

YHU3283: Reality

AY2021/22 Semester 2 | Neil Mehta

Teaching Score Analysis

Response Rate

Raters	Students
Responded	16
Invited	16
Response Ratio	100%

Quantitative

Overall Mean Score

Competency	Faculty Score
Overall Mean	4.94

Breakdown Mean Score for each statement

	# Response	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Applicable	Standard Deviation	Mean
The course was effectively organized.	16	0	0	0	0	16	0	0.00	5.00
The course clearly articulated objectives and expectations.	16	0	0	0	2	14	0	0.34	4.88
The course assignments helped me learn.	16	0	0	0	1	15	0	0.25	4.94
The instructor helped me understand course materials and concepts.	16	0	0	0	0	16	0	0.00	5.00
The instructor encouraged student participation and/or engagement.	16	0	0	0	0	16	0	0.00	5.00
The instructor provided constructive feedback on my work.	16	0	0	0	2	14	0	0.34	4.88
The instructor was helpful outside of class.	16	0	0	0	2	14	0	0.34	4.88

Faculty Mean Score Comparison

Question	Faculty Score (Neil Mehta)		Major Score (Philosophy)		Division Score (Humanities)		College (Yale-NUS College)		Students	
	Response Count	Mean	Response Count	Mean	Response Count	Mean	Response Count	Mean	Response Count	Mean
The course was effectively organized.	34	4.91	95	4.73	411	4.61	2215	4.45	16	5.00
The course clearly articulated objectives and expectations.	34	4.74	95	4.59	411	4.60	2215	4.44	16	4.88
The course assignments helped me learn.	34	4.79	95	4.71	411	4.64	2213	4.46	16	4.94
The instructor helped me understand course materials and concepts.	34	4.91	95	4.77	411	4.72	2215	4.61	16	5.00
The instructor encouraged student participation and/or engagement.	34	4.94	95	4.74	411	4.77	2216	4.60	16	5.00
The instructor provided constructive feedback on my work.	34	4.79	95	4.64	410	4.68	2210	4.51	16	4.88
The instructor was helpful outside of class.	33	4.67	91	4.67	395	4.66	2169	4.61	16	4.88
Overall	-	4.82	-	4.69	-	4.67	-	4.53	-	4.94

Number of hours spent per week, outside the scheduled class meetings. [1]

Name	1hr	2hrs	3hrs	4hrs	5hrs	6hrs	7hrs	8hrs	9hrs	10hrs
YHU3283: Reality	0	0	0	2	2	3	2	4	1	0

Number of hours spent per week, outside the scheduled class meetings. [2]

Name	11hrs	12hrs	13hrs	14hrs	15hrs	16hrs	17hrs	18hrs	19hrs	20hrs	N/A	Mean
YHU3283: Reality	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	7.25

Course Comments

What were the main concepts and skills you learned in this course?

Comments
I learned many different theories that attempt to answer different questions within the field of metaphysics. To the question of what constitutes reality, I have learnt many different theories comprising essences, modality, grounding, possible worlds, and the Quinean framework of quantifiers. To the question of how reality is structured, I have learnt about (priority and existence) monism, the view that the existence of all things depends on other things, as well as several proposed solutions to the problem of identity and distinctiveness facts.
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how to argue, breakdown an argument, provide evidence
I learnt how to structure my arguments well and speak clearly and confidently.
Aside from the authors and the philosophical theories that we discussed, I learned plenty of crucially useful skills that I can apply in my other seminars and even daily life and conversations. For instance, I learned how to be more precise, how to evaluate an argument, providing a constructive objection, etc.
In this course, I learnt many practical skills: how to write concisely, listen to others attentively, and evaluate philosophical arguments. I also learnt a great deal about the various philosophical tools one might need to theorise about reality, such as existence, possible worlds, essences and structure.

