PHIL 2233: Ethics and Pop Culture*
Summer 2025 – Main Session (June 02 –July 03, 2025)
Monday – Thursday, 10:45 a.m. – 12:45 p.m. (Gravenor 204)

ABOUT THE COURSE

The Instructor

Madeleine Léger (please call me "Madeleine")
I'm a PhD candidate in the Georgetown Philosophy Department. My areas of specialization are feminist philosophy, epistemology, the philosophy of place, and the philosophy of language. I love cooking, being outside, and working with my hands. I also love my cat, Simone! I'm excited to get to know each of you—and to learn about the things you love, too.

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Course Description

This course aims to equip students with philosophical tools to turn a critical eye on pop culture and engage ethically with its productions. It will do so by examining a wide range of pop cultural artifacts, such as professional sports, social media, film, music, journalism, literature, food, and lifestyle writing. The course will consider broad ethical implications of pop culture clustering around five themes: cultural conversations, bodies and selves, living well, fear, and community. Our investigations will also attend to the philosophical relevance of pop culture and highlight the various arguments and positions found in everyday cultural productions. As the course progresses, students will find that philosophy and pop culture are intertwined, such that either one stands to illuminate and inform the other. Whether it's through apocalypse movies, home cooking, or TikTok influencers, pop culture is entangled with our ways of knowing, creating, and enacting the ethical dimensions of our lives.

Course Objectives

- Students will be exposed to a wide range of philosophical approaches, reflecting the heterogeneity of contemporary academic philosophy;
- Students will be able to apply philosophical concepts, methods, and tools to their own lives and to the world around them;
- Students will develop their analytic, critical, and creative thinking skills, which will equip them to better understand, articulate, and build on their own thoughts and those of their interlocutors;
- Students will engage in meaningful, constructive, and collaborative dialogue with their classmates;
- Students will develop and enrich their understanding of their social world; they will identify and raise philosophical questions about it; and they will gain strategies to engage with their communities through their thinking, writing, and living.

Course Structure

The course is divided into five modules: Cultural Conversations; Bodies and Selves; Living Well; Understanding the World; Home and Community. Each module will last one week, and each module will

build on the others. Each week, there will be some longer/more complex readings/engagements and some lighter (though still rich!) readings/engagements. I have indicated the page counts (or time lengths) of all course materials, so you can plan your workflow accordingly.

You can expect class time to include combinations of lectures, discussions, and group activities. I'll do my best to provide varied and flexible opportunities for in-class engagement; please come to class prepared to dig into the readings in the way(s) that feel(s) most comfortable for you.

You will be evaluated on a combination of *Participation/Engagement* (20%), five *Short Artifact Presentations* (25%), one *Playlist Paper* (20%), and a *Final Project* (35%). (For more information about assignments and evaluation, see "Assignments" section, below.)

READING SCHEDULE

Below is a detailed list of our course reading schedule. All the assigned readings are available on the PHIL 2233 Canvas Page. Note that for each class meeting, you will find a **primary reading** and an **optional engagement.** I will expect you to come to class having done the primary reading; however, the optional engagements are *completely* optional—I will never assume that you have completed them. They are just meant to provide opportunities for you to enrich your understanding of the material when curiosity or passion seizes you!

A note on the content: Some of the topics in the course may be difficult or painful. I've tried to include content warning (marked "CW") to help you prepare for particularly challenging readings. Please be in touch with me if you have concerns about any of the assigned materials.

Date	Primary Reading	Optional Engagement
Introduction In this first meeting, we'll get to know each other a bit! We'll also set up the course, raise some questions that will follow us throughout the term, and prepare ourselves to engage with the material and each other. We'll ask some introductory questions, like: Who is a philosopher? What counts as being "philosophical"? What does philosophy have to say about pop culture? What does pop culture have to say about philosophy?		
06/02	**Catherine M. Robb**: "Is Taylor Swift a Philosopher?" https://andphilosophy.com/2024/09/20/is-taylor-swift-a-philosopher/	**Myisha Cherry**: "Conversations" (podcast, 43 mins) https://elucidations.vercel.app/posts/episode-112-myisha-cherry-discusses-the-skill-of-conversation/
Module 1: Cultural Conversations This module will invite us to think about the role pop culture plays in our lives. How do our attachments to artists, athletes, and popular figures contribute to identity formation? Is it okay to like "bad" stuff? Does it matter if something we enjoy has some ethically problematic facets? Must one		

