

PHIL2601: Philosophy of Religion

Fall 2008

Tuesdays & Thursdays 18:05-19:25
Paterson Hall, Room 201 (PA201)

Instructor Heidi Lene Maibom
Department of Philosophy
Paterson Hall 3A39
613 - 520 3825
heidi_maibom@carleton.ca

Office hours Thursday 17:00-18:00 or by appointment

Course Description

We will begin with early theological debates from the Medieval period, where we will consider Christian, Jewish, and Muslim philosophy, particularly on the existence of God. We then move on to the Scottish enlightenment to the debate about natural religion, where the status on natural and revealed religion, the existence of God, and the problem of evil is discussed. Of relevance to religion, particularly in its more modern forms, is the question of belief and religious/mystical experience, which we move on to next. Lastly, we consider a variety of more recent attempts at explaining *why* we have religion and practices associated with religion: rituals. This stretches from psychoanalytic accounts of religion and rituals to evolutionary psychology explanations.

Course Aim

My aim in this course is to impart knowledge about the broad range of philosophical issues that arise in the context of religion spanning more than a thousand years. Students are expected to acquire an understanding of the purpose and use of inquiring into religion, including why even religious people would want to inquire into their religious texts and beliefs. They are expected to acquire knowledge of—including ability to critically examine—proofs of the existence of God, the nature of the problem of evil, the nature of religious belief and experience, and psychoanalytic and evolutionary accounts of the origin of religion and religious practices.

Course Requirements

Reading and attendance; three short discussion papers (2 pages, 10% each), one midterm exam (30%) and one final essay (8 pages, 40%).

Readings

Get these books from the bookstore:

- (1) David Sloan Wilson: *Darwin's Cathedral*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2002.
- (2) Sigmund Freud: *The Future of an Illusion*. New York: Norton.

Copy from course pack in library or from department main office:

- (3) Avicenna (Ibn Sina): *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, selections

Online texts:

- (4) Anselm: *Proslogion*, with response by Gaunilo
<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/anselm.html>
- (5) David Hume: *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*
<http://www.anselm.edu/homepage/dbanach/dnr.htm>
- (6) William James: "The Will to Believe"
http://www.philosophyarchive.com/text_simple.php?era=1800-1899&author=William%20James&text=The%20Will%20to%20Believe
- (7) William James: *Varieties of Religious Experience*, get it on google books:
http://books.google.com/books?id=Qi4XAAAIAAJ&printsec=toc&dq=varieties+of+religious+experience&source=gbp_summary_s&cad=0
- (8) Moses Maimonides: *The Guide for the Perplexed*
[http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Guide_for_the_Perplexed_\(Friedlander\)](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Guide_for_the_Perplexed_(Friedlander))
- (9) Blaise Pascal: *Pensées*, Part III, #233
<http://www.classicallibrary.org/pascal/pensees/pensees03.htm>
- (10) Pascal Boyer & Pierre Liénard: Why Ritualized Behavior? Precaution Systems and Action Parsing in Developmental, Pathological, and Cultural Rituals. *Brain and Behavioral Sciences*, 29, 1-56 (2006).

Paper Submission

Submit your essays using WebCT. Essays are due before midnight on the day they are due.

Late essays will be penalized. *One point will be subtracted per day late, including weekend days.* Always keep a copy of your essay. It is department policy that it is every student's responsibility to keep a copy of each essay submitted to a philosophy course.

Evaluation

Your papers should be free of grammatical and spelling errors (*1 point per 10 spelling/grammar errors will be deducted*). This can partly be accomplished by using the spelling function of Word, but only partly. Your language should be clear and easy to read. Always give yourself enough time to leave the paper for at least one day before you need to submit it, so you can read it over again and make corrections if necessary. This helps you spot errors that you would not otherwise discover. Most importantly, it allows you to see whether what you write makes sense and whether it is comprehensible to other people. If you cannot make sense of it some time after writing it, you need to rewrite. Obscure phrasing is not an alternative to not understanding the relevant ideas or arguments.

If you have problems understanding a text, an argument, or an idea when you write your assignments, do not just write something that you do not understand. Give the best interpretation that you can, and explain that this is what you are doing. If your interpretation is plain silly, it is probably wrong, so try again. You are allowed to give several interpretations and outline the pros and cons of each. The grading of your assignment will be partly based on the interpretative work that has gone in to it.