Comments
beyond course content, I think I developed a lot as a writer and thinker – specifically, learning to ask the right questions, think creatively but also logically, and to write precisely.
I learned about difference theories in metaphysics and how they can be applied. I also benefitted greatly from the handouts. I learned much about communication skills and ways to interact with arguments.
I learned to write clear and concise sentences. It's a skill that is oft overlooked, and Neil was excellent at educating us how to do so.
I learned to evaluate arguments based on the modus ponens and modus tollens argument forms.
I learned several philosophical concepts on characterising fundamentality.
– I learned to think, write, and express my ideas precisely.
– I learned to make statements and respond to others in a clear and respectful manner.
– I was challenged a lot and I feel extremely fulfilled. Even though things were difficult, I have gained a lot of confidence in my ability as a philosopher.
– I learned the different tools to characterise reality eg. essence, grounding, structure.
– I learned the difference between metaphysics and epistemology.
– I learned that many philosophical problems are much harder to solve than they initially seem, and I learn how to articulate the problems well.
– I have learned to embrace and seek out failure! It may sound contrived but I think this class helped me grasp this in a way that I have not before.
Thinking logically, analysing highly abstract concepts and texts, writing and speaking effectively Key concepts theories in metaphysics
Metaphysical theories and the notions they take to be primitive. How to evaluate theories based on their advantages and disadvantages. How to engage in productive philosophical discussions by actively listening, synthesizing, expressing thoughts with precision, using illustrative examples, and exercising the principle of charity.
Metaphysical and some epistemological theories and concepts Writing skills, diagramming arguments, evaluating arguments, developing objections
I've learned so many concepts in metaphysics, and so many skills in writing/argumentation! I learned about existence, essence, metaphysical necessity, possible world, grounding, structure, etc. I also learned how to explain ideas, structure ideas, identify and use good argument forms, use signposts effectively, and evaluate arguments.
Various metaphysical concepts that different thinkers take to be primitive in fully characterising reality. The application of different metaphysical concepts in explaining certain phenomena or observations about the world. Reconstruction of arguments in premise–conclusion form, how to evaluate them etc Writing skills like being precise.
I learnt many things but if I were to choose some main concepts/ skills: argument forms (modus tollens and modus ponens), process of coming up with objections, heuristics to evaluate a conditional claim and to determine if a claim counts as good evidence.

What helped you learn? Please provide examples such as reading materials, activities, assignments, and the instructor's distinctive teaching methods.

Comments
Seminar discussions were the most instrumental to my understanding of the course material. Prof. Mehta used the arguments from the text as a springboard for class discussions, but often novel arguments and objections from my peers were moments where I really grasped and appreciated the nuances of the arguments in the text.
I appreciated that the readings were a manageable volume – I have had classes with 100+ page readings, and I find that Prof Mehta assigns shorter readings that help me understand the main ideas, instead of being overwhelmed by detail.
lessons in the warm ups, class itself
What was really helpful was the feedback provided during class time when Neil would give students on the spot feedback on how they could improve. Also the homework was really helpful too!

Comments

The way that Prof. Mehta structured the class in general helped me learn a lot. In particular, I benefited a lot from the weekly assignments, mini-lectures, and the seminars where Prof. Mehta called on each student, a method that gave every student a chance to speak and have Prof. Mehta's feedback and useful improvement tips.

Neil provides weekly homework exercises along with handouts that are extremely useful. In class, I find Neil's method of calling on students to provide specific, guided contribution very effective; they keep seminars on-topic and keeps everyone engaged in the material discussed.

seminars provided many opportunities to learn and clarify concepts as well as new skills, and assignments gave me many opportunities to practice them. the readings are well chosen and it is very helpful to have key passages highlighted for us.

The handout was very helpful in allowing me to gain small not necessary skills needed for the material. The warm up and cool downs can be time consuming, but i still feel that they're necessary for understanding the course material.

Neil's in-person seminars helped me to learn tremendously. They were thoroughly enriching.

Neil's weekly warm-ups and cool-downs helped me to learn in my own time

Neil's weekly handouts were most helpful as a go-to learning resource

Our midterm and final papers help me to put everything together

– The warm-ups and cool-downs helped a lot as they forced me to consistently practice my writing & responding to philosophers. I find them incredibly challenging in a fulfilling way.

