

Pain & Suffering

A sample syllabus by Tiina C Rosenqvist

[This syllabus outlines a proposed intermediate-level course the philosophy of pain and suffering.]

1. Course Description

This seminar course explores pain and suffering. Key questions include: What is pain? What is its function? Can pain be illusory? Is pain inherently bad? How are pain and suffering related? If animals can feel pain and suffer, what ethical considerations arise? What are some issues involved in assessing the credibility of pain reports? What are the ethics surrounding opioid prescriptions?

The philosophy of pain and suffering is a vibrant area of contemporary research. Through a multidisciplinary approach drawing from philosophy, bioethics, psychology, medical science, and neuroscience, we will critically examine these questions and think deeply about some of the most fundamental aspects of human and animal experience.

“All pain is simple. And all pain is complex. You’re in it and you want to get out. How can the ocean be not beautiful? The ocean is not beautiful today.”

— Lisa Olstein: *Pain Studies*

2. Course Objectives

By actively participating in this course, you will:

- Gain an empirically-informed understanding of key contemporary issues and debates in the philosophy of pain.
- Critically analyze and evaluate complex views and arguments related to pain and suffering.
- Incorporate empirical findings from psychology, neuroscience, and medical science to enrich your philosophical understanding.
- Actively participate in class discussions and debates, honing your ability to articulate and defend your viewpoints while considering opposing perspectives.
- Refine your writing skills by composing clear, concise, and well-structured essays that unpack, discuss, and evaluate philosophical arguments.
- Engage in collaborative learning activities, such as group discussions and peer reviews, to enhance your understanding through diverse perspectives and feedback.

Through these activities, you will not only deepen your knowledge of the philosophy of pain and suffering but also develop essential skills in critical thinking, communication, and argumentation that are valuable across various disciplines and professions.

3. Course Structure

In-person sessions

The seminar sessions will generally follow a format of short lectures or presentations followed by discussions. It is expected that you complete the assigned readings before each class and actively participate in the discussions and other in-class activities, including peer review. Each enrolled student must present on *one* of the required course readings to the seminar.

This seminar is designed to foster deep engagement with course materials through active participation and thoughtful presentations. Your contributions to discussions will play a crucial role in enhancing the seminar experience for everyone involved.

Out-of-class activities

You are expected to complete all *required* readings before the classes for which they are assigned. You are expected to contribute to the Canvas discussion board for each required reading by submitting your post before the relevant class session.

Additionally, you will write two papers and take two quizzes.

4. Assignments & Assessment

Weights

- Attendance & Participation —15%
- Discussion Board Contributions —10%
- Module Quiz(zes) — 10%
- In-class Presentation —10%
- Short Paper (1,000-1,200 words) —15%
- Long Paper (2,000-2,500 words) + outline + peer review —35%

Attendance and Participation

Attendance is mandatory. You are allowed to miss up to two seminar sessions without prior notice, except on the day you are scheduled to give your presentation or participate in peer review. If you anticipate missing more than two seminar sessions, you must provide prior notice and complete a make-up assignment. Failure to notify will likely result in a deduction from your participation grade. Repeated lateness may also negatively impact your participation grade.

Active and considerate participation in discussions and class activities is expected. This includes completing assigned readings beforehand, coming to seminar prepared with ideas and questions, adhering to discussion guidelines, and demonstrating genuine engagement.

In-class participation is a critical component of the course and will be tracked throughout the term. I understand that participating in class can be challenging for various reasons. If you find in-class participation difficult, please let me know as soon as possible. We can discuss strategies to make

you feel more comfortable and/or come up with alternative participation methods. Your success and comfort in this course is important to me.

Discussion board contributions

You are expected to contribute to the Canvas discussion board for each required reading by submitting your post *before* the relevant class session. To receive full credit, your contribution should demonstrate meaningful engagement with the text(s) and be at least five sentences long. You can ask probing questions, articulate agreements or disagreements with supporting reasons, or draw insightful connections to other readings from the course. Late submissions will be accepted for up to seven days, and will receive half credit at maximum.

Module quizzes

There will be a quiz at the end of modules II and IV. Only your best quiz score counts towards your final grade (10%). This means that you can either *not* take one of the two quizzes, or you can take both and have the lowest score dropped (the recommended option).

