PHIL Sxxx: TRUST – AND MISTRUST

2023 Yale Summer Session, b-term, MWF, 9:00-11:15 A.M.
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Trust involves a tension. On the one hand, we must build trust on the basis of its absence. On the other hand, trust is best built when a measure of it already exists between those who are trying to strengthen it. What is trust, such that violations of it yield a sense of betrayal rather than mere disappointment? What is the relation between epistemic and practical trust? When, if ever, is it rational to place one's trust in someone, some group or something – or to mistrust them? Can philosophers be proponents of the value of trust without ceding our role as critical, skeptical, even mistrustful thinkers?

The topic has timely social and political implications. Liberal democracy depends upon citizens trusting that they share a common world and set of institutions enabling them to negotiate differences fairly. The aim of enemies of democracy is to sow doubts in the public so as to undermine trust in democratic institutions. This invites a consideration of phenomena such as polarization, epistemic bubbles, echo chambers, populism, conspiracy theories, "truth decay," and even the idea of "a post-truth culture."

In the face of these challenges, how can we hope to rebuild trust in one another and democratic institutions?

**Course Requirements** (% of grade for each requirement is indicated in red)

1. **Faithful preparation, class attendance, and participation** in our discussions.
   
   a. Because we only have 15 meetings, any one absence is equivalent to missing an entire week during a regular, 15-week semester. Each unexcused absence will reduce your grade by one level, e.g., from ‘A’ to ‘A-.’
   
   b. A pattern of helpful participation in class will help your grade. (15%)

2. **Written work** will consist of 3 posts, 2 drafts of a proposal for your final essay, and the essay itself:
   
   a. Three approximately 800-word **posts**, one for each of the first three parts of the course. You may choose which day to post on, and the post will be on the reading assignment for that day. I’ll provide a number of “prompts” for each day, helping you with the structure of an argument. Your post is **due by midnight** before class. (45%)

Use our course website on **Canvas** for the purpose of posting.

   i. Start by creating a file of your post on your desktop.
   
   ii. Next, upload it to the “Assignments” page on Canvas, and press “Submit.”
   
   iii. I will receive it and provide comments and a grade. You will receive an e-mail notification after I have responded to your post.
In the event of difficulties with Canvas, you can always send your posts as an attachment directly to me via e-mail at lavog@conncoll.edu. Be sure to put your name on the title line of your post!

b. A draft of your final essay proposal with your central question, thesis, an outline of steps in the argument, and a bibliography of sources. I’ll comment on your proposal and expect you to follow up with a second draft responding to my comments (15%)

   i. We’ll meet to discuss your ideas for a final essay proposal at the end of the 3rd week of classes.
   ii. Your detailed proposal is due by Tuesday, 7/25 at noon.
   iii. The revised draft of your proposal is due by Friday, 7/28 at midnight.

c. You must post your final essay (approximately 2,500, carefully edited words) on Canvas by 8:30 A.M. on our last day: Friday, August 4. Then, in class, you’ll make a 5-minute oral presentation outlining the central question, thesis and argument of your final paper. I see this as a “philosophical party,” where we have a chance to celebrate what we’ve done during our brief semester. (25%)

What do I expect from your POSTS?

Posts will help you prepare well for our class discussions and warm you up for your longer final essay. The best structure for a post involves the following steps:

1. Identify a thesis that one of our authors puts forward (e.g., Hannah Arendt believes that x...).
2. Explain the reasons why s/he believes this thesis.
3. Raise an objection to the author’s thesis or her defense of it.
4. If you have time, propose your own thesis and explain why you believe it.

EDIT your entry before you post it!!!! Each post is due by midnight before the class for which you post. LATE POSTS MAY NOT BE ACCEPTED AS I NEED TIME TO READ THEM BEFORE CLASS.

I’d be glad to discuss your progress any time, but especially when we meet to talk over plans for your final paper.

What do I expect from your final essay?