– The readings never feel like they are overwhelming, which is great because they allow me to focus on them and gain the most out of each one.

– The mini-lectures are extremely clear and illuminating in class. I enjoy them a lot and always feel like I learn something: if not something content related, then something related to how to present my answers.

– I find the structure of the lessons very unique, but very effective because it almost always feels like I learn what the instructor sets out to have me learn.

Assignments before seminars and prof's feedback for every student's class participation

The highly focused engagements of the text in class are invaluable.

I especially appreciate that Neil runs through the argument from the readings slowly at the start of every class, ensuring that we are all on the same page before engaging in further critical engagement. This is especially helpful for readings that I have struggled to fully grasp and appreciate the force of the argument presented.

Compared to the other classes, I suspect that the high levels of critical engagement in this seminar may be in no small part attributed to the homework assignments. It challenges every one of us to independently engage with the readings before coming to class for productive discussions.

Exercises and notes, class discussions and mini-lectures

The readings were super interesting and mind-blowing. Prof Neil's mini-lectures in each seminar were exceptionally helpful to clarify philosophical concepts and prepare me for class discussions. The homework is painful but very rewarding – it kept me on track with learning and consolidating my skills in this class. The way Prof Neil structured paper assignment – one draft, one peer review, and final submission – is very helpful to scaffold the paper-writing process. I also extremely enjoyed the way Prof Neil facilitated the seminar – it always feel very well-paced and very interactive and engaging. The thing I appreciate the most in this seminar is that, there is no moment when I feel confused about what I learned in class. I really appreciate the fact that Prof Neil assigned short and focused readings and made sure we learned everything to be learned in each reading/class. This helped me to consolidate my learning greatly.

I thought the reading list was well curated and interesting. I think giving us a little more context about the historical development of the contemporary literature might be helpful in allowing us to locate when and where each piece was written, and how it fits into the bigger picture of the overall debate. Talking a bit more about how it might interact with historical thinkers, or those that we don't read could be interesting as well, though I understand this is not meant to be a history of philosophy of course, so a minor thing, more of a fun/good to know, cool additional fact, rather than something that's needed to improve comprehension of the material.

Felt like towards the end of the semester it felt like a lot of what we were doing were objections. I understand that developing these are an important part of philosophy, but perhaps this could be varied up and we could do some other activities/find other ways of engaging with the thinkers? Don't really have anything in mind, but it is something I noticed, and am unsure what the alternative is, but I do like variety and if things could be spiced up to include more than just objections that would be good.

Assignments are good, I think it's a good assessment structure though I wonder if it's feasible to introduce more substantive, low stakes assignments.

Calling on multiple people at once I think is a good way of getting through everyone speaking in class once quicker, though I think it's still valuable to press a line of questioning on a student, having that level of depth of engagement seems to me to be a good

Comments

learning opportunity so that should still be something that's done occasionally. I also think, if asking multiple students to answer, if the first student gets the answer correctly, it's a much more productive use of time to get the second student to do something new, like answer a new question, make a connection to another concept, progress along the argument etc. This is especially if the first student didn't make any major mistakes, because in those cases the second student doesn't add much in the way of substantive content, and will mostly be polishing smaller stylistic/technical things, which I think while important, can be picked up on still when they need to answer a more substantively challenging question.

Mainly seminar discussions, spending time outside of class time to process and understand course material, and email correspondences with Prof. Neil.

Please elaborate on your previous responses or address other issues such as class dynamics or atmosphere.

Comments

This is not a fault of Prof. Mehta given that metaphysics is a really dense and broad topic, but I would have appreciated more feedback on our objections in our assignments.

