

Phil 383: Philosophical Approaches to Religion

Spring 2009

Location: 206 Bartlett • Time: MWF 12:20-1:10

Instructor: Jeffrey Dunn
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Course Website: <http://people.umass.edu/jdunn/383Home.html>

or

<http://people.umass.edu/jdunn/> (click on “Courses”, then “Phil 383”)

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 “fine-tuned” 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.

This will be a challenging course. Much of the reading is difficult and must be read slowly and more than once. Many of the ideas and arguments presented in lecture and in the readings are unfamiliar, difficult, and technical. On the exams, and in the take-home essays you will be expected to know the material thoroughly, to think deeply, and write very clearly and precisely about the issues.

Required Text:

(available at *Amherst Books*)

Philosophy of Religion: The Big Questions, Stump & Murray (eds.) (1999: Blackwell Publishing) ISBN: 978-0-631-20604-0

(Required articles not in our textbook will be made available to you.)

Basic Schedule:

(for a more complete and accurate schedule, see the course website)

Week 1	Introduction & Overview
Week 2	Omnipotence
Week 3	God & Morality
Week 4	Omniscience & Freedom
Week 5	Omniscience & Freedom
Week 6	Omniscience
Week 7	Pascal's Wager/Clifford's Evidentialism
Week 8	Plantinga & Properly Basic Belief in God
Week 9	Hume & Miracles
Week 10	Teleological Arguments
Week 11	Problem of Evil
Week 12	Problem of Evil
Week 13	<i>Student Presentations</i>
Week 14	<i>Student Presentations</i>

Course Requirements:

Lectures:

You are expected to attend lectures, take detailed notes, and participate in class discussions. Attendance will occasionally be taken, which will affect your attendance/participation grade.

Reading:

You are expected to complete the required reading for each class meeting, and come prepared to discuss the material and ask questions. Reading assignments will be announced in class and posted on the website.

Internet:

You are expected to have regular access to the internet to view the class schedule, and to view and print papers that are available on the internet, on UDrive, or on JSTOR.

Essay Assignments:

You are expected to complete two take-home essays. The first will be assigned on **February 27** and be due on **March 6**. The second will be assigned on **April 27** and be due on **May 4**.

Midterm Exam:

The midterm for this course will consist of multiple choice and short answer questions. The midterm will be on **March 23 from 7 - 9 pm**. If you have a conflict with the midterm and cannot attend, you must contact me *BEFORE* Spring Break, which begins on March 13.

Final Exam:

The final exam will be cumulative and will consist of multiple choice and short answer questions. The time and date of the final exam is scheduled by the university.

Student 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.

Grading:

Attendance and Participation	5 %
Essay Assignment 1	17.5%
Midterm Exam	20%
Essay Assignment 2	17.5%
Presentation	15%
Final Exam	25%

Logistical Information:

Some of our reading assignments are not available in our textbook. These articles are available online and are linked from the Reading List on the course website. The articles will usually be linked from the Schedule, too. They are linked in one of three ways. First, some of the articles are available through JSTOR. If you are accessing the article through the UMass network, clicking on the link will take you to the article. If you are *not* on the UMass network, then you must gain access to JSTOR through the UMass library site. If you need help figuring out how this works, please let me know. Second, some of the articles are available on UDrive. After clicking on the UDrive link you will be asked to enter your username and password. Your username is your UMass user ID, and your password is your

UMass user ID password. If you have any problems with this, please let me know. Finally, some of the articles are available on various public websites. By clicking on the link, you'll be automatically taken to the article.

Students with Disabilities:

If you have a disability relevant to this course that you think that I should be aware of, please contact me as soon as possible.

Academic Dishonesty:

Academic dishonesty is a serious offense, and I take it very seriously. There is a clear Academic Honesty 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 academic dishonesty is, it is your responsibility to contact me with any questions so that you are clear about it. Ignorance is not an excuse. If I discover any instance of academic dishonesty, I will pursue the harshest penalty consistent with university policy.