

Hip-Hop and Philosophy

Spring 2015

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Course Description

Socrates tells us that “the unexamined life is not worth living,” and Talib Kweli claims that “life without knowledge is death in disguise.” I believe that both hip-hop and philosophy provide us with an opportunity to both examine our lives and to think critically about the world in which we live.

Both philosophers and hip-hop artists think about God, death, criminal justice, and authenticity, among other things. But rarely do members of these two groups talk to one another about pressing social and philosophical issues. This is a shame, given that both hip-hop and philosophy have a rich history and have produced exemplary thinkers.

This course should be thought of as a type of conversation between hip-hop and philosophy. Over the next fifteen weeks, we will think through a number of difficult questions, critically consulting the wisdom of both philosophers and hip-hop artists, but privileging neither group. The process should be both entertaining and enlightening.

Course Requirements and Grading

Student grades will be based on in-class participation and either three, five-page papers or one fifteen-page paper. Only students who have completed at least one course in philosophy will be permitted to write a fifteen-page paper. Assignments are weighted as follows:

- 30% In-class participation
- 70% Three, five-page papers or one fifteen-page paper

In the course paper(s), students will present a sustained discussion of *one* topic. I will provide several topics for the paper, but students are encouraged to develop their own paper topics. If you decide to pursue a topic of your own creation, please discuss it with me *before* you begin writing.

All assignments will be assessed based on three criteria: 1) accuracy: how well the student understands and presents the material contained in the course readings, 2) clarity of writing, and 3) content: the strength of the analysis and critique of the views the student takes issue with, and the quality of the argument(s) used to support any positive views presented in the paper.

Make sure to read "Guidelines on Reading a Philosophy Paper":
<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html>

And "Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper":
<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>

Statement on Americans with Disabilities Procedures:

Howard University is committed to providing an educational environment that is accessible to all students. In accordance with this policy, students in need of accommodations due to a disability should contact the Office of the Dean for Special Services for verification and determination of reasonable accommodations as soon as possible after admission to the University or at the beginning of each semester. The Dean of the Office of Special Student Services can be reached at (202) 238-2420.

Plagiarism and cheating:

Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. Evidence of dishonesty will be pursued, and confirmation will result in an "F" for the course. Students are responsible for knowing which actions constitute plagiarism. Please refer to the Howard University Student Handbook, p.114.

Text:

Hip-Hop and Philosophy: Rhyme to Reason, by Derrick Darby (editor), and Tommy Shelby (editor), (Open Court, 2005)

All other readings and songs will be posted to Blackboard.

Most songs, along with lyrics and commentary, can be found at: <http://rap.genius.com/>

(Disclaimer: I recognize that some students may find some of the songs I selected for this course offensive or profane. While students are required to read each assigned article, I do not require that students listen to songs they find unnecessarily disturbing. But, remember that we are not listening to the artists listed below solely for the purpose of entertainment, but to determine what they may have to say about the philosophical topics under discussion).

Course Schedule

(Note that I may alter this schedule during the semester.)

Week 1: What is Hip-Hop? What is Philosophy?

Read: **Bertrand Russell**: The Value of Philosophy, **Plato**: Apology: A Defense of Socrates, **Cornel West** in The Examined Life (video). **Tommie Shelby**: Impure Dissent: Hip-Hop and the Political Ethics of Marginalized Black Youth

Tracks: **KRS-One**: My Philosophy, The MC; **Mos Def**: Fear Not of Man, Hip Hop; **Dead Prez**: Hip-Hop; **Common**: I Used to Love Her, **Mobb Deep**: Quiet Storm; **Nas**: Hip-Hop is Dead; **Reflection Eternal**: The Manifesto

Week 2: Images of God in Hip-Hop and The Problem of Evil

Read: **J.L. Mackie**: Evil and Omnipotence, **Derrick Darby**: Yo! Aint No Mystery: Who is God?, **Christopher Johnson**: God, the Black Man and the Five Percenters (NPR feature)

