Hums S225: Medicine and the Humanities: Certainty and Unknowing

Time: T-Th 1.00-4:15
Room: TBA

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Course Description:
Sherwin Nuland often referred to medicine as “the Uncertain Art.” In this course, we will address the role of uncertainty in medicine, and the role that narrative plays in capturing that uncertainty. We will focus our efforts on major authors and texts that define the modern medical humanities, with primary readings by Mikhail Bulgakov, Henry Marsh, Atul Gawande, and Lisa Sanders. Other topics will include the philosophy of science (with a focus on Karl Popper), rationalism and romanticism (William James), and epistemology and scientism (Wittgenstein). Field trips will take us to the Yale Medical Historical Library, and the Yale Center for British Art.

Required Texts:
1. Henry Marsh – Do No Harm
2. Leo Tolstoy – The Death of Ivan Ilyich (trans., Louise and Aylmer Maude)
3. Lisa Sanders – Every Patient Tells A Story
4. Jerome Groopman – How Doctors Think
5. Mikhail Bulgakov – A Young Doctor’s Notebook (trans., Michael Glenny)
6. Spalding Gray – Gray’s Anatomy

Other assigned readings (to be made available online):
2. Philippe Aries – selection, Death Denied
5. Nassim Nicholas Taleb, selection, The Black Swan
11. Kate Murphy, “Do You Believe in God, or Is That A Software Glitch?” N.Y. Times, 8/27/16
13. Goethe, selection, Faust
15. Robert Pirsig, selections, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance
16. Witold Gombrowicz, selections, Diary
19. Atul Gawande,
   • “The Velluvial Matrix,” The New Yorker, 6/16/10.
- “The Learning Curve,” The New Yorker, 1/28/02
- “When Doctors Make Mistakes,” The New Yorker, 2/1/99
- “Slow Ideas,” The New Yorker, 7/29/13
- “Letting Go,” The New Yorker, 8/2/10

21. Warburton, selections, Philosophy: Basic Readings – Popper, Kuhn, Sokal, Monk
22. Wittgenstein, selections, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus and Philosophical Investigations
23. Robert Pirsig, selections, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance
25. Stephen Hawking, selection, A Brief History of Time
27. Tolstoy, selections, War and Peace

Recommended Reading (optional)
2. Sherwin Nuland – How We Die
3. Philip Roth – The Anatomy Lesson
5. Harvey Pekar and Joyce Brabner – Our Cancer Year
6. Roz Chast – Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant?
7. Sir Thomas Browne – Religio Medici

Course Requirements:
Regular attendance at lectures, as well as informed and active participation in class, is expected.

The grade breakdown will be as follows:
- Presentations: 15%
- Midterm Paper: 25%
- Final Paper: 40%
- Attendance and Participation: 20%

Presentation: You will give two brief oral presentations, one on pseudoscience, and a second on cognitive bias in clinical medicine. Each presentation should demonstrate some background research, encourage thinking about the subject, and close with a few questions — general or specific — which will engage the class in conversation.

Midterm and Final Papers: Your midterm essay should run between 3-4 pages, and final essay between 8-10 pages, double spaced. Papers may be research-oriented or more expository, considering a work we’ve read in light of a medical experience of your own, or a family member’s.

Admission Criteria: Preference will be given by seniority.

Computer and Mobile Device Policy: I respectfully ask that notes be taken by pen / pencil and paper in class, rather than by computer, and that texting and phone calls be taken outside of the classroom.
Academic Integrity: Any work that you submit must be your own, and any work that is borrowed must be properly cited.

Weekly Schedule
(some changes may occur)

Class 1: Tuesday, 6/30
- Introduction; Syllabus; Course Guidelines
- Henry Marsh – Do No Harm (Chapters 1-12)

Class 2: Thursday, 7/2
Note: Class will take place at The Cushing Center at Yale Medical Library
- Henry Marsh – Do No Harm (Chapters 13-25)
- Karl Ove Knausgaard
  - “The Terrible Beauty of Brain Surgery,” N.Y. Times Magazine, 1/3/16
  - selections, My Struggle, Book I
- Optional: Matt Morrison, “Dr. Frederick Wiseman,” Film Comment, 5/13/16

Class 3: 7/7
- Leo Tolstoy – The Death of Ivan Ilyich
- Jorge Luis Borges, “On Exactitude In Science,”
- Nassim Nicholas Taleb, selection, The Black Swan
- Wordsworth, “Tables Turned.”
- Rivka Galchen, “Every Disease on Earth,” The New Yorker, 5/13/13

Class 4: Heuristics and Cognitive Errors, Diagnostic and Therapeutic: 7/9
- Jerome Groopman, selections, How Doctors Think (2007)
  - Introduction
  - Chapter 6, “The Uncertainty of the Expert.”

**Class 5: 7/14**

- Mikhail Bulgakov – A Young Doctor’s Notebook
- Atul Gawande,
  - “The Learning Curve,” The New Yorker, 1/28/02
  - “When Doctors Make Mistakes,” The New Yorker, 2/1/99

**Class 6: Science and the Soul: 7/16**

- Dostoevsky, selections, Notes From Underground
- Kate Murphy, “Do You Believe in God, or Is That A Software Glitch?” N.Y. Times, 8/27/16
- Craig M. Bennett. Neural correlates of interspecies perspective taking in the post-mortem Atlantic Salmon. J. Serendipitous Unexpected Results 1, 1–5; 2010.

**Midterm Paper Due**

**Class 7: Science and Romanticism: 7/21**

Note: Class will take place at Yale Center for British Art

- Goethe, selection, Faust
- Blake, selection, Milton – “On Reason and Imagination...”
- Robert Pirsig, selection, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance
  “Classicism vs. Romanticism.”
- Witold Gombrowicz, selections, Diary

**Class 8: Pseudoscience: 7/23**

- Spalding Gray – Gray’s Anatomy
- The Onion, Revolutionary New Insoles Combine Five Forms of Pseudoscience. 3/31/99

**Class 9: The Philosophy of Science; Scientism: 7/28**

- Warburton, Philosophy: The Basics – “Science”
- Warburton, selections, Philosophy: Basic Readings – Popper, Kuhn, Sokal, Monk
- Wittgenstein, selections, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and *Philosophical Investigations*

- Robert Pirsig, selection, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*  
  “Mu States and Truth Traps.”
- Stephen Hawking, selection, *A Brief History of Time*

**Class 10: Epistemology, Metis, Medical Ethics: 7/30**

- William James – Rationalism vs. Empiricism, *Some Problems of Philosophy*
- William James, “The Moral Philosopher and The Moral Life.”
- Tolstoy, selections, *War and Peace*

**Final Paper Due**

Potential Guest Speakers:
Lisa Sanders, M.D.
Stephen Bergman, M.D. (a.k.a. Samuel Shem.)
James Scott, Ph.D.

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There will also be an opportunity to shadow me on an Emergency Room shift at my hospital, for anyone who is interested. If this is something that might be appealing to you, please let me know, and we will figure out the details.