

Phil 3454: Philosophy of Religion
CRN: 86829, Torgersen Hall 1040
MWF 1:25–2:15pm

Instructor: Ted Parent, Ph.D.

Office: Major Williams 221

Office Hours: MW, 10:10am–11am, 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:

Pojman, L. *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, 4th edition, Thomson, 2002. All readings are from this text unless otherwise indicated. The 5th edition is on Canvas, but some readings in the former are not in the latter. Yet those are also posted as separate articles on Canvas.

Additional materials posted on Canvas.

Course Assignments:

- (1) **Every Wednesday** (with a few exceptions; see below), there will be an in-class writing assignment (about a paragraph in length) on the reading for that week. Satisfactory performance on these assignments is a requirement for the course, which means that unsatisfactory performance can lower your final grade. However, exemplary performance on these assignments can also act as "extra credit" to boost your final grade.
- (2) Short essay (couple of paragraphs) due on **Sept 13**, worth 10% of the final grade. (This essay will be graded just as check/check+/check-/zero.)
- (3) Paper (maximum length is 5 pages) due **Oct. 7th** worth 30% of the final grade.
- (4) Paper (max length 5 pages) due **Nov. 9th** worth 30% of the final grade.
- (5) Final exam **Dec. 18th** worth 30% of the final grade.

N.B. Excellent or poor participation/attendance will also affect your final grade.

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 co-operate 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: *Supra-Rationalism*

Aug. 28, 30; Sept 1 *Handout: Pessimism about Argument; *The *Upaniṣads* (excerpts); *Lao-Tzu, *Tao-te Ching* (excerpts); *Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakārikā* (excerpts); *A selection of Zen kōans; *Suzuki, “Ch. 4: Illogical Zen” from *Introduction to Zen Buddhism* [*Selections from the *Sutta Pitaka*; *J.D. Salinger, “Teddy;”]

WEEK TWO: *More Supra-Rationalism; Some Fideism*

Sept. 4 NO CLASS (Labor Day)
Sept. 6, 8 *Ibn Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (excerpt); *Pseudo-Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*; *Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (excerpts) [*Sheiman, *An Atheist Defends Religion*, especially ch. 6; *Dougherty & Tweedt, “Religious Epistemology”]

†WEEK THREE: *More Fideism; Some Cosmology*

Sept. 11, 13 Fideism (cont’)
Short essay due on Sept. 13
Sept. 15 Aquinas, “The Five Ways”

WEEK FOUR: *The Cosmological Argument*

Sept. 18 Aquinas (cont’)
Sept. 20, 22 P. Edwards, “Critique of the Cosmological Argument”

WEEK FIVE: *The Teleological Argument*

Sept. 25 Wm. Paley, “The Watch and the Watchmaker”
Sept 27, 29 Hume, “Critique of the Design Argument”

WEEK SIX: *More Teleology*

Oct. 2, 4, 6 Hume (cont’); R. Swinburne, “The Argument from Design” [*Monton, “God, Fine-Tuning, and the Problem of Old Evidence”]

WEEK SEVEN: *Pragmatic Arguments*

Oct. 9 Pascal, “The Wager”
Oct. 11 Wm. James, “The Will to Believe” [Clifford, “Ethics of Belief”]
Oct 13 NO CLASS (Fall Break)

†WEEK EIGHT: *Science vs. Religion*

Oct. 16, 18, 20 *John Worrall, “Science Discredits Religion”
1st paper due Oct. 16

WEEK NINE: *Hume on Miracles; the Problem of Evil*

Oct. 23 Hume, “Against Miracles” [*Christine Overall, “Miracles as Evidence Against the Existence of God”]

Oct. 25, 27 J.L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence" [*Chief Si'ahl, Speech of 1854;
*Norland, "Congo: More Vicious than Rape"]

WEEK TEN: *The Problem of Evil*

Oct. 30; Nov. 1, 3 Mackie (cont'); Leibniz, "Theodicy: A Defense of Theism" [*Mulgan,
"What if God is Just Not That Into You?" *Sharon Street, "If
Everything Happens for a Reason, then We Don't Know What
Reasons Are;" Dostoyevsky, "Rebellion;" *Handout: *Karma* and
Rebirth]

WEEK ELEVEN: *More Evil*

Nov. 6, 8, 10 *Marylin McCord Adams, "Horrendous Evil and the Goodness of
God;" *Kushner, "Ch. 8: What Good, then, is Religion? (excerpts),"
from *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*

†WEEK TWELVE: *Religion and Morality*

Nov. 13, 15 Plato, "Morality and Religion;" *Janine Marie Idziak, "Divine
Commands are the Foundation of Morality" [*Interview with Owen
Flanagan (excerpts)]

2nd paper due Nov. 13

Nov. 17 Sartre, "Ethics without Religion" [*Ruth Chang's TED talk on "Hard
Choices"]

WEEK THIRTEEN

Nov. 20, 22, 24 NO CLASS (Thanksgiving Break)

WEEK FOURTEEN: *Religion and the Meaning of Life*

Nov. 27 Lois Hope Walker, "Religion Gives Meaning to Life"

Nov. 29; Dec 1 *Nietzsche, selections from R. Solomon (ed.), *Existentialism*.
[*Kahane, "If There Is a Hole, It is Not God-Shaped"]

WEEK FIFTEEN: *Nietzsche on Meaning and Morality*

Dec. 4, 6, 8 *Nietzsche, handout with additional selections.

†WEEK SIXTEEN: *More Nietzsche*

Dec. 11, 13 Nietzsche (cont')

Final exam at 9:45am on Tuesday, Dec. 19, in Major Williams Hall 221.

*indicates a text that can be downloaded from the "Files" section on Scholar.

†indicates a week where there is NO in-class writing assignment.