Your final essay should have the same structure that I recommend for your posts: identify a thesis or philosophical claim that at least one author has made, explain why they believe it, subject it to critical examination, and conclude with a thesis of your own and a defense of it. In your 2,500-word final essay you’ll have more room to develop your argument than you did in your posts.
I. Trust and Ethics: the Interpersonal

- You are required to “post” for one of the following three classes in Part I.

Day 1  The Importance of Trust – and Some Fundamental Questions

1. Try to imagine a world without trust. How does trust seem essential and unavoidable for:
   a. Our private and social lives, and
   b. Our pursuit of knowledge?

   o What do you mean by trust? How many different types operate in your life? What are its different contexts and conditions?

2. The Philosophy of Trust: 3 Short Videos by Prof. Sanford Goldberg
   a. The Nature of Trust
   b. The Rationality of Trust
   c. The Ethics of Trust

Day 2  Trust and Moral Philosophy

   a. Trust and its Varieties
   b. Trust and Relative Power
   c. Trust and Voluntary Abilities
   d. The Male Fixation on Contract
   e. A Moral Test for Trust

Day 3  Trust as the Foundation of Ethical Life

   a. Loss of Trust in the World
   b. The Necessity, Pervasiveness and Invisibility of Trust
   c. Trust’s Priority over Reason
   d. Trust in a Developmental Setting
   e. On First Love: Basic Trust as Recognition of Intrinsic Worth
   f. Conclusion: Trust, Trauma and Morality
II. Trust and Political Life: Groups and Institutions

- You are required to “post” for one of the following three classes in Part II.

**Day 4** The Collapse of Public Trust: Hannah Arendt on Totalitarianism


**Day 5** Trust in Democratic Societies: The Importance of Truth


**Day 6** Loss of Trust in Liberal Democracy: How Democracies Die

5. Ezra Klein, “The Doom Loop of Democracy” (Outline).

III. Trust is a World of Social Media: the Loss of Informational “Gatekeepers”

- You are required to “post” for one of the following four classes in Part III.

**Day 7** The Breakdown of Political Trust: “Tribal Epistemology” in a World of Social Media

4. Recommended:
Day 8  
**Echo Chambers, Epistemic Bubbles and Democratic Dysfunction**


Day 9  
**Bald-Faced Lies, Memes, and Science Denialism::
Tribalism and the Priority of “Political Meaning” over Truth**

4. A recommended film: “Don’t Look Up!”

Day 10  
**Conspiracy Theories and the Goal of “Ungoverning”**


- A detailed draft of your proposal for your final essay is due by noon on Tuesday, 7/25.

IV. **Trust after Trump**

Day 11  
**PBS Frontline Documentary: “Lies, Politics and Democracy” –
Loyalty, Complicity and the Question of Fascism**

1. “Lies, Politics and Democracy” (PBS Frontline documentary, 113 minutes).

Day 12  
**“The Big Lie” and Reality Rebellion: Do We Share a Common World?**

1. Thomas Edsall, “We’re Staring at Our Phones, Full of Rage for ‘the Other Side,” *NYT*, 6/15/22
2. Thomas Edsall, “Seven Years of Trump Has the Right Wing Taking the Long View, *NYT*, 9/28/22

- The revised draft of your proposal is due by Friday, 7/28 at midnight.
Day 13  The Rise of “Illiberal Democracy”: An Oxymoron?


Day 14  How to Build Trust: Democracy as “A Space of Reasons”


2. David Brooks, “How to Build Trust in an Age of Distrust,” Aspen Festival of Ideas (Video: 59 minutes) 
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-TM89UqXal

Day 15  In-class Presentation of Your Final Project

1. You must post your final essay (approximately 2,500, carefully edited words) on Canvas by 8:30 A.M. on our last day: Friday, August 4. (All work for YSS must be completed by the end of the semester.)

2. Then, in class, you’ll make a 5-minute oral presentation outlining the central question, thesis and argument of your final paper. You’ll also entertain questions from members of the class. I see this as a “philosophical party,” where we have a chance to celebrate what we’ve done during our brief semester.