endorse everything about a pop culture artifact to engage with it? Why is pop culture so often a space to work out social disagreements? How does it contribute to our self-understandings?		
06/03	**Alfred Archer and Jake Wojtowicz**: "It's Much More Important Than That: Against Fictionalist Accounts of Fandom" (14 pages)	**Mary Magda-Ward**: "Can a Feminist Love the Super Bowl?" (10 pages)
06/04	**Erin Tarver**: "Sports and Identity" (45 minutes) https://unmutetalk.podbean.com/e/episode-040-erin-tarver-on-sports-and-identity/	**Erin C. Tarver**: "On the Particular Racism of Native American Mascots" (25 pages)
06/05	**Kathryn Bromwich**: "What Reality TV Can Teach Us" (800 words) https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2014/nov/16/reality-tv-lessons-in-philosophy **M. Coleman, Akilah Reynolds, and Autena Torabi**: "The Relation of Black-Oriented Reality Television Consumption and Perceived Realism to the Endorsement of Stereotypes of Black Women" (9 pages)	**Alex King**: "Taco Bell and the Paradox of Ironic Appreciation" https://aestheticsforbirds.com/2023/03/30/taco-bell-and-ironic-appreciation/ **Kathleen J. Cassity**: "'Political Correctness', Reversal, and Incongruity: Dynamics of Humour in *Life of Brian*" (15 pages)
Module 2: Bodies and Selves In this module, we will think about how pop culture influences how we think of ourselves. We will ask questions like: Can (and should) social media influencers be role models? How do gendered representations show up in, and get reinforced by, pop culture? How can we subvert problematic representations of ourselves and others? Where else can we find ourselves in popular culture? Can we look for subversive narratives within the dominant ones?		
06/09	**Catherine Robb and Alfred Archer:** "Influencers as Role Models" (14 pages)	**Cheryl Cottine**: "Role Modeling in an Early Confucian Context" (20 pages)
06/10	**Shahidha Bari**: "Female Nudity is Powerful—But Not Necessarily Empowering" (1,200 words) https://aeon.co/ideas/female-nudity-is-powerful-but-not-necessarily-empowering	**Emily Ratajkowski**: excerpts from *My Body* (10 pages) **Sami Seybold**: "'And If All of That Is Also True for a Doll…': Feminist Epistemology in Barbie" (1,600 words)

	bell hooks: "Beyoncé's Lemonade is Capitalist Money-Making at Its Best" (1,300 words) https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/may/11/capitalism-of-beyonce-lemonade-album **Lauren Elkin**: "Her Body Is a Problem" (5,700 words) https://aeon.co/essays/the-female-body-under-the-female-gaze-poses-a-monster-problem	
06/11	**Alexis Pauline Gumbs:** excerpts from *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* (6 pages)	**Toni Morisson**: "Récitatif" (12 pages)
06/12	**bell hooks**: "Aesthetic Inheritances: History Worked by Hand," from *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (7 pages)	**Alice Walker**: "Everyday Use" (3,500 words) https://harpers.org/archive/1973/04/everyday-use/
	Module 3: Living Well In this module, we will think about how popular culture suffuses the intricacies of our daily life. We will start by thinking of food cultures—why they matter, how they shape us, and how they intersect with social issues. We will then think about different ways to organize our living spaces and how norms about tidy living intersect with ethics. We will think about the ways our jobs and work lives are profoundly tied to well-being. And finally, we will think about representations of grief and loss in pop culture. All of these pieces will invite us to ask questions like: How (and from where) do we learn how to live well? Where is the line between the personal and the communal? How do we find agency in situations over which we have little control? ** Note: Playlist Paper due on June 22nd*	
06/16	**Lisa Heldke**: "My Dead Father's Raspberry Patch, My Dead Mother's Piecrust" (5 pages) **Natasha Miller**: "Anna's Life Changing Noodles" (podcast; 12 mins) https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/annas-life-changing-noodles/id1674678902?i=1000607033239	**Lisa Heldke**: "Down-Home Global Cooking: A Third Option Between Cosmopolitanism and Localism" (20 pages)
06/17		