The quizzes are untimed and open-book, and you have two attempts for each quiz (your *latest* score is the one that is recorded; this means that your recorded score can go down if your second attempt results in a lower score than the first).

In-class presentation

Each enrolled student must present on *one* of the required course readings to the seminar. Your presentation should last approximately 20 minutes, with around 15 minutes dedicated to careful exegesis and 5 minutes for critical evaluation. You should prepare a handout or PowerPoint to aid in your presentation.

- *Exegesis*: In your presentation, explain what is at stake in the debate, the author's thesis, the arguments presented, the premises supporting those arguments, any objections the author addresses, and how the author responds to those objections.
- *Critical discussion*: Evaluate the strength of the author's arguments. Consider whether there are plausible objections that the author does not explicitly address. Assess the author's exposition of alternative views for accuracy and fairness.

The presentation is worth 10% of your final grade. I'm happy to talk to you about your presentation beforehand.

Papers

You are required to write two argumentative papers. The first paper (1,000-1,200 words) is worth 15% of your final grade and the second paper (2,000-2,500 words) is worth 35%. Prompts will be provided. For the second paper you will also write a 2-page outline that you will workshop with your peer review group. Penalty for missing the outline is 5%. Penalty for missing peer review is 5%.

5. Course Policies

[Omitted from this sample.]

6. Resources

[Omitted from this sample.]

7. Class & Readings Schedule

Note on terminology

- **“Required”** readings are the ones you are expected to read and engage with *before* the relevant class session.
- **“Recommended”** readings/podcasts/videos will give you a fuller understanding of the topic under discussion. They will likely be useful to you when writing papers. Some ideas in the recommended readings might also be discussed during in-class sessions.
- **“Optional”** readings/podcasts/videos are extra materials for when you are particularly interested in a topic.

Module I. Getting Started

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This module serves as a foundational exploration into the philosophy, psychology, and neuroscience of pain and suffering, laying the groundwork for deeper discussions and analyses throughout the course.
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- (1) Basics: What is an argument? How to read philosophy?
 - **Required:** Pryor, “Guidelines on Reading Philosophy”
- (2) What is philosophy of pain and why do we do it?
 - **Required:** Corns (2017), “Pain Research: Where are we and why it matters?”
 - **Optional:** Scarry (1985), “Introduction.” *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*
- (3) What is philosophy of suffering and why do we do it?
 - **Required:** Bain, Brady and Corns (2019). “Introduction.” *Philosophy of Suffering*
- (4) The psychology of pain and suffering: a brief introduction
 - **Required:** Williams (2017), “Psychological models of pain.” *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Pain*
 - **Recommended:** “The Mysterious Science of Pain” (TED-Ed) / YouTube
- (5) The neuroscience of pain and suffering: a brief introduction
 - **Required:** Wiesel & Pauli (2016), “Neuroscience of Pain and Emotion” (*excerpts*)
 - **Recommended:** “Nociceptors—An Introduction to Pain” / YouTube
 - **Optional:** “The Neuroscience of Pain,” *The New Yorker*

Module II. Knowing Pain

This module deals with the epistemology of pain, addressing questions such as: How do I know my own pain, and is it possible for me to be mistaken about it? How do I understand and recognize the pain experienced by others?

(6) Wittgenstein on pain

- **Required:** Wittgenstein (1953/2009), *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, sections 243–309
- **Required:** Hacker (2006), “Of Knowledge and of Knowing That Someone Is in Pain.” *Wittgenstein: The Philosopher and his Works* (excerpts)

(7) Can you be wrong about *your* pain?

- **Required:** Langland-Hassan (2017), “Pain and incorrigibility.” *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Pain*

(8) Can you *see* the pain of others?

- **Required:** De Vignemont (2017), “Can I see your Pain?” *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Pain*

[Module Quiz](#)

Module III. The Nature and Content of Pain

This module deals with metaphysics and the philosophy of mind, offering a critical examination of prominent philosophical theories that seek to elucidate the nature and content of pain.

