

## **7. An Invitation to the Pleasures of Critical Thinking: Dimensions of Truth, Reality, Existence and Knowledge**

Course Instructor – Mr. Thomas Mathew

Course Duration – 60 hours

### **Course Objectives**

- To help participants engage with questions that matter
- To help participants acquire, and apply critical thinking skills to evaluate everyday life situations and make informed choices
- To help learners articulate and express abstract ideas
- To introduce core ideas in philosophy like truth, reality, existence, knowledge, logic, and free will

### **Expected Outcome**

At end of the course students are expected to:

- effectively engage with questions that matter
- use critical thinking skills to analyze the world around and make informed choices
- effectively express complex ideas
- be familiar with the everyday dimensions of ideas like truth, reality, existence, knowledge, logic, and free will

### **Course Introduction**

(5 Hours)

“Think for yourself, or others will think for you without thinking of you.”

Henry David Thoreau

“The main concern of philosophy is to question and understand very common ideas that all of us use every day without thinking about them.”

Thomas Nagel

At one level, philosophy has been perceived as a field of study that a non-elite mind cannot engage with. This course attempts to break this myth, and deals with selected foundational principles of philosophy in its everyday significance in order to develop critical thinking skills. What does it mean to think critically? One starts to develop critical thinking skills by asking questions to oneself and others: questions that emerge from the premise of reason. To ask thoughtful questions, one needs to look beyond his/her mind and critically evaluate the world around. It is assumed that a thinking mind will be in continuous disagreement with itself and the minds around, without which conviction and understanding can only linger forever. The ideological quarrels one picks up in life needs to stem from the ability to critically think, analyse, examine and evaluate realities. The concepts and situations discussed, and the activities conducted in this course envision the development of a sceptic psyche that thrives on asking questions. The course has been designed with the understanding, that the ability to ask thoughtful questions is fundamental to any engaging learning experience.

This course intends to teach the art of disagreement, but for a reason, to know the world a level deeper by engaging with the questions related to everyday human experience, the questions that matter. The skills this course deal with would be helpful while dealing with everyday life situations, given the changing nature of our everyday experiences. It is nearly impossible to navigate through the 21<sup>st</sup> century post-truth world, an information labyrinth, without what it takes to make informed decisions, for which critical thinking is a prerequisite. The course urges the participants to stop thinking with the flow and begin thinking with awareness: awareness about the consequences of the choices.

“An Invitation to the Pleasures of Critical Thinking: Dimensions of Truth, Reality, Existence and Knowledge”, views philosophy as a foundation for making rational enquiries into everyday experiences. In life, new dimensions open up when individuals start questioning what has been told to them by people, establishments, social institutions, and other cultural practices, both orally, and in writing. Why are people often discouraged from asking questions? This course will offer ample space to challenge the existing notions on the act of questioning and would emphasize on the pressing need to question everything before embracing. The readings, writings, discussions, debates, case studies and other activities in this course will allow the participants to study the contemporary significance of the ideas mentioned in each module, become familiar with diverse worldviews and perhaps approach life situations with more clarity. The ideas this course deal with i.e., truth, reality, existence, knowledge, ethics, logic, and morality are not isolated compartments of human experience, on the other hand they exist complementing each other and are inevitable for arriving at informed decisions. The scope of free will in private and public spaces is also determined by the perspectives individuals develop towards these ideas. “An Invitation to the Pleasures of Critical Thinking: Dimensions of Truth, Reality, Existence and Knowledge”, envisages, education as an edifice that is built on the rock-solid foundation of reason. The course also looks at the fragments of human Self and is designed to offer an immersive experience to the participants.

## **Course Modules**

### **Module I**

#### **From Truth to many truths and post-truth**

**(10 hours)**

What is the difference between Truth and a truth? How do they determine the fate of right and wrong? Does truth vary according to context?

Individual perception on truth plays a significant role in defining the character of an informed decision. The scope for questioning or reason is nil when the mind exclusively deals with singular Truth. This module looks at the idea of truth as an everyday reality and deals with ideas related to human journey from Truth to many truths. Lack of exposure into what other minds think will restrict the scope of critical enquiries and the act of making inclusive choices.

Considering this, the module also looks at popular worldviews that define the boundaries of right and wrong, and how individual perspectives on what is true and what is not, influence the approach to free will. The activities will emphasize the fact that, individuals need to stop taking the established knowledge system for granted and begin the practice of arriving at it through independent thinking: by looking at an issue through diverse lenses.