	Amy Olberding: "Martha and the Masters: Virtuous Domestic Aesthetic Activity" (13 pages) **Martha Stewart Website** (peruse) https://www.marthastewart.com/1505907/home-design **KonMari Website** (peruse) https://konmari.com/	**Amy Olberding**: "Tidying Up Is Not Joyful but Another Misuse of Eastern Ideas" (1,300 words) **Leo Tolstoy**: "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" (15 pages)
06/18	**Nicholas Kreuder**: "'Severance,' Identity, and Work" (900 words) https://www.prindleinstitute.org/2022/05/severance-identity-and-work/ **Sarah Stoller**: "The Flexible Work Fallacy" (3,300 words) https://aeon.co/essays/how-did-flexible-work-turn-from-a-feminist-ideal-to-a-trap	**Prole**: "Abolish Restaurants: A Worker's Critique of the Food Service Industry" (comic, 10,000 words) **Raymond Geuss**: "Two Stories About the Future," from *A Philosopher Looks at Work* (4 pages)
06/19	**Yo-ran Yang**: *Before Mourning* (short zine) *NOTE: Yo might come speak to our class!*	**Emily Polk**: "Peregrinations of Grief" (4,000 words) https://aeon.co/essays/so-it-goes-and-goes-and-goes-on-vonneguts-death-mantra
	Module 4: Fearing the World In this module, we will think about how pop culture often helps us think about difficult questions. We will turn to apocalyptic movies, climate change journalism, and poetic resistance to discuss pop culture's power to subvert, inspire, challenge, and mobilize. We will think about the ethical import of fear—how it can spur us to action, freeze us in place, and challenge us to find new ways of living in difficult times. The materials for this module will invite questions like: Does literature impart philosophical lessons? Why do so many of us reach for apocalyptic fiction? How should we talk about climate catastrophe? What is the power of words in times of crisis?	
06/23	**Amir Jaima**: "On Philosophy and Literature" (podcast) https://unmutetalk.podbean.com/e/episode-005-amir-jaima-on-philosophy-and-literature/	**Octavia Butler**: "Speech Sounds" **Audiobook**: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5tQ33KmnJBQ

06/24	**Frank Bures**: "Dispatches from the Ruins" (5 mins) https://aeon.co/videos/why-do-we-crave-the-awful-futures-of-apocalyptic-fiction **Claire Colebrook**: "End-Times for Humanity" (2,800 words) https://aeon.co/essays/the-human-world-is-not-more-fragile-now-it-always-has-been	**Ami Harbin**: excerpts from *Fearing Together* (15 pages) **Joshua Forstenzer**: "Radical Optimism is Dua Lipa's Philosophy for Dealing with Life's Chaos—but Radical Openness is a Better Approach" (900 words) https://theconversation.com/radical-optimism-is-dua-lipas-philosophy-for-dealing-with-lifes-chaos-but-radical-openness-is-a-better-approach-228838
06/25	**Amy Westervelt**: "Mothering in an Age of Extinction," from *All We Can Save* (6 pages) *CW: climate anxiety* **Ayana Elizabeth Johnson**: "We Don't Get to Give Up" (video interview, 18 mins) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F11eewBggRY	**Joe Matthewson:** "Climate Change Advances on Us," excerpt from *Ethical Journalism: Adopting the Ethics of Care* (11 pages)
06/26	**Audre Lorde**: "Poetry is Not a Luxury" (6 pages) **Amanda Gorman**: Interview on her poetry being banned https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gR-yervhhBc	**Adrienne Rich**: "A Mark of Resistance" (poem, 1 page) **Shalan Joudry**: "Raising Forests" and "Unfolding of Blankets" (2 pages, poems) **Kevin Young:** *Lift Every Voice* (website; peruse) https://www.africanamericanpoetry.org/

Module 5: Home and Community
In this final module, we will think about the different ways we find, make, and re-make homes for ourselves and others in/through popular culture. We will think about what it feels like to engage with a culture across time and how our relationships to cultural artifacts shift. We will think about the cultural power of creating communal homeplaces in art. And we will think about different ways to share ideas and navigate conflict through careful conversations and cultural exchanges.

Note: Final Project is due on July 4th.

