

What does it mean to perform an act? What are we doing when we do something? The term “action” covers everything from picking up a pencil to leading a political revolution. Action is a way of intervening in the world and changing it, in minor or major ways. Both ethics and politics involve acting in relation to others. Philosophers have found action interesting because it bridges the mental and physical worlds, beginning as intention and ending with some sort of embodied execution. The English word “act” complicates things still further, since it can mean not only “to do something” but also “to pretend to do something; to play a part.” Acting in the “serious” sense is always haunted by dramatic or play-acting. And because drama is the art form that relies on people actually doing things onstage—or rather, pretending to actually do things onstage—it is also an art form that has thought through questions of action in sophisticated ways. In this course we will read a variety of works by philosophers, playwrights, theologians, filmmakers, and economists in order to get a sense of how action has been understood from the classical era to the present day.

One goal of this course will be to see how concepts of action have evolved over time. Another is to introduce you to some of the great thinkers and writers of the Western tradition. The very notion of a “tradition” as opposed to a sequence means that these thinkers and writers don’t just occur one after the other. Each is deeply influenced by his or her predecessors, and either further develops their thinking, rebels against it, or turns it in a new direction. Another way of putting this is that each writer *acts upon* those who came before. This course will therefore be concerned in part with what a tradition is, and how it offers opportunities for intellectual action.

Another goal of this course is to teach you how to read difficult texts with understanding, to think critically about them, and to write clearly and persuasively in ways that pay close attention to the details of a given text, not just its broad thematic strokes. Many of the readings in this course are challenging, but also rewarding. They will require kinds and degrees of attention that you are not used to employing. I will do my best to illuminate what is going on in lecture, but you must also do the work of reading the assignments carefully. If you are passive, if you just rely on me and don’t put the necessary work in yourself, you will not derive much benefit from the lectures. You too must *act* in the context of this course.

### Course Requirements and Grading

- 1) Regular attendance at lectures and discussion sections, and participation in discussion. Attendance will be taken at lecture by means of brief periodic quizzes that will also test whether you have done the readings for that day. Failing a daily quiz will count as an absence for that day. You will be allowed a maximum of three unexcused absences during the semester, including lectures and sections. Absences beyond that limit will result in reduction of the final course grade by 1/3 full grade for each additional class missed. For instance, missing four classes will reduce an A to an A- ; missing five will reduce an A to a B+; and so forth. Absences for religious holidays must be reported to your section leader *in advance*.
- 2) A mid-term and a final exam. The latter is not inclusive but merely covers the second half of the course. Exams will consist of identifying terms that I have written on the board during lecture

and commenting on their significance. Anything I write on the blackboard or project on a screen during lecture may appear on the exams. Material on handouts and secondary readings may also appear on exams, so be sure you have all handouts. Tests will also involve identifying passages from the readings (usually passages I have discussed in lecture) and commenting on them.

- 3) Three papers : one of 3-4 pages, one of 5-6 pages, and one of 7-8 pages.

Grading:

Exams: 20% of final grade each

Papers: paper #1 = 10% of final grade; paper #2 = 15% of final grade; paper #3 = 20% of final grade

Participation in discussion section: 15% of final grade

#### Lecture Policies

- 1) Be on time. Daily quizzes will be given at the beginning of class, and if you miss the quiz, you will be counted as absent.
- 2) Because some class readings are given on NYU Classes, you may use laptops and tablets for note-taking and to access readings. However, **YOU MAY NOT CONNECT TO THE INTERNET DURING LECTURE WITHOUT PERMISSION FROM ME.** If anyone is spotted online during class, or texting during class, that person will be asked to leave lecture and will receive an absence for the day. That person will also lose the right to bring any electronic device to class for the remainder of the semester.
- 3) Turn off cell phone ringers prior to class.