(9) Meanings of pain

- **Required:** Duncan (2017), “The Meanings of ‘Pain’ in Historical, Social, and Political Context,” *The Monist*

(10) Philosophical theories of pain

- **Required:** Hardcastle (2017), “A brief and potted overview on the philosophical theories of pain.” *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Pain*

(11) Representationalism

- **Required:** Tye (1995), “A Representational Theory of Pains and their Phenomenal Character,” *Philosophical Perspectives*

(12) Evaluativism

- **Required:** Bain (2017), “Evaluativist accounts of pain’s unpleasantness,” *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Pain*

(13) The biological function of pain; *Short Paper Topics Distributed*

- **Required:** Casser (2020), “The Function of Pain,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*
- **Recommended:** Klein (2015), “The biological role of pain,” *The Brains Blog*.

(14) Imperativism, *Short Paper Topics Distributed*

- **Required:** Klein (2014), *What the Body Commands*, Ch. 3: "Pain and Imperatives"
- **Recommended:** Klein (2017), "Imperativism," *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Pain*
- **Optional:** Klein interviewed on *New Books in Philosophy* (NBP) podcast: <https://newbooksnetwork.com/colin-klein-what-the-body-commands-the-imperative-theory-of-pain-mit-press-2015>

(15) Review of Modules I, II and III; *Writing Workshop #1*

- **Required:** Pryor, "Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper"

Short Paper – 15%

Module IV. Pain and Suffering

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This module critically examines the nature of pain and its relationship to suffering, addressing questions regarding the intrinsic value or "badness" of pain.
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(16) Is pain bad by nature? (*Dolorism*)

- **Required:** Massin (2017), "Bad by nature: an axiological theory of pain," *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Pain*

(17) Distinguishing pain and suffering (*Conditionalism*)

- **Required:** Klein (2014), *What the Body Commands*, Ch. 4: "Pain and Suffering"
- **Optional:** Bain (2014). "Pains that Don't Hurt." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*

(18) Reverse conditionalism

- **Required:** Bradford (2020), "The Badness of Pain," *Utilitas*
- **Optional:** Coleman (2017), "Painfulness, Suffering, and Consciousness," *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Pain*

(19) Pain & agency

- **Required:** Beck & Haggard (2017), "Pain, voluntary action, and the sense of agency," *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Pain* (pp. 175–185).

(20) Pain and suffering in Buddhist philosophy

- **Required:** Gyal & Flanagan (2017), "The role of pain in Buddhism: The conquest of suffering," *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Pain*
- **Optional:** "Buddhist Philosophy of Pain and Suffering" / YouTube

Module Quiz

Module V. Pain, Ethics, and Epistemology

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This module explores the intricate ethical considerations and epistemological challenges surrounding pain and suffering, addressing the responsibilities of healthcare professionals, the rights of patients and animals (and artificial agents?), and the societal implications of pain management practices.
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(21) Pain, bias, and injustice

- **Required:** Wiggleton-Little (2019), "Pain Testimonies, Testimonial Injustice, and the Burden of Trust," *Blogs on the APA*
- **Required:** Drwecki (2015), "Education to Identify and Combat Racial Bias in Pain Treatment," *AMA Journal of Ethics*.

(22) Treatment of pain: the ethics of prescribing opioids

- **Required:** Lajam et al. (2019), "Ethics of Opioid Prescriber Regulations: Physicians, Patients, and Pain," *The Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery*
- **Recommended:** Rider (2016), "An Ethical Dilemma for doctors: When is it OK to prescribe opioids?" *STAT*

(23) Animal pain

- **Required:** Singer (2009), *Animal Liberation*, pp. 6-15
- **Required:** "How do animals experience pain?" (TED-Ed) / YouTube

(24) Animal suffering

- **Required:** Regan (2004), *Empty Cages: Facing the Challenge of Animal Rights*, prologue and parts 1-4

Long Paper Topic

(25) Robots and pain

- **Required:** Mandik (2017), "Robot Pain," *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Pain*

Long Paper Outline

Module VI: Wrapping Up

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This module provides you with the opportunity to consolidate your knowledge, refine your analytical skills, and prepare your final papers through collaborative peer feedback and reflective discussions on the broader implications of philosophical inquiry into pain and suffering.
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(26) Review of modules IV & V; *Writing Workshop #2*

(27) Long Paper Outline Workshop/Peer Review in Class

(28) Final Review & Discussion

Long Paper – 30%