

Philosophical Approaches to Religion

Prof. Jeffrey Dunn

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MWF 12:20-1:10
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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/

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	–
1/30	The Idea of God	Rowe, “The Idea of God”
2/2	The Idea of God	Rowe, “The Idea of God”

The Divine Attributes

2/4	Omnipotence	Aquinas, “From <i>Summa Contra Gentiles</i> ”
2/6	Omnipotence	Savage, “The Paradox of the Stone” Mavrodes, “Some Puzzles Concerning Omnipotence”
2/9	Omnipotence	Savage, “The Paradox of the Stone” Mavrodes, “Some Puzzles Concerning Omnipotence”
2/11	Goodnes	Plato, excerpt from <i>Euthyphro</i>
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

3/2	Pascal's Wager	Pascal, "From <i>Pensees</i> " Hajek, "Pascal's Wager"
3/4	Pascal's Wager	Pascal, "From <i>Pensees</i> " Hajek, "Pascal's Wager"
3/9	Pascal's Wager	Pascal, "From <i>Pensees</i> " Hajek, "Pascal's Wager"
3/11	James/Clifford	Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief" James, "The Will to Believe"
3/13	James/Clifford	van Inwagen, "It is Wrong, Everywhere, Always, and for Anyone, to Believe Anything upon Insufficient Evidence"
3/25	James/Clifford	van Inwagen, "It is Wrong, Everywhere, Always, and for Anyone, to Believe Anything upon Insufficient Evidence"
3/27	Basic Belief	Plantinga, "Warranted Belief in God" Plantinga, "Belief Without Argument"
3/30	Basic Belief	Martin, "Belief Without Argument: A Critique" Hasker, "The Case of the Intellectually Sophisticated Theist"
4/1	Hume & Miracles	Hume, "Of Miracles" Dawid & Gillies, "A Bayesian Analysis of Hume's Argument Concerning Miracles"
4/3	Group Presentation Work Day	–
4/6	Hume & Miracles	More, "From <i>A Dialogue Concerning Heresies</i> " Cover, "Miracles and Christian Theism"
4/8	Hume & Miracles	More, "From <i>A Dialogue Concerning Heresies</i> " Cover, "Miracles and Christian Theism"

Arguments For And Against God's Existence

4/10	Fine-Tuning	Paley, "The Watch and the Watchmaker"
4/13	Fine-Tuning	Dawkins, "God's Utility Function"
4/15	Fine-Tuning	Schlesinger, "From <i>New Perspectives on Old-time Religion</i> "
4/17	Fine-Tuning	Monton, "God, Fine-Tuning, and the Problem of Old Evidence"
4/21	Problem of Evil	Al-Ghazali, "From <i>Theodicy in Islamic Thought</i> " Voltaire, excerpt from <i>Candide</i> (Ch V)
4/22	Problem of Evil	Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism"
4/24	Problem of Evil	Gaon, "From <i>The Book of Doctrines and Belief</i> "
4/27	Problem of Evil	Lewis, "Evil For Freedom's Sake?"
4/29	Problem of Evil	van Inwagen, "The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil"

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