The Self and What to Do About It
First-Year Seminar

Syllabus

Professor: John Richardson
Dept. of Philosophy, 5 Washington Place, Rm. 304
Office hours: TBA
jr8@nyu.edu

Meetings: Tu/Th 12:30-1:45
5 Washington Place, Rm. 302

The course will look at a variety of views about 'the self'. Each of us, it seems, is or has a self. Just what is this--how can each of us identify it? And when we see what it is, what lessons should we draw--what should we do about it? The course will look at an eclectic range of writings on these questions, mostly philosophical writing, but also some fiction and poetry. Central attention will be paid to 'existentialist' treatments of the self--by Nietzsche, Sartre, and Beauvoir, for whom the topic is crucial. We'll compare their answers with those given by Emerson and Whitman--a second focus. But we will also broaden the discussion well beyond these, taking quicker looks at others from different ages and cultures. By the end, students may or may not be able to say just what their self is, but they will have a very good idea of the complexity and interest of the question.

Tentative schedule:

Sept.  3 (Introduction)

A. Self as subject/agent
   8  Descartes
   10 "
   15 [Recent theories of agency]
   17 "

B. No-self views
   22 Parfit
   24 "
   29 Bhagavadgita

Oct.  1 "

C. Self as to-be-made
   6 Whitman
   8 "
I'll pass out a weekly reading sheet that will specify assignments from these authors, and also pose questions to ask and try to answer as you read. It will also include supplementary readings, both required and recommended. Most of the reading will be of PDFs I'll post in Classes. But please acquire the texts (in the editions) listed below.

**Requirements:**

Three papers of different kinds and lengths, plus a final exam. The grade will be based on: paper 1 (10%), paper 2 (20%), paper 3 (30%), final exam (25%), attendance/participation (15%). Note that poor attendance will be penalized beyond that 15%. The penalty for plagiarism or cheating will be failure for the course.

Paper 1 will be short (3 pages) and purely expository. Paper 2 will be a little longer (5 pages) and argumentative. Paper 3 will be still longer (8 pages), and will require a preliminary 1-page sketch of your claim and argument, on which I'll give you advice. I will pass out assignment sheets including topics/prompts for each of these assignments. Paper 1 will be due **Sept. 20**; paper 2 on **Oct. 25**; the sketch of paper 3 will be due **Nov. 15** and paper 3 itself on **Dec. 6**. Each assignment is due by midnight on the assigned date. The purpose of the papers is to strengthen your ability to write clear, well-structured, argumentative prose, and also to give you the opportunity to present and defend your own judgments about the readings.
The final exam will be on the day/time assigned us by CAS. I will pass out a study sheet in advance that will
give a longer list of questions, from which I will choose some on the day of the exam for you to answer.
Answers will be a combination of short definitions, and longer summaries of positions. The purpose of the
exam is to get you to solidify and organize the material of the course. It will not require you to take your own
positions on this material (unlike papers 2 and 3).

Texts:

Descartes: *Meditations on First Philosophy* [Hackett]
*Bhagavadgita* [tr. Mitchell; Harmony]
Nietzsche: *Beyond Good and Evil* [Cambridge University Press]
Nietzsche: *On the Genealogy of Morality* [Hackett]
Sartre: *Being and Nothingness* [Washington Square Press]