

Phil 3454: Philosophy of Religion
CRN: 87222, Torgersen Hall 1020
MWF 1:25–2:15pm

Instructor: Ted Parent, Ph.D.

Office: Major Williams 221 (in the stairwell)

Office Hours: MW, 12:15–1:15pm, and by appointment.

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This course is an introduction to some major religious controversies, as discussed by philosophers. After a review of fideism, we will mostly be focused on the key arguments for and against God’s existence. In the last four weeks, we will ask to what extent (if any) God’s existence matters to morality and the “meaning of life.”

Texts:

Peterson, M. et al. (Eds.), *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, 5th ed., Oxford UP
-Additional materials posted on Canvas.

Course Assignments:

- (1) Short essay (couple of paragraphs) due on **Sept 10**, worth 10% of the final grade. (This essay will be graded just as check/check+/check-/zero.)
- (2) Take-home exams due on **Oct. 15**, **Nov. 5**, and **Dec. 11**, each worth 25% of the final grade.
- (3) Participation is worth 15% of the final grade. How much should you participate? Well, if you don’t participate *at all*, don’t expect to get a passing grade for participation! Yet it is possible to earn an ‘A’ here without talking at every chance. Indeed, *quality matters much more than quantity*...and you certainly should avoid dominating the discussion. Regardless, my guess is that an ‘A’ for participation requires that, more often than not, you talk at least once during a session. Though note that *visiting office hours also counts as participation*.

No late assignments accepted, unless you can give hard evidence of a legitimate emergency.
NO LAPTOPS! Philosophy requires lots of concentration, and laptops create too much distraction. (A single laptop on the web will distract most everyone sitting around you.)
Relatedly, please **do not be late** and remember to **turn off your cell phone**.

Despite the policies in boldface, if you have special needs because of a disability (learning disability, attention deficit disorder, psychological, physical, etc.), we can certainly make different arrangements. But please talk to me as soon as possible.

The grading scale for the course is as follows (raw scores will be rounded):

Percentage	Letter Grade	G.P.A. scale
93-100	A	4.0
90-92	A-	3.75
88-89	B+	3.5
83-87	B	3.0
80-82	B-	2.75
78-79	C+	2.5

73-77	C	2.0
70-72	C-	1.75
68-69	D+	1.5
63-67	D	1.0
60-62	D-	0.75
59 and below	F	0.0

The office of Academic Integrity has asked that all syllabi include the following statement:

The Undergraduate Honor Code pledge that each member of the university community agrees to abide by states: **“As a Hokie, I will conduct myself with honor and integrity at all times. I will not lie, cheat, or steal, nor will I accept the actions of those who do.”**

Students enrolled in this course are responsible for abiding by the Honor Code. A student who has doubts about how the Honor Code applies to any assignment is responsible for obtaining specific guidance from the course instructor before submitting the assignment for evaluation. Ignorance of the rules does not exclude any member of the University community from the requirements and expectations of the Honor Code. For additional information about the Honor Code, please visit: www.honorsystem.vt.edu.

I heartily endorse this statement. Thank you.

General Remarks:

Reading philosophy is hard. That’s why I recommend reading the weekly material *twice*. BUT! For your first reading, it is sufficient to skim the texts, just to get a sense of the main ideas. (Only takes 5 minutes, tops!) After that, read the material again *carefully*. Your earlier skimming should provide a basic “framework” that allows you to process things MUCH better.

During your second reading, it’s best to *read with a pen and note the points of interest*. I do NOT recommend mere underlining/highlighting. Rather, it’s best to read as if you were *engaged in a conversation* with the author: Raise questions, ask for clarification, and levy criticisms in the margins. This practice effectively prepares you for class discussion and the assignments.

Be forewarned that the clear majority of my feedback on your work will be critical. Of course I strive to be courteous nonetheless. Yet *please* do not take any of my criticisms personally! Loads of critical feedback is simply how academic philosophy operates. And in this class, the purpose of this is *certainly* not to belittle or discourage you, but to hone your writing/thinking skills.

Speaking of courtesy, I *insist* that discussions proceed in a respectful and well-mannered fashion. *Philosophy is difficult, and no one should be made to feel stupid*. Relatedly, taking an aggressive tone is inappropriate. It usually signals that the goal is to “win” a dispute, rather than to cooperate in a mutual endeavor to seek the truth. I reserve the right to tell you *to leave the session* if you violate these basic norms of courtesy.

