Philosophical Approaches to Religion
Prof. Jeffrey Dunn

Spring 2009
MWF 12:20-1:10
Bartlett 206
UMass, Amherst

Office: 367 Bartlett
Office Hours: Th 10-11, by appt.
Email: jdunn@philos.umass.edu
Homepage: http://people.umass.edu/jdunn

Description

In this course, we will address philosophical issues and questions that arise when one thinks about some of the doctrines of the major Western religions. To address these questions and issues we will be reading both historical and contemporary work in the analytic tradition. Some of our topics include:

The Nature of God: What is God like? What are his attributes?

Omnipotence: What is it to be all-powerful? Is it logically consistent to hold that there is an all-powerful being?

God and Morality: What is the relation between God and morality? Does God make things right or wrong by his commands?

Omniscience: What is it to be all-knowing? Could a being really know everything? If God has perfect knowledge of what we will do, can we still have free-will?

Belief in God: What is it to believe something because of faith? Is it acceptable to believe based on faith, or must we have evidence for our beliefs?

Miracles: What is a miracle? Do we have good reason to believe that miracles have occurred? If so, do they provide us with evidence that God exists?

The Teleological Argument: Does the existence of a well-organized world tell in favor of a supernatural designer of the world? Does the fact that the laws of nature appear finetuned give us reason to believe in a supernatural designer?

The Problem of Evil: If God exists, then why is there so much suffering and pain? Does this give us reason to believe that there is no God?

It is worth noting that this is a course that will take a philosophical approach to religion. It is not a course in comparative religion, the history of religion, or the psychology of religion. We will not be asking what the religious beliefs of this or that group are, or how they differ from the beliefs of this other group, or what cultural circumstances led them to adopt their religious views. Though these questions may be interesting in their own right, they are not our questions. We will be interested in assessing the coherence and plausibility of some of the main claims of the major religious traditions.

Text

*Philosophy of Religion: The Big Questions,* Stump & Murray (eds.)

(Additional readings will be made available online.)
Course Requirements

Take-Home Exams
There are two take-home exams:
Exam 1: Due 3/6
Exam 2: Due 5/4

Midterm and Final Exam
There are two in-class exams, one near midterm, and the other during finals week. Both these exams will consist of multiple choice and short answer questions.
Midterm: 3/23
Final: see University schedule

Presentations
At the end of the semester, each student will participate in a group presentation. There will be 12 groups with each group containing at least 4 members (two groups will potentially have 5 members). Each group will be assigned an article, and will give a 15 minute presentation that focuses on the arguments in this article. For more details about the presentation, follows the Group Presentation link on the course website. During presentations, attendance will be taken every day. Failure to attend class during presentations will negatively affect your attendance/participation grade.

Other Requirements
You should keep up with the readings, attend class, and participate in discussions. To facilitate this there will be occasional short reading quizzes and in-class assignments. Consistent with university policy, you may be dropped from the class if absences are too frequent.
You should also make arrangements to meet with me if you are falling behind or are confused about something.

Things You Can Expect From Me
I will give clear and prompt feedback on your work.
I will assist you in choosing a paper topic and outside sources.
I will be available outside class to discuss the course material or for extra help as needed.

Grading
Take-Home Exams (2): 35% (17.5% each)
Midterm Exam: 20%
Final Exam: 25%
Presentation: 15%
Participation/Attendance: 5%
Special Considerations

This Institution is committed to providing equal access to academic programs and university-administered activities and reasonable modifications/accommodations to students with disabilities in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, as amended in 2008. Any student needing special accommodations due to a disability should contact Student Disability Services. It is the responsibility of each student to discuss implementation of approved modifications/accommodations with each faculty member and/or staff member within one week of the date of receiving a modification/accommodation approval memo or within the first two weeks of the academic semester.

Academic Integrity

Academic integrity is very important, and violations are serious offenses, which I take very seriously. There is a clear Academic Integrity Policy that can be found here:

[http://www.umass.edu/dean_students/codeofconduct/acadhonesty/](http://www.umass.edu/dean_students/codeofconduct/acadhonesty/)

It is your responsibility to read the university policy. If you are unclear about what constitutes a violation of academic integrity, it is your responsibility to contact me with any questions so that you are clear about it. Ignorance is not an excuse. The *minimum* penalty for violations of Academic Integrity is a 0 on the relevant assignment and a further reduction in your overall grade.

Tentative Reading Schedule

**Introduction**

1/26 Introduction

**The Divine Attributes**

2/4 Omnipotence Aquinas, “From *Summa Contra Gentiles*”
2/6 Omnipotence Savage, “The Paradox of the Stone”
2/9 Omnipotence Mavrodes, “Some Puzzles Concerning Omnipotence”
2/11 Goodness Plato, excerpt from *Euthyphro*
2/13 Goodness Kretzmann, “Abraham, Isaac, and Euthyphro”
2/18 Freedom & Foreknowledge Plantinga, “On Ockham’s Way Out” (section 1)
2/20 Freedom & Foreknowledge Plantinga, “On Ockham’s Way Out” (sections 2-4)
2/23 Freedom & Foreknowledge Plantinga, “On Ockham’s Way Out” (re-read)
2/25 Freedom & Foreknowledge Nozick, “Newcomb’s Problem”
2/27 Freedom & Foreknowledge Nozick, “Newcomb’s Problem”
# Knowledge of God

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3/2</td>
<td>Pascal’s Wager</td>
<td>Pascal, “From Pensees”\Hajek, “Pascal’s Wager”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>Pascal’s Wager</td>
<td>Pascal, “From Pensees”\Hajek, “Pascal’s Wager”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/9</td>
<td>Pascal’s Wager</td>
<td>Pascal, “From Pensees”\Hajek, “Pascal’s Wager”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/11</td>
<td>James/Clifford</td>
<td>Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief”\James, “The Will to Believe”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/13</td>
<td>James/Clifford</td>
<td>van Inwagen, “It is Wrong, Everywhere, Always, and for Anyone, to Believe Anything upon Insufficient Evidence”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/25</td>
<td>James/Clifford</td>
<td>van Inwagen, “It is Wrong, Everywhere, Always, and for Anyone, to Believe Anything upon Insufficient Evidence”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/3</td>
<td>Group Presentation Work</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# Arguments For And Against God’s Existence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4/10</td>
<td>Fine-Tuning</td>
<td>Paley, “The Wathch and the Watchmaker”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/13</td>
<td>Fine-Tuning</td>
<td>Dawkins, “God’s Utility Function”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/15</td>
<td>Fine-Tuning</td>
<td>Schlesinger, “From New Perspectives on Old-time Religion”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/17</td>
<td>Fine-Tuning</td>
<td>Monton, “God, Fine-Tuning, and the Problem of Old Evidence”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/21</td>
<td>Problem of Evil</td>
<td>Al-Ghazali, “From Theodicy in Islamic Thought”\Voltaire, excerpt from Candide (Ch V)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/22</td>
<td>Problem of Evil</td>
<td>Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/24</td>
<td>Problem of Evil</td>
<td>Gaon, “From The Book of Doctrines and Belief”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/27</td>
<td>Problem of Evil</td>
<td>Lewis, “Evil For Freedoms Sake?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/29</td>
<td>Problem of Evil</td>
<td>van Inwagen, “The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Student Presentations

5/1 Groups 1-3
5/4 Groups 4-6
5/6 Groups 7-9
5/8 Groups 10-12
5/11 Wrap-Up