

Syllabus for *The Philosophy of Religion*

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Introduction

Welcome to Philosophy XXX, The Philosophy of Religion. In this class, we'll examine what a *god* is, whether there *are* any, and what, if anything, we should learn from the presence or absence of religious *experience*.

Course Goals

Students will acquire proficiency in some of the basic issues in the philosophy of religion, especially regarding the nature, existence, and experience of God(s). Students will be encouraged to try out their own answers to central questions in the field, and to think creatively while appreciating influential answers that have come before. Students will gain confidence participating in conversations with grace and sensitivity on the one hand, with clarity and rigor on the other.

Students will continue to develop the general philosophical skill of writing arguments clearly and concisely. Students in this course should already be familiar with the art of raising objections and counterexamples. By the end of the course, they should have made progress in thinking two or three moves ahead—not simply, “what’s an objection to this view?” but “how could this view handle this objection?” “What modifications would preserve as much insight as possible from the original view?”

Required Materials

You should bring a composition notebook, a writing utensil, and a copy of the day’s reading to class every day.

There are three required texts for the course:

Pojman, Louis P. & Rea, Michael (2015). *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, 7th Edition (Anthology)

Mackie, J.L. (1983). *The Miracle of Theism*, Oxford University Press. (Miracle)

Our course reader, which contains other article-length readings. (Reader)

Bring a hard copy of the relevant text with you to class every day.¹

Course Readings: General Description

Our class is organized into five units, two of which are pairs. Before we can ask whether or not a god exists, we've got to know what we're looking for. Our first unit, *What's A God?*, surveys a handful of important answers to this question (though, admittedly, it does not consider all of them). Our second unit, *Puzzles About Classical Divine Attributes*, consider problems and potential solutions for the classical, monotheistic conception of God—the conception of God which, for better or worse, has been most influential in analytic philosophy over the last century.

Our second pair of questions address whether or not any gods exist. The third unit introduces three traditional arguments for the existence of God: the cosmological argument, the argument from design, and the fine-tuning argument. The fourth unit focuses on the problem of evil.

Our final unit focuses on divine speakings and silences. Many cite as reason for their beliefs a direct experience of God: others wonder why, if God exists, God doesn't manifest godself through obvious experiences to everyone. We also consider human speech aimed at God.

Course Readings: Schedule

Our course is divided into five units.

UNIT ONE: WHAT'S A GOD? (5)

Day 1: Selections from Ancient Greek Philosophers (Anthology)

Syllabus (Reader)

Day 2: McFague, Sally: God and the World (Anthology)

Day 3: Sen, Sushanta: The Vedic-Upanisadic Conception of Brahman (The Highest God) (Anthology)

Day 4: Ives, Christopher: Emptiness: Soteriology and Ethics in Mahayana Buddhism. (Anthology)

Day 5; Anselm: *Monologion* 1-2, 15-17 (Reader)

Leftow, Brian: "Anselm's Perfect Being Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm*. (Reader)

UNIT TWO: PUZZLES ABOUT CLASSICAL DIVINE ATTRIBUTES (4)

¹ Get in touch with me or Disability Services as appropriate if you need an alternative way to interact with the text during class.

Day 6: Aquinas: Is God's Power Limited? (Anthology)
Zimmerman, Dean: Defining Omnipotence (Reader)

Day 7: Pike, Nelson: God's Foreknowledge and Human Free Will Are Incompatible.
(Anthology)

Day 8: Plantinga, Alvin: God's Foreknowledge and Human Free Will Are Compatible.
(Anthology)

Day 9: Scrutton, Anastasia: Divine Passibility: God and Emotion. (Reader)

Day 10: *Exam 1*

UNIT THREE: ARGUMENTS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD (6)

Day 11: Excerpts from *Nyāyakusumāñjali* I,4 (Reader)
Excerpts from Avicenna (Reader)

Day 12: Clarke, Samuel: The Cosmological Argument (Anthology)

Day 13: Mackie, J.L.: Cosmological Arguments (chapter 5 of *Miracles*)

