

Introduction to Philosophy: Rationality and Religious Belief

PHIL 001G (W)
Syllabus – Fall 2024

Important Information:

Instructor: Rosanna Picascia

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Day/Time/Location: MWF, 10:30am-11:20pm, Science Center 145

Office Hours: Wednesdays 2pm-4pm, Beardsley 210

Course Description:

This course provides a cross-cultural introduction to some of the central questions and arguments in the philosophy of religion, engaging with both western and non-western philosophical traditions, historical and contemporary authors, and theistic and non-theistic perspectives. In particular, the course focuses on the following questions: What makes religious belief rational? What have been the central arguments for and against God's existence? Does morality have a foundation without God? What sort of problem does evil and suffering present for both theists and nontheists? Do people have essential selves that constitute their identity over time or is the self an illusion? In contemplating these questions, students will have the opportunity to reexamine their own views and assumptions about religion in dialogue with great thinkers from diverse cultural, historical, and linguistic backgrounds.

Course Goals:

(1) To learn how to read, think, and write about complex philosophical problems in a way that is both personally engaging and academically rigorous; (2) To learn how to construct a productive conversation among philosophers from diverse backgrounds; and (3) To learn how to converse with one's peers about seemingly intractable problems in philosophy.

Course Readings:

You do not need to purchase any course materials. All the course materials will be available through Moodle.

Assignments:

Papers

You will write **two** 5-6 page papers (double-spaced, 12-pt font). Each paper will follow the traditional philosophical format: presenting and explaining a philosopher's argument on a particular philosophical question, anticipating objections to the argument, and developing your own argument in response.

Each paper will have two parts: a *first draft* and a *final draft*. You will have two opportunities to receive feedback on your first draft. First, one class day will be dedicated to a peer review workshop, where you will meet in small groups, present the central argument of your paper, and receive critical feedback from your peers. Second, you will meet with your course WA for additional feedback. You will revise your paper in light of the feedback received from both your WA and peers.

Three short writing assignments

Throughout the semester, you will complete three short (i.e. no more than 1 page) “skill building” writing assignments. Each of the assignments isolate and focus on one skill that is essential to writing philosophy papers. The assignments will be posted on Moodle and each will be available for and completed within a 24-hour period.

Course engagement

I define course engagement as the completion of any concrete course-related participation activity. Examples of course engagement include (but are not limited to) the following: participating in small group work, attentive listening, asking questions in class, contributing to class discussion, and coming to office hours.

Your grade will be based on 1) the completion and submission of small group activities centered on constructing or responding to arguments and 2) your own documentation and self-assessment of your course engagement. Regarding the first component, there will be weekly small group activities that will be collected and assessed for completion. Regarding the second component, three times during the semester, you will document your class engagement by filling out a self-assessment rubric.

Grading:

- A. Paper #1: 30% of grade*
- B. Paper #2: 30% of grade*
- C. Three short writing assignments: 20% of grade*
- D. Course engagement: 20%*

Laptop and phone policy:

Laptops (and phones) are not permitted because they are bad for the classroom environment. The best evidence available suggests that laptops distract from learning, not only for the laptop users, but additionally, for those around them. Exceptions will be made based on need (see Accommodations Statement below).

Printing primary reading material:

Since the course material is available online or in pdf format, you will need to print out the **primary reading material**, which we will reference in class. Supplemental reading does not

need to be printed. Instead, make note of anything from the supplemental reading that you wish to discuss in class and bring those notes to class.

There is no charge for printing. Here is a list of printers available in public computing areas and residence halls- <https://kb.swarthmore.edu/display/PRIN/Printing+for+Students>

Accommodations Statement:

If you believe you need accommodations for a disability or a chronic medical condition, please contact Student Disability Services via email at studentdisabilityservices@swarthmore.edu to arrange an appointment to discuss your needs. As appropriate, the office will issue students with documented disabilities or medical conditions a formal Accommodations Letter. Since accommodations require early planning and are not retroactive, please contact Student Disability Services as soon as possible. For details about the accommodations process, visit the Student Disability Services website. You are also welcome to contact me privately to discuss your academic needs. However, all disability-related accommodations must be arranged, in advance, through Student Disability Services.

Tentative Course Calendar

Week 1 (9/2) Introduction to the course

9/4 (W): Overview of course content; in-class activity

First assignment: Read syllabus by next class

9/6 (F): Finish up in-class activity; discuss syllabus

UNIT 1: Rational Religious Belief

Week 2 (9/9): Is it wrong to believe on insufficient evidence?

Required primary reading:

1. William Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief"
2. William James, "The Will to Believe"

Optional material:

Video: Thomas Donaldson, "[Epistemology: The Will to Believe](#)" [Wireless Philosophy]

Week 3 (9/16): Can religious experience justify religious belief?

Required primary reading:

Al-Ghazali, *The Rescuer from Error in Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings* (ed. and trans. Muhammad Ali Khalidi). Read the Introduction to the text (pp. xxiv-xxix), pp. 59-64, and pp. 76-98.

Optional background:

1. John Ramsey, "al-Ghazālī's Dream Argument," *1000-Word Philosophy: An Introductory Anthology*, July 25, 2020.
2. Podcast: Peter Adamson, "[Special Delivery: al-Ghazali](#)," in *The History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps*

Week 4 (9/23): Can religious testimony justify religious belief?

