

**DRAFT**  
**Philosophy for Wicked Problems**

Winter 2025 Graduate Course in Philosophy

Western University

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**Description:** Introduced in 1973 by design theorists Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber, the concept of 'wicked problems' highlights societal issues that are difficult to define and solve due to their complex and intricate nature. While initially introduced in a social policy context, this notion has been used to describe a wide range of ongoing challenges, including public health, sustainability, climate change, or biological conservation. The aim of this course is two-fold: 1) Reflect on the nature of wicked problems, critically assessing the meaning and adequacy of this concept for characterizing complex problematic collective situations with loose boundaries and elusive solutions, and 2) highlight the role of philosophy in tackling these problems. We will approach this second goal with a somewhat practically oriented mindset. Looking at specific cases of wicked problems, we will ask what philosophical perspectives and tools could be particularly useful. Short of becoming an expert on one given problem, anyone taking this course will become better equipped to explore and promote the relevance of philosophy in addressing some of the most challenging problems of our time. As such, this is a great course for students interested in joining or launching a research project at the Rotman Institute.

**Format:** This course is entirely discussion-based and requires full and ongoing engagement from all students. Topics and readings will be briefly introduced during class, but there will be no lectures or formal academic presentations. Students are expected to have read the materials and should be ready to engage in structured, inclusive, and constructive discussions meant to push our reflection further. A subset of analytical tools and problems will be proposed by the instructor for the first half of the semester. During the second half, in consultation with the instructor, students will be asked to introduce their own case studies and related philosophical tools. Although this is a course in philosophy, students are encouraged to also consult and share reading materials coming from a variety of sources and disciplines.

**The final grade will be based on the following scheme:**

1. Preparing and leading a discussion (20)
2. Mid-term essay (25)
3. Final essay (35)
4. Participation (20)

**List of Themes & Preliminary Schedule**

Weeks 1-2	Wicked Problems: Meaning and Criticisms
Weeks 3-4	Survey of Analytical tools: Field Philosophy, Actor Network Theory, Controversy Mapping, Boundary Objects, Knowledge Co-production, Pluralism, Relationalism
Weeks 5-7	Problems: Sustainability, Managing Socio-Ecological Systems, Synthetic Biology
Weeks 8-12	Problems: TBD based on students' interest.

## Resources (TBC)

[1-] <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/west/reader.action?docID=4717251&ppg=130>

[2-]

[https://assets.ctfassets.net/4wrp2um278k7/2kkRQGdnHkcdrvBgCS4Lqz/e24283589b1f8ec1f405f91a5fa8b510/TOC\\_and\\_Preface\\_Wicked\\_Philosophy.pdf](https://assets.ctfassets.net/4wrp2um278k7/2kkRQGdnHkcdrvBgCS4Lqz/e24283589b1f8ec1f405f91a5fa8b510/TOC_and_Preface_Wicked_Philosophy.pdf)

[3] - <https://academic.oup.com/policyandsociety/article/38/2/315/6407924>

[4] - <https://academic.oup.com/policyandsociety/article/38/2/180/6407919>

[5] - <https://academic.oup.com/policyandsociety/article/38/2/167/6407923>

[6] - <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9847445/>

[7] - <https://direct.mit.edu/posc/article/28/4/482/97500/Mess-in-Science-and-Wicked-Problems>

[8] - <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A489081746/AONE?u=lond95336&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=27ef13c9>