from Wednesday.

Week 4: Logic

Monday, January 30th:
  • Problem set 2 is due at 5pm.

Wednesday, February 1st:
  • PCT, chapter 6, pp. 193-218.

Friday, February 3rd:
  • PCT, pp. 218-223.
  • “How To Construct Logical Proofs.”

Week 5: Logic and Inductive Reasoning

Wednesday, February 8th:
  • “How To Construct Logical Proofs.”

Thursday, February 9th:
  • Problem set 3 is due by 5pm. Drop it off at my office (Jepson 234) or mailbox.

Friday, February 10th:
  • Review logic.

Week 6: Inductive Reasoning

Wednesday, February 15th:
• PCT, chapter 8, 264-295.
• Watch: Ester Duflo, “Social Experiments to Fight Poverty.”
• Peter Dizikes, “The Natural Experimenter.”

Friday, February 17th:
• PCT, pp. 296-316, 367-387.
• Jonah Lehrer, “The Truth Wears Off.”

Week 7: Review and Midterm

Monday, February 20th:
• Problem set 4 due at 5pm.

Wednesday, February 22nd:
• Review for midterm.

Friday, February 24th:
• Midterm.

Week 8: Critical Thinking and Morality

Wednesday, March 1st:
• PCT, pp. 421-438.
• Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality.”
• Group A reading response due.

Friday, March 3rd:
• Jason Brennan and Bas Van Der Vossen, “International Aid and Global Charity.”
• Group B reading response due.

Week 9: Spring Break

Week 10: Effective Altruism and Global Poverty

Wednesday, March 15th:
• William McAskill, Doing Good Better (DGB), introduction, chapters 1-4.
• Website: “Give Directly.”
• Listen to: This American Life, “Money for Nothing and Cows for Free.”

Friday, March 17th:
• DGB, chapter 7 and 10.
• Responses from Daron Acemoglu and Emily Clough.
• Amia Srinivasan, “Stop the Robot Apocalypse.”
Week 11: Animals

Wednesday, March 22nd:
• DGB, chapter 8.
• Peter Singer, “All Animals Are Equal.”
• Websites: “Mercy for Animals” and “the Humane League.”

Friday, March 24th:
• Carl Cohen, “The Case for the Use of Animals in Biomedical Research.”
• Alastair Norcross, “Puppies, Pigs, and People.”
• Charity proposal due at 5pm. Email it to me at hidalgoj@gmail.com.

Week 12: Climate Change and Sustainability

Wednesday, March 29th:
• RT Pierrehumbert, “Climate Change: A Catastrophe in Slow Motion.”
• John Christy, “Testimony, U.S. House Ways and Means Committee.”
• Recommended: David Schmidtz, “A Place for Cost-Benefit Analysis.”

Friday, March 31st:
• Reread DGB, pp. 135-140.
• Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, “It’s Not My Fault.”
• Websites: “Cool Earth” and “ClimateWorks.”

Week 13: Existential Risks and Systematic Change

Wednesday, April 5th: Existential Risks
• DGB, chapter 6.
• Nick Bostrom, “Analyzing Human Extinction Scenarios.”
• Websites: “The Future of Humanity Institute” and “Machine Intelligence Research Institute.”

Friday, April 7th: Systematic Change
• Michael Huemer, “In Praise of Passivity.”

Week 14: Giving Game and Career Decisions

Monday, April 10th:
• Paper due at 5pm. Email it to me at hidalgoj@gmail.com.

Wednesday, April 12th: Giving Game
• Come to class with a rough ranking of charities.
• Recommended Reading: James Surowiecki, “How To Make Small Groups Work.”

Friday, April 14th: Career Decisions
• DGB, chapters 5, 9, conclusion, and appendix.
• Both Group A & Group B need to write a response paper for this session.

Week 15: Review

Wednesday, April 19th:
• Review exercises.

Friday, April 21st:
• Review exercises.

Final exam:
• Monday, April 24th 2-5pm.