Towards the end of the semester, when COVID restrictions had loosened, the professor rearranged seating so that around 6 people were sitting per table. This actually made me really uncomfortable and I felt I didn't have enough personal space. It also made it hard to focus on the class when I could hear so many noises around me. This is a really minor point, but please don't cram students together! Some students have sensory issues or are especially sensitive to sounds.

nil

Nil

This class taught me tons of useful skills that I am certain that I will be using for the rest of my life. I am thankful to Prof. Mehta for putting so much effort into the material and class structure, and for making sure that students are able to take away a lot from the course.

This class is arguably one of the best philosophy classes I've taken at Yale–NUS. The material is exciting and challenging, and Neil teaches it very well. The class atmosphere is very conducive for rigorous philosophical work. Without fail, I leave every seminar feeling inspired by the discussions I've had with my peers, and excited to learn more.

I always feel intellectually stimulated in class and I think Prof Mehta does an excellent job keeping seminars focused while leaving room for questions and clarifications, including after class. I feel like all students are respected and challenged in class and I always look forward to seminar.

I think the only thing I'd like to have learned more about is how exactly to make an objection. Sometimes, the warm up exercises are hard to complete because I feel that I lack the technique or observational skills to find out what's wrong with a particular view and exactly how to attack it.

Neil fosters a very inclusive culture whereby making mistakes is not only not a bad thing, but is actively celebrated.

Our class atmosphere is very advanced with strong contributions from all students

Things not covered in my previous answers:

– I think it's great that Neil goes out of his way to show concern for us, such as by making sure he remembers our names and pronouns, or checking in on us when we show up late, or by treating us as intellectual equals (in the sense that even when he criticises our answers, it never feels like he is talking down to us, nor does it feel like he is holding back from challenging us). It makes me feel really included and that helps tremendously with my learning experience.

– While Neil challenges us, I think he also does it in a gentle and encouraging manner that makes me feel safe to step out of my comfort zone! He encouraged us many times to try giving points that we are less sure about, rather than giving the "safe" answer, and embrace failure while doing so. The "beautiful failure" comments he gave are actually surprisingly helpful to me. I actually found that phrase jarring and disconcerting at first. But over time, I think that practice really helped because I am now kind of desensitised to the word "failure," which is a step I never thought I'd make. He also does a lot of little things that show us how embracing failure is okay — for example, he leads by example, often pointing out to us parts of philosophical thinking that he himself finds challenging, and how he personally embraces the spirit of failure and self-improvement. It is encouraging because I no longer see it as a bad thing to be stumped. He also works this practice into his regular assignments, asking us to consider a "beautiful failure" we made in our previous assignment and to work on sharpening our arguments.

– I think one downside of the highly structured classes is that I don't really feel like I've had much interaction with my classmates during class time, and so I don't really feel that well connected to them. But I appreciate that there is the opportunity to stay back to ask questions and have a bit more unstructured discussions during that time, to make up for it!

Comments

– All in all I think this course is quite demanding and hold us to very high standards. But this also comes with a lot of care, encouragement, and valuable lessons on failure. And I get a real sense of fulfilment from this course, and I am definitely learning so much, both in terms of sharpening my thinking and writing skills, as well as being a better person!

classes are well–organized. Prof Mehta has given us sufficient time for us to consider difficult concepts before and during seminars.

I feel highly engaged at every seminar class, and being in Neil's class has been one of my greatest joys and privilege as a student at Yale–NUS.

NA

The class environment is really open, non0judgmental, and encouraging! I truly enjoyed it!

I think the hand out after the first half of the course clarifying the direction/big picture of the course was helpful. I think the first half is very clearly organised and I thought that it was pretty clear what we were doing. I think slightly more can be done to prep students to understand how the application of metaphysical concepts works in the second half of the semester. One way to do this might be to show what changes when you use different metaphysical concepts to explain a phenomena, and the different implications invoking each theory has (beyond the theoretical costs/benefits). Perhaps also providing or sketching out some of the challenges we examine in the second half, and how they fit together would make students feel like the second half is more coherent. It seems to me you know what you want students to take away, but I think the problem for us if we're not sure how these debates fit into the bigger philosophical picture.

NIL