For this class, you are not allowed to quote or paraphrase. *One point per quote or paraphrase will be deleted from your total points.* This is to ensure that you do not replace an understanding of the issue with rote memorization. The aim of the course is to provide an understanding of the general issues and an appreciation of the argumentative moves. Having said that, you need to be able to remember the arguments made, e.g. the ontological argument (note that in some cases, the words you use might be very similar to those in the texts because it is impossible for them not to be. The phrase 'God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived' is acceptable in an essay on the ontological argument, e.g.).

When rendering an argument for a position, precision is paramount. Getting an argument *almost* right is still getting it wrong. Sometimes it does not take much to make a valid argument invalid, so great care is required here. You are expected to learn to remember, understand, and reproduce—in your own words—a variety of arguments. One way to make sure you get things right is to rehearse the argument

that you have written down to see if it makes sense. If it does not, try again. It might turn out that the argument is not valid, in which case this is an important point to make in your essay. But do not simply assume that an argument does not work if it does not make sense the first time you try to express it. Make sure that you do not simply reproduce an obscure argument in your own words, but that you also explain what it means. It is not enough to say, e.g., that Anselm argued that God must exist because he is that than which nothing greater can be conceived. You must also explain what it means (to the best of your ability, of course), and how the argument is supposed to work.

Second to presenting and explaining an argument, which often involves some interpretation, is evaluating it. You are expected to acquire the ability to evaluate arguments for validity (does the conclusion follow from the premises?), coherence and plausibility. You should learn always to give the most charitable interpretation of an argument, and then be able to evaluate *that* version. Making an argument sound stupid is not an art. Making the best of an argument is. Sometimes this may be the best you can do. At other times, you may find that you find the premises problematic, e.g. In that case your task is to put your reservations on paper clearly and concisely. There will most likely be arguments for everyone to disagree with, so you will get to practice your skills with arguments that: (i) you agree with (here you might have to defend the argument against possible objections), (ii) that you almost agree with, but that need extra support (which you will give them), and (iii) that you disagree with. But remember, it is NEVER acceptable simply to say 'I disagree with p' or 'I feel that p is wrong'. If you cannot give relatively good reasons why you think or feel what you do, do not object to an argument or an idea. The only currency accepted here are reasons!

A good rule of thumb to use when writing essays is: give examples! Because philosophy is relatively abstract as a subject matter, it can be quite tricky to figure out what is going on. Examples are therefore often crucial. This also works for your own arguments and ideas. If you cannot give even one example, then chances are that you are not clear on what you are trying to say.

In general, the most important evaluation criterion is going to be your ability to explain the relevant ideas and arguments correctly and in clear, concise language. This presupposes, however, that your written English is sufficiently good to be generally comprehensible. Expect a failing mark if your essay is incomprehensible. Good examples, counterarguments, evaluations of argument structure, problem cases, etc. are all elements that will bring up your grade, if done well.

Two final points. First, participating in class discussions is going to help you figure out what arguments are, how to explain and criticize them, and so on. Try to overcome any reluctance you have to ask questions when you do not understand something. You are here to learn, not to appear as if you already understand everything. Furthermore, listen carefully to what other people ask and how I respond, since this is an important guide to how to deal with ideas and arguments. Second, a good way to avoid plagiarism is to write your essay with your books closed. Once you have written down the argument as you remember it, double-check with the text, close it, then rewrite.

Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities requiring academic accommodations in this course are encouraged to contact the Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities (500 University Centre) to complete the necessary forms. After registering with the Centre, make an appointment to meet with me in order to discuss your needs at least two weeks before the first in-class test or CUTV midterm exam. This will allow for sufficient time to process your request.

Religious Observance

Students requesting academic accommodation on the basis of religious observance should make a formal, written request to their instructors for alternate dates and/or means of satisfying academic requirements. Such requests should be made during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist, but no later than two weeks before the compulsory academic event. Accommodation is to be worked out directly and on an individual basis between the student and the

instructor(s) involved. Instructors will make accommodations in a way that avoids academic disadvantage to the student.