Tracks: **Notorious B.I.G.**: Suicidal Thoughts; **Dead Prez**: Propaganda; **Jay-Z**: No Church in the Wild; **Rick Ross and Jay-Z**: The Devil is a Lie; **2Pac**: Only God Can Judge Me; **KRS-One feat. Grand Puba**: 5% ; **Rakim**: Mystery (Who is God?); **Wu-Tang Clan**: Older Gods; **Brand Nubian**: Ain't No Mystery

Week 3: Death

Read: **Epicurus**: Letter to Menoeceus, **Lucretius**: On the Nature of Things (selections), **Shelly Kagan**, Lecture on Death (video)

Tracks: **Notorious B.I.G.**: Everyday Struggle, **Mobb Deep**: Survival of the Fittest, **2Pac**: My Only Fear of Death, Bury Me a G; **Nas**: Life's a Bitch, **The Game**: My Life, **Ice Cube**: Today Was a Good Day; **Ghetto Boys**: My Mind is Playing Tricks on Me, 6 Feet Deep; **Clipse**: The Funeral

Week 4: Humility and Self-Promotion

Read: **Holy Bible**, **Koran** (selected passages), **Friedrich Nietzsche**: Ecce Homo (selections), Genealogy of Morality, Book 1.

Tracks: **Kanye West**: Everything I Am, I Am a God, Monster; **Jay-Z**: FUTW, Encore, What More Can I Say, The Takeover, My 1st Song; **Jay Electronica**: Exhibit A, B, and C; **Nas**: Nas is Like; **BlackStar**: Definition; **KRS-One**: Step Into a World

Week 5: The Battle, the Cypher, and Recognition

Read: **Friedrich Nietzsche**: Homer's Contest, **Robert Brandom**: The Structure of Desire and Recognition: Self-Consciousness and Self-Constitution. **Paul Edwards**: How to Rap: The Art and Science of the Hip-Hop MC (selections)

Tracks: **MC Shan**: The Bridge v. **KRS-One**: The Bridge is Over; **Westside Connection**: Westside Slaughterhouse v. **Common**: The Bitch in You; **Jay Z**: The Takeover v. **Nas**: Ether **Wu-Tang Clan**: Gambinos, **Kanye West**: Clique, **Mos Def**, **Black Thought**, and **Eminem**: 2009 BET Cypher

Week 6: Keeping It Real

Read: **Lewis Gordon**: Grown Folks' Business: The Problem of Maturity in Hip-Hop, **John Pittman**: "Y'all Niggaz Better Recognize": Hip Hop's Dialectical Struggle for Recognition

Tracks: **Mobb Deep**: Shook Ones, **MF Doom**: Rap Snitches, **Nas**: Represent, Get Down, Second Childhood, **Mos Def**: The Rape Over; **2Pac**: When We Ride on Our Enemies

Week 7: Hip-Hop and Misogyny

Read: **Gwendoyne Pough**: What It Do, Shorty?: Women, Hip-Hop and a Feminist Agenda, **Kathryn Gines**: Queen Bees and Big Pimps: Sex and Sexuality in Hip-Hop

Tracks: **2Pac**: Dear Mama, I Get Around, Keep Your Head Up, Wonda Why They Call You Bitch, **Jay-Z**: Girls, Girls, Girls, Big Pimpin; **Goodie Mob**: Beautiful Skin; **BlackStar**: Brown Skin Lady; **Queen Latifah**: Ladies First, U.N.I.T.Y; **Lil Kim**: Queen Bitch; **Nicki Minaj**: Beez in the Trap; **Method Man**: All I Need

Week 8: Criminal Justice

Read: **Paul Butler**: Racially Based Jury Nullification: Black Power in the Criminal Justice System, **Michele Alexander**: The New Jim Crow (video)