Relative truth vs absolute truth

The Allegory of the Cave - Plato

The Outline of Intellectual Rubbish – Bertrand Russell

21 Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Extracts) - Yuval Noah Harari

### **Module II**

#### **What is knowledge and how it is created?**

**(10 hours)**

Is there any difference between knowledge and information? Knowledge becomes knowledge when it passes through the lens of legitimation comprised of factors like belief, truth and justification. Power that percolates down from top to bottom in a society and the discourses produced out of such power equations are instrumental in producing what is perceived as knowledge. This module, through activities that involve selected philosophical concepts would look into various dimensions of knowledge, both traditional and contemporary. It tries to respond to the key questions with regard to the production and dissemination of knowledge. The module also examines the everyday aspects and various social agencies that influence human perception and the process of meaning making.

## Objectivity vs Subjectivity

How do we know anything: Chapter II by Thomas Nagel

Agrippan Trilemma

### Module III

#### **I think, therefore I am, and do you think so?**

**(10 Hours)**

Human life enters the terrain of unresolved confusion, the moment one starts asking questions like who am I? Why am I here? And what is the purpose of me being here? The very question of purpose in human life has been addressed by different schools of thought within the broad canvas of philosophy. The paradigm of existence took a new turn with Rene Descartes proposing, I think therefore I am and the debates that emerged henceforth. Undeniably, every object exists, and wouldn't it be curious to examine if there is any difference between living and existing? What is the role of the Self in determining the course of individual existence? How does the Self take shape? The module examines the role of human being in the world by analyzing everyday human experiences, and key debates that have taken place in the realm of existence and experience.

I think, therefore I am – Rene Descartes

I am, therefore I think- Soren Kierkegaard

Other views on the idea of existence

The Myth of Sisyphus

There's No such Thing as Free Will: But we're better off believing in it anyway-Stephen Cave

### Module IV

#### **The real is the rational, the rational is the real**

**(10 Hours)**

How would reality look like if human mind does not apply reason? Is the idea of reality a social construct made possible through words? According to Dr. Radhakrishnan, philosophy is a logical inquiry into the nature of reality. Is what we see through our eyes real or is that just our own reality? Is it true that the world functions like how we see it? or is our perception just one among many? This module would encourage the participants to look at the existing notions of reality and the way each one is constructed and perceived. It systematically examines the varied dimensions of reality through selected readings, viewings and individual experiences.

Negative Capability – John Keats

The Blind Men and the Elephant – Jataka Tale

Three Marks of Existence in Buddhist Philosophy

The Rational Alone is Real – Hegel

### Module V

#### **Why Think Critically?**

**(15 Hours)**

Mere accumulation of knowledge by itself does not lead to understanding and conviction, but critical evaluation of what the eyes see help in achieving a polished vision. We live in a world where the human mind is flooded with ideas and information, yet the room for independent choices is shrinking drastically. Whether we like it or not, as social animals, all of us need to make decisions at various junctures in our everyday life. It is also important to remind oneself that the choices made at various junctures of life play a significant role in defining the highs and lows of one's life. The decisions made without critically evaluating multiple realities can invite disasters. It is desirable that one develops the knack to navigate through the chaotic world by making informed decisions. Conscious decision-making requires a few steps, such as gathering knowledge, validating them after analyzing relevance, and arriving at individual decisions only after evaluating the possible consequences. This course does not offer readymade solutions or answers to everyday problems, but emphasizes on the need to think before making decisions. It aims to give a sharp knife that helps in identifying what one needs by eliminating the rest.

The Art of Reasoning: An Introduction to Logic and Critical Thinking – David Kelly (Extracts)  
Hegel's Dialectics  
Critical Thinking through films

### **Assessment Activities**

#### **CIA – 100 Marks**

- Identify any five questions that you would like to deal with during the course and share them with the instructor in the first week, the instructor will integrate the questions into classroom discussions. By the end of the course, students are expected to prepare brief write-ups of about 500 words on each of the questions - 20 Marks
- Beyond engaging in reading and writing activities, student participation in classroom discussions will be evaluated for 10 marks.
- Select a film or a scene from a film and explore the idea of multiple realities. Students are expected to make a presentation in class followed by a Q&A session where other members of the class would ask questions based on the presentation - 10 marks
- Group Activity – The class will be divided into groups of five each. Each group is expected to prepare a critical thinking course with module description and activities – 20 Marks
- Group Activity – The class will be divided into groups of five members each –During one session, two groups will participate in a debate, ensuring participation from all members of the team - 10 Marks
- Select any short story and rewrite it from another character's perspective, preferably an underrepresented one - 20 Marks
- Students will be asked to select any global or international issue and write an opinion piece after critically examining it– 10 marks

### **Recommended Reading**

1. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy
2. Critical Thinking: An Introduction – Alec Fisher
3. Asking the Right Questions: A Guide to Critical Thinking – M. Neil Browne and Stuart M Keeley
4. Weaponized Lies: How to Think Critically in the Post-Truth Era – Daniel Levitin
5. Reality: A Very Short Introduction – Jan Westerhoff