Day 14: Paley, William: The Watch and the Watchmaker. (Anthology)

Day 15: Hume, David: A Critique of the Design Argument. (Anthology)

Day 16: Collins, Robin: A Scientific Argument for the Existence of God. (Anthology)

UNIT FOUR: THE PROBLEM OF EVIL (8)

Day 17: Mackie, J.L. "The Problem of Evil" (Chapter 9 of *Miracles*)

Day 18: Rowe, William: The Inductive Argument from Evil against the Existence of God.
(Anthology)

Dostoevsky, Fyodor: Rebellion (Anthology)

Day 19: Jantzen, Grace: Whose Problem is the Problem of Evil? (Anthology)

Day 20: Plantinga, Alvin: The Free Will Defense. (Anthology)
Excerpts from Augustine's *De Libero Arbitrio* (Reader)

Day 21: Hick, John: Evil and Soul-Making. (Anthology)

Day 22: Lebens, Sam & Goldschmidt, Tyron: The Promise of a New Past (Reader)

Day 23: Adams, Marilyn McCord: Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God. (Anthology)

Day 24: Gäb, Sebastian: Why Do We Suffer? Buddhism and the Problem of Evil (Reader)

Day 25: *Exam 2*

UNIT FIVE: DIVINE SPEAKINGS AND SILENCES (5)

Day 26: Endo, Shusaku: Excerpts from *Silence* (Reader)
Schellenberg, J.L.: Divine Hiddenness Justifies Atheism. (Anthology)

Day 27: Rea, Michael: Divine Hiddenness, Divine Silence. (Anthology)

Day 28: Selections of Mystical Experiences. (Anthology)
Alston, William P.: Perceiving God. (Anthology)

Day 29: Kleinschmidt, Shieva: Atheistic Prayer (Reader)

Day 30: Chiang, Ted: Hell is the Absence of God (Reader)

Day of Final: *Exam 3*

Expectations and Assessments

It is expected that you will carefully read the texts before class and contribute to discussion during class. The overall length of reading per class will never exceed 30 pages, but those pages should be read closely.

Apart from your contributions to discussions in class, your reading of the material will be assessed by (a) random spot-checks on your journals and (b) exams at the end of each major unit. The exams are not cumulative.

You are also expected to produce a writing project during the semester. You will be expected to complete various stages of the writing project at checkpoints throughout the course.

Attendance

Attendance is mandatory. This class is based on discussion, and when you miss class, you miss an integral part of the course (and rob us of your contributions as well!). I will take attendance at the beginning of every class.

Barring extreme circumstance, excused absences will never be granted if they are requested after the start time of a class period. It's your obligation to request an excused absence before missing it.

Repeated absences can result in a failure to pass the course.

Journal

In this class, we'll use journals to help us process the reading material. There should be a journal entry for each class day for which reading was assigned. Your journal should be brought to class each day in the form of a composition notebook. Each journal entry must include:

- 1) The date of the reading
- 2) The name of the article(s)
- 3) A sticky passage from the readings—a passage you had trouble understanding, or where you think the author might not be maximally clear. Actually write out the passage—slowing down to think about each word is a helpful way to begin to understand a sticky passage.
- 4) A question or objection that you have in response to the reading. Your questions don't need to be longer than a paragraph, but I expect them to be reasonably detailed and to show engagement with the reading.
- 5) A question or comment that another student asked during the discussion in class that you found insightful, along with the other student's name.
- 6) Elements 1-5 should be clearly labeled.

This is what is required in the journals, but I strongly recommend that you also use it to take other notes that may be useful to you as you read and as we discuss the readings in class.

About three or four times during the semester, I will randomly collect the journals to check that they are being completed in good faith and to assign a grade. I will also sometimes ask students to share their sticky passages or questions/objections during class.

(If there's a reason that handwritten notes are not feasible for you, please talk to me and we'll find an alternative.)