Tracks: **Dead Prez**: Police State; **NWA**: Fuck the Police; **KRS-One**: Sound of the Police, Black Cop; **Jay-Z**: 99 Problems

Week 9: Criminal Justice

Read: **Erin Kelly**: Criminal-Justice Minded: Retribution, Punishment, and Authority
Paul Butler: Much Respect: Toward a Hip-Hop Theory of Punishment

Tracks: **Mobb Deep**: Eye for an Eye; **Eve**: Love is Blind

Week 10: Hustlin' and Materialism

Read: **Tommie Shelby**: Justice, Deviance, and the Dark Ghetto, **Jeffrie Murphy**: Marxism and Retribution

Tracks: **Rick Ross**: Hustlin', **Dead Prez**: Hell Yeah; **Clipse**: Grindin, Mama I'm So Sorry, I'm Not You, **Nas**: Thief's Theme, **BG**: Bling Bling; **Wu-Tang Clan**: C.R.E.A.M

Week 11: The Meaning of Blackness

Read: **Tommie Shelby and Lionel McPherson**: Blackness and Blood: Interpreting African American Identity; **Tommy Curry**: You Can't Stand the Nigger I See!: Kanye West's Analysis of Anti-Black Death; **W.E.B DuBois**: Of Our Spiritual Strivings

Tracks: **BlackStar**: Astronomy (8th light), Yo Yeah; **Dead Prez**: I'm an African; **Kanye West**: Black Skinhead; **Lauryn Hill**: Black Rage

Week 12: The N-Word

Read: **J. Angelo Corlett**: "For All My Niggaz and Bitches": Ethics and Epithets; **Luvell Anderson and Ernie Lepore**: What Did You Call Me? Slurs and Prohibited Words

Tracks: **A Tribe Called Quest**: Sucka Nigga; **Nas**: Ya'll My Niggas, Be a Nigga Too; **Kanye West and Jay-Z**: Niggaz in Paris

Week 13: Freedom and the Meaning of Life

Read: **Thomas Nagel**: The Absurd, **Jean Paul Sartre**: Existentialism is a Humanism

Tracks: **Jay-Z**: Allure, Lost Ones; **BlackStar**: Thieves in the Night; **Outkast**: 13th Floor (Growing Old), Aquemini; **Nas**: Doo Rags; **2pac**: Cause I Had To, To Live and Die in L.A.; **Notorious B.I.G.**: Juicy, **A\$AP Rocky**: Suddenly; **J Cole**: Crooked Smile, **Kendrick Lamar**: Sing About Me, **NWA**: Express Yourself, **Little Brother**: Extra Hard, **Lauryn Hill**: Everything is Everything

Week 13: Hip Hop and Aesthetics: What is the point of art? Can aesthetic judgments be objective?

Read: **Julius Bailey**: When Apollo and Dionysus Clash: A Nietzschean Perspective on the Work of Kanye West, **Richard W. Miller**: Three Versions of Objectivity: Aesthetic, Moral, and Scientific

Tracks: **Jay Electronica**: Jazzmatazz, So What You Saying; **Andre 3000**: A Day in the Life of Andre Benjamin; **Talib Kweli**: Just Begun; **Mos Def**: Taxi; **Nas**: It Ain't Hard to Tell; **Earl Sweatshirt**: Chum; **The Roots**: Web; **Fugees**: Fu-Gee-La, Ready or Not; **Ghostface Killah**: Nutmeg

Week 14: Hip Hop and Aesthetics: Aesthetics and ethics

Read: **Ted Cohen**: On Consistency in One's Personal Aesthetics, **Berys Gaut**: The Ethical Criticism of Art

Tracks: **Tyler the Creator**: Yonkers; **Trinidad James**: All Gold Everything; **Rocko**: U.O.E.N.O

Week 15: G.O.A.T: Who is the greatest of all time?

Catch up and Conclusion

The final paper is due at the end of the exam period.