06/30	**Talbot Brewer:** "The Patina of the Past: Meditations on Memory and Home" (9 pages)	**Thom Swiss**: "Popular Culture and Christmas: Nomad at Home" (10 pages)
07/01	**Jennifer Brant:** "Finding Homeplace Within Indigenous Literatures: Honoring the Genealogical Legacies of bell hooks and Lee Maracle" (16 pages) *CW: colonialism, assimilation, violence*	**bell hooks:** "Homeplace: A Site of Resistance" (8 pages) **Lee Maracle:** "Two Poems" (3 pages) *CW: racism, misogyny, violence*
07/02	**[No assigned reading;** we will watch this documentary in class and discuss it together] **Anita Chitaya and Esther Lupafya**: "The Ants and the Grasshopper" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0qeKMJYcjmk	
07/03	**[No Assigned Reading]** **In class:** Project Workshop *bring your project ideas and whatever you've done so far!*	**Andrea J. Pitts**: "Philosophical Collaborations with Activists" (11 pages)

ASSIGNMENTS AND EVALUATION

Participation (20%): To fulfil this requirement, you must be present (in all senses of the word) and alert in class, and you must engage in small group discussions and classroom activities. You must also respect the **classroom norms** (outlined below). Otherwise, your participation can take lots of different forms!

I am committed to making our classroom a welcoming environment for everyone. I understand that folks have different comfort levels in group settings; accordingly, I will provide a wide range of options for participating during class time. One of those options will be larger in-class discussions, and I hope that you all feel comfortable contributing to them. But I will also include several other kinds of engagement in my consideration of what active participation in this course can look like. It can also include office-hour attendance, email inquiries, discussion posts on the Canvas page, thoughtful extra engagements, etc. Again, the minimal requirement is that you show up, remain alert, participate in the non-plenary activities, and be respectful. Otherwise, you should participate in the ways that feel best to you. Help me see what those are. (I promise to keep my eyes wide open.) Please communicate with me early and often if you have questions about this requirement.

Weekly Artifact (25%): Once per week, you must bring one pop culture artifact to class and present it for discussion. It can be anything—a social media post, an article, a video, a movie, a book, etc. You will offer a short (3-5 minute) presentation on the artifact and explain what it is, why you find it interesting,

and how it connects to the course topics that week. You will also raise at least one philosophical question for discussion in class. Following your presentation, you will submit a very short written reflection.

Playlist Paper (20%): You will compile a list of reading, listening, or viewing recommendations for one of the following people: a) Donald Trump; b) the mayor of your hometown; c) Madeleine Léger; d) your grandparent; or e) a child in your life. You may make a curated list of pop culture artifacts that your chosen target will *like,* but this is not the only way to proceed. For instance, you can make a list of items you think they'd benefit from hearing (because, e.g., it would help you start an important ethical conversation with them). Your list must contain at least 5 items, and it must be accompanied by a paper in which you offer a brief rationale for each of your selections, making clear connections to the course content. This portion of the assignment should be at least 1,000 words long, and it must incorporate at least two course readings. **Due June 22nd.**

Final Project (35%): Submit a final project that engages deeply with the course material. You may meet this requirement by writing a standard final paper (5–6 pages), but you may also submit a creative project (e.g., narrative, visual art, podcast, etc.). If you choose the latter, you *must run your plan by me first.* **Due on July 4th.** Please note that the university has strict grade submission deadlines. So, **you can use a maximum of two late days** on this assignment (see late days policy below).

COURSE POLICIES

Classroom norms: The classroom belongs to all of us. Accordingly, we will cultivate an atmosphere of respect and collegiality during our meetings. Each of us will strive to treat the members of this class well. This includes using the students', authors', and instructors' proper names and pronouns; addressing each other respectfully; listening attentively to classmates' comments and questions; contributing thoughtfully and carefully to discussions and activities; broaching difficult topics with the seriousness and care they deserve; having an open mind to thoughts that are different than one's own; recognizing that students' needs may vary.

Email Communication: Please email me if you have any questions or concerns about the course. I will respond to all weekday inquiries within 24 hours. I will respond to weekend inquiries within 48 hours.

Office Hours: Please feel invited and encouraged to come to office hours! I love meeting with students, and I care about getting to know each of you. (For more information, see office hours handout, which is available on the Canvas page.)

Canvas Page: Course information, announcements, readings, syllabus updates, and links will be posted on and/or sent through Canvas. You are responsible for ensuring that messages sent through Canvas are sent directly to your email address and for checking your email and Canvas regularly. Please also see Canvas for additional resources, including guidelines for writing a philosophy paper and mental health resources.