Exams

For the exams, several of the readings from the relevant unit will be selected. Each selected reading will have three questions: (a) an exegetical question to test basic comprehension of the paper, (b) a question to test understanding that asks you to engage with a new argument or idea not discussed in class and relate it to one of our readings, and (c) a question that falls in the middle (i.e. a more complicated exegetical question or a question that tests a more basic level of understanding). You will have some (limited but significant) choice over which subset of the passages to answer questions about. But you must answer every question for any passage that you choose to engage. E.g., you may choose between answering the questions on Aquinas or Avicenna, but you can't choose to answer just *some* of the questions on Aquinas and just *some* of the questions on Avicenna. (I will show you a sample question set before the first exam.)

Writing Project

For the writing project, you will be asked to engage with a topic that goes beyond our syllabus. You may choose to write on any of the questions below. If you'd rather write on a different topic, let me know: we can meet and agree on a well-constructed question.

1. **God and Time:** "God does not exist in space so God cannot exist in time." Discuss.
2. **Testimony and Miracles:** Could it be rational, merely on the basis of testimony, to believe that a miracle had occurred?
3. **Skeptical Theism:** "We shouldn't expect to know what reasons God might have for allowing evil. Therefore, we can't be very sure that God doesn't have very good reasons for allowing evil to happen to us. So evil is not significant evidence for atheism." Discuss.
4. **Karma and Justice:** Does Karma blame the victim? Why or why not?
5. **God and Morality:** "If there is no God then all things are permissible." Discuss.
6. **Ontological Argument:** Does the ontological argument give us a good reason to believe in Anselm's God?
7. **Prophecy:** What is Maimonides' theory of prophecy and is it coherent?
8. **Religious Diversity:** Does the prevalence and persistence of religious diversity in the face of disagreement make it irrational to have any one, particular religious outlook?
9. **Religious Pluralism:** "God is not bound by any one religious tradition: each (or at least most) religious traditions teach the truth about God, even though they disagree about God on the surface." Discuss.
10. **Afterlives:** Bernard Williams argues that immortality would be tedious. How plausible is this, and/or what conception of the afterlife does it presuppose?

I will provide a "starter bibliography" of 3-5 items for each of these topics. The paper will be completed in the stages outlined below:

A. Select a Question. (Due date: TBD) Grade: 1%

B. Bibliography Construction: I will give you a handful of readings to get you started. You must find three additional readings of your own. At most one of those can be from our syllabus. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy and PhilPapers.com will be good resources for you. We'll talk more in class about good strategies for finding useful articles.

(Due Date: TBD) Grade: 1%

C. *Précis*: You will be required to write two, 300-400 word *précis* of any two of the articles on your bibliography that are not also on the syllabus. A *précis* should briefly summarize the thesis and central argument in the article so that someone who has not read the article could understand. (Due Date: TBD) Grade: 2%

D. Abstract: A question selected and some research underway, you're now in a position to write an abstract. Your abstract should (1) clearly identify your thesis, (2) outline the main argument(s) of the paper, and (3) give the reader a sense of the flow of the paper. Your abstract should be 250-350 words. (Due Date: TBD) Grade: 4%

E. First Draft: Your first draft should be at least 1500 words and should have the number of words clearly displayed. It should be a complete draft: the positive argument for your thesis should be fully developed. (Due Date: TBD) Grade: 10%

F. Peer Review (2x): Every student will review two other students' papers. Students will complete a peer review form (to be given in class) in which they identify the strengths and weaknesses of the paper, evaluate the paper according to a rubric, and offer an objection to the view. Reviews should be charitable in tone, but it's also important to be honest about where the paper needs improvement—that's how you can be most helpful! (Due Date: TBD) Grade: 2%

G. Final Version: Your final paper should be between 2k and 2.5k words (and should have the number of words clearly displayed). The paper should respond to (a) the comments in the peer review and (b) the instructor's comments on the first draft. How you responded to these comments will be a part of your grade so that, e.g., an unchanged draft resubmitted as a final version of the paper would earn a worse grade on the final version than it did on the draft. There should be a clear argument and at least one clearly-labeled and developed objection should be considered and responded to. (Due Date: TBD) Grade: 20%