Students or instructors who have questions or want to confirm accommodation eligibility of a religious event or practice may refer to the Equity Services website for a list of holy days and Carleton's Academic Accommodation policies, or may contact an Equity Services Advisor in the Equity Services Department for assistance.

Pregnancy

Pregnant students requiring academic accommodations are encouraged to contact an Equity Advisor in Equity Services to complete a letter of accommodation. The student must then make an appointment to discuss her needs with the instructor at least two weeks prior to the first academic event in which it is anticipated the accommodation will be required.

Plagiarism

It is the responsibility of each student to understand the meaning of 'plagiarism' as defined in the undergraduate or graduate calendars, and to avoid both committing plagiarism and aiding/abetting plagiarism by other students.

The University Senate defines plagiarism as "*presenting, whether intentional or not, the ideas, expression of ideas or work of others as one's own.*" This can include:

- reproducing or paraphrasing portions of someone else's published or unpublished material, regardless of the source, and presenting these as one's own without proper citation or reference to the original source;
- submitting a take-home examination, essay, laboratory report or other assignment written, in whole or in part, by someone else;
- using ideas or direct, verbatim quotations, or paraphrased material, concepts, or ideas without appropriate acknowledgment in any academic assignment;
- using another's data or research findings;
- failing to acknowledge sources through the use of proper citations when using another's works and/or failing to use quotation marks;
- handing in "*substantially the same piece of work for academic credit more than once without prior written permission of the course instructor in which the submission occurs.*"

Plagiarism is a serious offence which cannot be resolved directly with the course's instructor. The Associate Deans of the Faculty conduct a rigorous investigation, including an interview with the student, when an instructor suspects a piece of work has been plagiarized. Penalties are not trivial. They include a mark of zero for the plagiarized work or a final grade of "F" for the course. **I always recommend the most severe penalty for plagiarism.**

Class Schedule

4 September	Anselm: <i>Proslogion</i> , selection (w. Gaunilo's response)
9 September	Avicenna (Ibn Sina): <i>The Metaphysics of the Healing</i> , 1.6, 8.1
11 September	Avicenna (Ibn Sina): <i>The Metaphysics of the Healing</i> , 8.2-8.4
16 September	Maimonides: <i>The Guide of the Perplexed</i> , Introduction, Book I, Chapter LIV
18 September	Maimonides: <i>The Guide of the Perplexed</i> , Book II, Propositions xviii-xxiv, Chap. I, Chap. XII-XIV
23 September	Maimonides: <i>The Guide of the Perplexed</i> , Book II, Chap. XVI-XIX
24 September	First short paper due
25 September	Hume: <i>Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion</i> , Parts I-II
30 September	Hume: <i>Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion</i> , Parts III-VI
2 October	Hume: <i>Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion</i> , Parts VII-XI
7 October	Hume: <i>Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion</i> , Parts XI-XII
9 October	Pascal: <i>Pensées</i> , Section III, §233

*** Thanksgiving Break ***

14 October	Midterm exam (in class)
16 October	James: The Will to Believe,
21 October	James: <i>The Varieties of Religious Experience</i> , Lecture IX
23 October	James: <i>The Varieties of Religious Experience</i> , Lecture X
27 October	Second short paper due
28 October	Wilson: <i>Darwin's Cathedral</i> , Chap. 1,
30 October	Wilson: <i>Darwin's Cathedral</i> , Chap. 1
4 November	Wilson: <i>Darwin's Cathedral</i> , Chap. 2
6 November	Wilson: <i>Darwin's Cathedral</i> , Chap. 2
11 November	Wilson: <i>Darwin's Cathedral</i> , Chap. 3
13 November	Wilson: <i>Darwin's Cathedral</i> , Chap. 3
17 November	Third short paper due
18 November	Freud: <i>The Future of an Illusion</i> , Chaps. I-V
20 November	Freud: <i>The Future of an Illusion</i> , Chaps. IV-X
25 November	Freud: Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices, Boyer & Liénard: Why Ritualized Behavior?
27 November	Boyer & Liénard: Why Ritualized Behavior?

*** December 20, Final Take-Home Exam Due *** (Submit papers on WebCT before midnight)