Tentative Schedule

[Readings listed in square brackets are optional]

WEEK ONE: *Fideism*

Aug. 20, 22, 24

*Handout: Pessimism about Argument; *Diener & Tay, “The Religion Paradox: If Religion Makes People Happy, Why are So Many Dropping Out?” *Sheiman, *An Atheist Defends Religion*, ch. 2
[*Handout: Ethics in the *Sutta Pitaka*]

WEEK TWO: *Eastern Supra-Rationalism*

Aug. 27, 29, 31 “Atman is Brahman;” *The *Upaniṣads* (excerpts); *Lao-Tzu, *Tao-te Ching* (excerpts); *Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā* (excerpts); *A few kōans from Chán/Zen Buddhism; *Suzuki, “Ch. 4: Illogical Zen” from *Introduction to Zen Buddhism* [*The Heart Sūtra; *The Diamond Sūtra; *J.D. Salinger, “Teddy;” †Meditation Videos; *Culadasa, “Jump Starting Your Practice;” †Duron, “19 Science-Backed Reasons to Meditate;” †Flanagan, “Bourgeois Buddhists: Do Americans Miss the Point of Mindfulness Meditation?”]

WEEK THREE: *Western Supra-Rationalism*

Sept. 3 NO CLASS (Labor Day)
Sept. 5, 7 *Azriel of Genroa, *Commentary on the Sefirot* (excerpt); *Ibn Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (excerpt); *Meister Eckhart, selections from the *Sermons*; *Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (excerpts), and †“Dedication to the Individual” [*Kierkegaard, “Is there a Teleological Suspension of the Ethical?;” *Pseudo-Dionysius, “Mystical Theology;” *Iyer, “Out of the Cell”]

WEEK FOUR: *Religious Experience*

Sept. 10 Teresa of Ávila, “Religious Experiences;” †Edna St. Vincent Millay, “Renaissance” **Short essay due Sept. 10**
Sept. 12, 14 Martin, “Critique of Religious Experience”

WEEK FIVE: *The Cosmological Argument*

Sept. 17 William Lane Craig, “The Kalām Cosmological Argument” [Aquinas, “The Classical Cosmological Argument”]
Sept. 19, 21 *P. Draper, “Critique of the Kalām Cosmological Argument”

WEEK SIX: *The Teleological Argument*

Sept. 24 Wm. Paley, “The Analogical Teleological Argument”
Sept. 26, 28 Hume, “Critique of the Analogical Teleological Argument”

WEEK SEVEN: *More Teleology*

Oct. 1, 3, 5 Hume (cont’); *R. Swinburne, “The Argument from Design;” J. Polkinghorne, “The Universe as Creation”

WEEK EIGHT: *Pragmatic Arguments*

Oct. 8, 10, 12 Pascal, “The Wager” Wm. James, “The Will to Believe” [Clifford, “Ethics of Belief”]

WEEK NINE: *Science vs. Religion*

Oct. 15, 17 *John Worrall, “Science Discredits Religion”
1st take-home exam due Oct. 15
Oct. 19 NO CLASS (Fall Break)

WEEK TEN: *The Problem of Evil*

Oct. 22, 24, 26 Hume, "Evil Makes a Strong Case Against God's Existence;" Leibniz, "Best of All Possible Worlds Theodicy;" Ghaly, "Evil and Suffering in Islam" [†Chief Si'ahl, Speech of 1854; †Norland, "Congo: More Vicious than Rape;" *W. Kaufman, "*Karma*, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil"]

WEEK ELEVEN: *More Evil*

Oct. 29, 31; Nov. 2 J.L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence;" John Hick, "Soul-Making Theodicy" [*Dostoyevsky, "Rebellion" and "The Grand Inquisitor"]

WEEK TWELVE: *Even More Evil*

Nov. 5, 7, 9 Marilyn McCord Adams, "Horrendous Evil and the Goodness of God;" *Sharon Street, "If Everything Happens for a Reason, then We Don't Know What Reasons Are"

WEEK THIRTEEN: *Religion and Morality*

Nov. 12, 14 Plato, "The Relation of Good to the Divine Will;" *Janine Marie Idziak, "Divine Commands are the Foundation of Morality" [*Interview with Owen Flanagan (excerpts)]

2nd take-home exam due Nov. 12

Nov. 16 Sartre, "Ethics without Religion" [†Ruth Chang, "Hard Choices"]

WEEK FOURTEEN:

Nov. 19, 21, 23 NO CLASS (Thanksgiving Break)

WEEK FIFTEEN: *Religion and the Meaning of Life*

Dec. 4, 6, 8 *Lois Hope Walker, "Religion Gives Meaning to Life;" *Nietzsche, selections from R. Solomon (ed.), *Existentialism*; *Nietzsche, handout with additional selections.

WEEK SIXTEEN: *More Nietzsche*

Dec. 11, 13 Nietzsche (cont')

3rd take-home exam due at 5:25pm on Tuesday, Dec. 11, in Major Williams Hall 221.

*indicates a text that can be downloaded on Canvas.

†indicates a web page whose link is found on Canvas.