Required primary reading:

- 1) Linda Zagzebski, "A Modern Defense of Religious Authority"
- 2) Dharmakīrti's *Commentary on the Sources of Knowledge* (PVSV ad. PV 1.214-1.219). The passages we are reading concern whether scripture is a source of knowledge. Translated in John Dunne's *Foundations of Dharmakīrti's Philosophy*, Appendix 4, pp. 361-368.

Helpful background for Dharmakīrti reading:

Jonathan Stoltz, "Testimony," [Chapter 5, *Illuminating the Mind*, **only sections 5.0 and 5.1**]

DUE: Tuesday 9/24 on Moodle by 9AM

[Short writing assignment #1: Argument reconstruction.](#) Opens on Moodle Monday 9/23 9AM.

UNIT 2: Arguments on God's Existence

Week 5 (9/30): Should we "Bet" on God?

Required primary reading:

- 1) Pascal's "[The Wager](#)"
- 2) Gary Gutting, "[Pascal's Wager 2.0](#)," *New York Times*, September 15, 2015.

Optional material:

Video: Susana Rinard, "[Pascal's Wager](#)," [Wireless Philosophy]

DUE: Friday 10/4 on Moodle before class time

[First draft of paper #1.](#) Friday's class will be a paper workshop.

Week 6 (10/7): Is the universe designed?

Required primary reading:

Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Parts 1-5

Required commentary:

Hans Halvorson, "[Fine-Tuning Does Not Imply a Fine Tuner](#)," *Nautilus*, January 2017

Fall Break: October 14th - October 18th

Week 7 (10/21): The cosmological argument, limited theism, and "true religion"

Primary reading:

Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Parts 6-12 (you can skim parts 6-8)

Optional commentary:

Mary-Jane Rubenstein, "Cosmic Pantheism," *Nautilus*, January 2017

DUE: Tuesday 10/22 on Moodle by 9AM

Short writing assignment #2: Raising a targeted objection. Opens on Moodle Monday 10/21 9AM

UNIT 3: Goodness, Objective Morality, and the Problem of Evil

Week 8 (10/28): What is “Goodness” and can it exist without God?

Primary reading:

1. Plato, “[Euthyphro](#)”
2. Louise Antony, “Good Minus God,” *NYT*, 12/18/2011

Optional background:

Video: Stephen Darwall, “God and Morality, [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#) [Wireless philosophy]

DUE: Monday 10/28 in class.

Final (graded) draft of paper #1. Physical copy must be submitted in class.

Week 9 (11/4): Is human nature good or bad?

Primary reading:

1. Mengzi (Mencius), *The Mengzi*. In *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy* (eds. Philip J. Ivanhoe & Bryan W. Van Norden). Selections from chapter 3 [1A7, 2A6, 4A17, 6A1, 6A2, 6A6, 6A7, 6A8, 7A15, 7B31]
2. Xunzi, *Xunzi*. In *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy* (eds. Philip J. Ivanhoe & Bryan W. Van Norden). Selections from chapter 6 [Chapter 1: An Exhortation to Learning, Chapter 19: Discourse on Ritual, and Chapter 23: Human Nature is Bad]

Optional material (these short videos are helpful):

- 1) Video: Matthew Walker, “[Mengzi on Human Nature](#),” [Wireless Philosophy]
- 2) Video: David Wong, “Xunzi on Human Nature,” [Wireless Philosophy]

Week 10 (11/11): The problem of evil

Primary reading:

1. Louise Antony, “No Good Reason—Exploring the Problem of Evil”
2. Marilyn McCord Adams, “Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God,”
3. Podcast: [Marilyn McCord Adams on Evil](#) (Philosophy Bites)

UNIT 4: Arguments for and against the Self

Weeks 11 (11/18) Self and the problem of suffering

Required reading:

Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy*, “Chapter 2: Empty Persons”

***Note: The primary reading for this week (selections of the Buddha’s discourses, i.e. *suttas*) is contained within Siderits’s chapter. In particular, pay attention to (and print out) the selection from the *Anatta-lakkhaṇa Sutta* (pp. 51-52) and the *Milindapañha* (pp. 67-71 and 77-78).

Optional background:

Amber Carpenter, *Indian Buddhist Philosophy*, Chapter 1: The Buddha's Suffering

Week 12 (11/25): Catch up

No class on Monday- I will be at a conference.

Wednesday's class will be dedicated to any catch up.

DUE: Monday 11/25 on Moodle before class time

First draft of paper #2 (paper workshop will be held Monday 12/2)

Week 13 (12/2): A Nyāya Challenge: Inference to the Self

Primary reading:

Dasti, Matthew, and Phillips, Stephen (trans.). *The Nyāyasūtra: Selections from Early Commentaries*. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 2017. [Chapter 4: Self, pp. 74-85]

Required background:

Watson, Alex. Self or No-self? The Ātman Debate in Classical Indian Philosophy. In Tuske (ed.) *Indian Epistemology and Metaphysics*. Oxford: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015. [only read Section 1: Nyāya versus Buddhism].

Optional commentary:

Chadha, Monima. "The Self in Early Nyāya: A Minimal Conclusion." *Asian Philosophy*, 23:1 (2013), pp. 24-42.

DUE: Tuesday 12/3 on Moodle by 9AM

Short writing assignment #3: Responding to objections. Opens on Moodle Monday 12/2 9AM

Week 14 (12/9): Catch up

Final paper due Thursday, Dec. 19th by 5pm

Drop off physical copy at my office in Beardsley #210. Early papers welcome!