H. Writing Reflection: Learning a new skill requires not just completing a challenge but reflecting on how you've overcome that challenge. It's easy for that part of the learning process to be lost in the mad rush of final exams. And so the last project of our semester together—our final, in a way—is a reflection on the paper-writing process. The reflection should address two questions: 1) What is one thing I learned by writing this paper? 2) If I could do one thing different about the writing process, what would it be? (Due Date: TBD) Grade: 5%

Religious Dialogue Project

One of the goals of our course is to learn to converse graciously with people who disagree with us on sensitive topics. An important project for our course is to interview a religious leader of a different² religious tradition—such as a priest, rabbi, imam, monk, etc—than any you belong to (if any).³ Because you will need to accommodate their schedule, I recommend setting up a time to complete the interview as early in the semester as possible. Here are the steps you should take:

² I won't ask for your religious affiliation, so—admittedly—I don't have any way to check whether the leader you've interviewed is really from a different tradition. But the hope is that this project offers you a chance to engage with a tradition that is less familiar to you.

The difference should be a difference in religion and not just a difference in denomination (though, of course, sometimes the boundaries are fuzzy or subject to dispute).

³ Sometimes this can be tricky if the religious tradition you would like to learn about does not have a clear separation between leaders and laypeople. Get in touch with me if it's unclear how to apply the instructions to your specific case.

This can also be tricky because some people have experienced abuse from religious leaders. If this assignment doesn't feel safe to you, let me know and we'll find an alternative assignment.

- 1) Email (or otherwise contact) the religious leader with whom you would like to meet. Explain the course project, and ask whether they'd be willing to meet for 30-60 minutes to be interviewed. You should have reached out to someone by (date TBD).
- 2) Prepare a list of questions ahead of time that you would like to ask them. You can ask hard questions, but remember that you're there to learn from them not to grill them. Candidate questions might include: "What do you think is the most distinctive teaching of your religious tradition?" "What's the most important spiritual practice or ritual to you, personally, in your tradition?" "Tell me more about your tradition's teaching on _____." "Do you feel a need to defend your religious beliefs with arguments—at least to yourself? If so, what's the most important argument/reason?" "What misconceptions do you think people have about your religious tradition?" etc.
- 3) Once you've arranged a time, show up punctually (and in appropriate attire, especially if meeting in a place of worship). Ask the questions you've prepared. Thank them for their time when you've finished.
- 4) Ask them to send me a quick email confirming that you've met.
- 5) Write a 1-2 page reflection on what you learned during the interview. Send me your reflection and the list of questions you created by _____.

Assessment

Your grades on individual assignments will be combined to form your course grade in the following way:

Journals: 10%

Exam 1: 15%

Exam 2: 15%

Exam 3: 7.5%⁴

Writing Project: 45%

Religious Dialogue Project: 7.5%

As noted above, the final grade can be affected by unexcused absences. The following guidelines translate what the various grades mean (esp. as applied to the research paper).

A: 90-100% Truly excellent work that goes above and beyond the baseline requirements for the course. Work that achieves the level of an A exhibits mastery of the material taught in the course and the ability to build on that mastery to contribute something creative, rigorous, and ambitious of your own thought to the assignment.

B+: 85-90%

B: 80-85% Solid, commendable work that fulfills all of the project requirements. B-level work exhibits competence with the course material and genuine insight that goes beyond the confines on what was taught. There may, however, be small errors, or the paper may lack the full rigor or creativity of an A paper.

⁴ The third exam is a smaller percentage of the grade because it covers a smaller portion of the syllabus.

C+: 75-80%

C: 70-75% Decent work that fulfills most of the project requirements. C-level work may, however, show gaps in understanding of the course material or substantial defects in the argument presented.

D: 60-70% Incomplete work that exhibits a poor understanding of the course material and makes a weak contribution to the discussion.

F: <60% Dishonest or severely incomplete work

Late Work Policy

Late work will not be accepted. One of the goals of the course is to learn how to write a research paper in stages, and maintaining a writing schedule is vital to this.

Extensions may be requested. But except in extreme circumstances, extensions should always be requested well in advance (at least 48 hours, ideally more).