#### Academic Integrity

All assignments, quizzes and exams submitted for this course must be original work done by you. All sources both published and online must be fully acknowledged, both when they are directly quoted and when they merely provide inspiration or background information. Plagiarism will result in every case in a failing grade for this course and a note sent to the Dean of your school. Please be aware that plagiarism is defined by the *fact* of unacknowledged borrowing and not by the state of mind of the person who engages in it. Ignorance, haste, carelessness, anxiety, etc. are no more acceptable than a conscious will to deceive, and will be treated identically. It is your responsibility to learn the proper rules and procedures for citation and to follow them. There are numerous online guides for this purpose; you should also consult with your section leader if you are uncertain in a specific instance (something that will be difficult to do if you leave the writing of papers for the night before they are due). There is in fact no reason for anyone to employ any outside sources for the paper assignments for this course, and so the safest way to avoid temptation is simply to avoid consulting outside materials. All papers for this course will be submitted online and checked for plagiarism by turnitin.com.

As a matter of practical advice: probably the number one incentive to plagiarism is writing of papers at the last minute, which can result in both panic and carelessness.

## Illness and Extensions

Verified, serious illnesses are legitimate reasons to request make-up exams or extensions on papers. However, documentation must be provided in which a physician either excuses you outright from a particular event or provides some indication of the nature and severity of the ailment. Notices from the Student Health Center that a student was seen by a physician do not even pretend to document illness and so will not be accepted as evidence. Moreover, federal laws prevent the Student Health Center from sharing medical information. To provide the requested documentation, you will therefore either have to see a private physician or sign a form for the Student Health Center waiving your confidentiality rights in this instance. Students missing a scheduled exam without adequate supporting documentation will be assessed a penalty of ½ letter grade on the makeup exam.

## Syllabus

Jan. 26: Introduction. Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Virtues, the Unity of a Life, and the Concept of Tradition," from *After Virtue* (on NYU Classes)

Jan. 28: Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Books I and II (on NYU Classes)

Feb. 2: Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Books III and VI (on NYU Classes)

Feb. 4: Aristotle, *Poetics*, pp. 1-31 (on NYU Classes); Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*

Feb. 9: Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*

Feb. 11: Aeschylus, *The Libation Bearers*, *The Eumenides*

Feb. 16: St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book II (on NYU Classes); Martin Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will* (selections) (on NYU Classes)

Feb. 18: Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*

Feb. 20: paper #1 due at 5:00 P.M. 3-4 pages

Feb. 23: Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Feb. 25: Shakespeare, *Richard III*

Mar. 1: Shakespeare, *Richard III*

Mar. 3: Shakespeare, *Hamlet*; Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, pp. 261-66 (NYU Classes)

Mar. 7: Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

Mar. 9: midterm

Mar. 21: Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, Book I, chaps 1-3; Book II, chap. 3; Book III, chap. 1; Book IV, chap. 2 (selections) (on NYU Classes)

Mar. 23: Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Part I, sections 1 and 2 (on NYU Classes)

Mar. 28: Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Part I, section 3 (on NYU Classes)

Mar. 30: Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach"; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, Part 1, pp. 37-52, 64-68

Apr. 5: Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Preface and First Essay

Apr. 7: Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Second Essay

Apr. 9: paper #2 due at 5:00 P.M. 5-6 pages

Apr. 12: Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, pp. 9-26, 74-120

Apr. 14: Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, pp. 120-139, 211-226, 306-355

Apr. 19: Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*  
Apr. 21: Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*  
Apr. 26: Hannah Arendt, "Action," pp. 175-199, 220-230, from *The Human Condition* (on NYU Classes)  
Apr. 28: Sarah Kane, *Blasted*  
May 3: Joshua Oppenheimer, *The Act of Killing*  
May 5: Joshua Oppenheimer, *The Act of Killing*  
May 9: paper #3 due at 5:00 P.M. 7-8 pages  
May 17: Final examination, 2:00 P.M.

#### Required Texts

Sophocles, *Oedipus the King* (Chicago)  
Aeschylus, *Oresteia* (Chicago)  
Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Dover)  
Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus* (Hackett)  
William Shakespeare, *Richard III* (Penguin)  
William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (Penguin)  
Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology, Part 1* (International)  
Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* (Random House)  
Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (Norton)  
Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (Beckett)  
Samuel Beckett, *Endgame and Act without Words* (Beckett)

All books available from the NYU Bookstore. It is strongly recommended that you use the editions ordered for this course.