Attendance: You are expected to attend each class session, to come prepared, and to arrive on time. That said, I understand that you may sometimes be unable to come to class for a variety of reasons. Accordingly, each student may have *one* free absence during the semester. You may claim it at any time without explanation or justification. However, any additional absences must be explained and communicated to me promptly (i.e., before any given class day or soon thereafter, in the case of an emergency); excessive and/or unexplained absences will affect your participation grade.

I will excuse up to two absences with proper justification, and it's your responsibility to make up for missed work/material in the event of your excused absence. After that, absences—even if they're excused—will affect your participation grade. If you're in prompt conversation with me about them, I will offer possibilities for making up any lost participation points (e.g., by writing short reflections on the material you missed). I reserve the right to fail a student who is excessively absent without communicating with me.

Late Work Policy: I understand that we all have lives outside of our coursework. However, we all have things to get done, and university deadlines exist for all of us—including me. To accommodate unexpected life events and everyone's individual workflow, each student may claim up to *three late days* **(total)**, which they can use on any assignment and at any point in the term. (So, you can use all three days on one assignment, but you can also spread them out over several assignments. For example, you can use two days on your Playlist Paper and one day on your Final Project.) I will not ask any questions or require any justification for late submissions, so long as they fall within this three-day window. However, if you need to exceed three late days over the course of the term, you must reach out to me and request a formal arrangement for a new deadline/schedule; even in the event of such communications, I may not grant you additional penalty-free extensions. In the absence of such arrangements, the grade of late assignments will be lowered by 2% for every additional day exceeding the three-day buffer. For instance, if an assignment would have earned a 90% grade, but it was submitted four days after the student ran out of late days, the assignment will receive an 82%. Please be in touch with me if you have questions about this. **Important note**: you may not use more than *two* late days on your final project. This is because I need to make sure I have enough time to grade all the assignments in time to submit the grades by Georgetown's deadline.

The Honor Code: You are expected and required to uphold standards of academic honesty in this course. In particular, plagiarism is absolutely unacceptable. All papers will be run through TurnItIn. You should be familiar with the Standards of Conduct outlined in the Georgetown Honor System and on the Honor Council website (see relevant links on Canvas).

AI Policy: I am asking you to not use ChatGPT or any other AI platform/tool (excluding spelling and grammar software) to generate ideas or written content for this course. If I could find an effective and reliable way to forbid you to use AI, I would. But until then, I can only state my worries and objections and try to convince you that I'm right about this. I'm asking you not to use AI for several reasons:

- AI has serious environmental impacts, especially regarding water consumption. Given that water scarcity is a pressing issue for many, and given that climate change is an existential issue for all, I would hope that each of us would choose *not* to use non-essential (and otherwise unethical) services that are so extractive and damaging to our planet.
- AI relies on the work of exploited humans, many of which are incarcerated, living in the global south, and/or earning far, far less than a living wage for their labour. As philosophers—but more importantly, as *humans*—we should strive not to be complicit in this exploitation.
- The class is designed to improve your writing and thinking. It's meant to invite you to draw your own connections and stretch yourself. That's how each of us will grow and learn. If you're outsourcing your work to AI, you're not doing that.
- Using AI raises important academic honesty issues. It raises the question of whether the work is *yours*. Moreover, tools like ChatGPT rely on uncredited materials of various sorts, which further complicates the authorship of the work it produces.
- I'll be reading your papers and project myself—with my brain, my eyes, my energy. And I will be writing you personalized feedback—with my brain, my fingers, my energy. It's disrespectful to hand me something you didn't write and expect me to spend time grading and assessing it.

- Despite what you might hope, AI produces garbage philosophy papers.

If, despite all this, you find yourself using AI, you must cite it, just like any other source or aid to your work. Failing to do so is an Honor Code violation. If I find you using AI in your work without citing it, you will be penalized. Moreover, I am open to discussion about creative, subversive, or critical uses of AI in your work. (In other words, given that it seems like AI is here to stay, I realize that there may be reasons to attempt to employ it (as) responsibly (as possible). Given the worries raised above, I have not yet found a model of what that looks like. But I am open to talking about it with you, if you think you've found it.)

ACCESSIBILITY AND WELLBEING

I care about making this course accessible to you. Please be in touch early and often with any accessibility needs or concerns as they arise. Find a link to Georgetown's accessibility page below.

https://accessibility.georgetown.edu/accessibility-resources-for-students/#