Plagiarism and Citations

Plagiarism is representing someone else's work as your own. Don't do it. Give proper credit whenever you are using another person's words, arguments, or ideas. When in doubt, cite.

Citing well isn't just a way to avoid plagiarism—it's an opportunity to demonstrate that you have engaged seriously and in good faith with other thinkers. Citing well also (perhaps counter-intuitively!) highlights where you have made an original contribution, making it easier for your readers to see what distinguishes your work from that of others.

When citing printed material, always include the author's name, date of publication, and page number. Every citation should match an entry in your bibliography.

Plagiarism will result in an F on the assignment and reported to the dean. If the plagiarism is blatant or repeated, it will result in an F in the course.

The university's policy on academic integrity can be found here: <http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/academic-integrity-policy/>

Technology Policy

You are permitted to use technology in class for and only for class-related purposes (i.e. displaying the course readings). But please be aware that when you use screens for any purpose, it is often a distraction to others around you. If you choose to use a screen, please actively take steps to minimize the distraction to others.

Email Guidelines and Office Hours

You should feel free to email me at any point for any course-related or philosophy-related questions!

Email is an excellent medium for short, specific questions about the course. I will always aim to get a response to you within 48 hours on a weekday. Be aware that, as a way of creating some healthy work/life boundaries, I typically do not answer emails after 5pm or on weekends. Feel free to gently remind me if I seem to have overlooked your email.

For more substantial questions or for extensive feedback on an assignment, I prefer to meet during office hours when possible. If my regular office hours do not work for you, we can set up an appointment for an alternative time.

Expectations for Discussion

All discussion in this class must be performed in a respectful and charitable way. The Rutgers Philosophy department writes:

“In our community we expect all participants to observe basic norms of civility and respect. This means stating your own views directly and substantively: focusing on reasons, assumptions and consequences rather than on who is offering them, or how. And it means engaging other’s views in the same terms. No topic or claim is too obvious or controversial to be discussed; but claims and opinions have a place in the discussion only when they are presented in a respectful, collegial, and constructive way.”

Here are three small recommendations that I think go a long way toward making philosophical discussions better:

1. Adopt a general attitude that you and your classmates are involved in the common pursuit of the truth, even when defending contrary theses.
2. Name other students when you’re responding to their idea. This shows that you’ve been listening to them and gives them credit for their contributions. Even when you are (politely) disagreeing, mentioning them communicates that you think their comment is worthy of discussion.
3. Unless the class is very small (and probably even then), raise your hand before making a contribution. This allows me as the instructor to see that quieter students have a chance to enter the discussion when they want to.

Finally, if I do anything that doesn’t promote good dialogue in our seminar, please let me know! I’m still learning how to be a good philosophical interlocutor as well, and some of my best feedback comes from you.

Accessibility

Please get in touch with the Office of Disability Services (ods.rutgers.edu) if there is any way at all that this course can be made more accessible for you. I want to make this course as accessible for everyone as possible!

Other Services for Students

Student-Wellness Services

[Just In Case Web App](#)

<http://codu.co/cee05e>

Access helpful mental health information and resources for yourself or a friend in a mental health crisis on your smartphone or tablet and easily contact CAPS or RUPD.

Counseling, ADAP & Psychiatric Services (CAPS):

(848) 932-7884 / 17 Senior Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08901/ www.rhscaps.rutgers.edu/

CAPS is a University mental health support service that includes counseling, alcohol and other drug assistance, and psychiatric services staffed by a team of professional within Rutgers Health services to support students' efforts to succeed at Rutgers University. CAPS offers a variety of services that include: individual therapy, group therapy and workshops, crisis intervention, referral to specialists in the community and consultation and collaboration with campus partners.

Violence Prevention & Victim Assistance (VPVA):

(848) 932-1181 / 3 Bartlett Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08901 /

www.vpva.rutgers.edu/

The Office for Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance provides confidential crisis intervention, counseling and advocacy for victims of sexual and relationship violence and stalking to students, staff and faculty. To reach staff during office hours when the university is open or to reach an advocate after hours, call 848-932-1181.