

Fall 2011

Philosophy 11: God, Morality, and Freedom

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About the course. The goal of this course is to introduce you to philosophy and its methods by looking at what philosophers, past and present, have said about God, morality, and freedom. The hope is that you will come out of the class better thinkers, better writers, and better equipped to tackle difficult questions like these with rigor and care.

Meetings. T/Th 2-3:20 **Note:** There will be no class on Th. October 6th and Tu. November 29th.

Requirements.

- Participation and Attendance (10%).
- Weekly reading responses (20%): due by 10PM on Monday.
- Two papers (70%): including a rewrite of the first.

Important. You cannot pass the class without receiving a passing grade in each one of these categories. E.g., you cannot pass the class if you fail the participation requirement, *even if* you have perfect grades on the rest of the assignments.

Late Penalty. If you cannot turn in your assignment on time, contact me as soon as possible.

- Late reading responses will not be accepted.
- Late papers will not be accepted unless arrangements are made 3 days *before* the due date.
- Late papers will be penalized by 1/3 of a grade for every day late.

Communication. Important class announcements and assignments will be communicated to you via email or in class. It is your responsibility to make sure you are up to date with the latest news.

Attendance. Most of the action happens in lecture (it is where I give away all the answers), so you won't want to skip it. Attendance is required anyway. If you must miss class, let me know *in advance* and we will schedule a make up assignment.

Participation. Philosophy is a communal activity. Much of it is about asking simple, clarificatory questions. I'll expect you to do at least that much regularly. This too, is a required part of your grade. If you are shy or uncomfortable speaking in class, I recommend the following approach.

First, alert me to your problem.

Second, participate outside of class, via email, or in my office ours.

Third, put on a brave face and force yourself to ask at least one question per class. This will get easier every time you do it. And you can prepare your questions ahead of time. (The difficult readings will provide ample material for clarification.)

Class will consist, largely, of discussion, and everyone is expected to pull their weight.

Reading. Most of the readings we will look at are quite tricky. Give yourself time to first, skim, and then carefully read each piece before we discuss it in class. Jot down questions and confusions to raise in lecture. Then skim the reading again after we've discussed it to make sure you understand it well. If you're still

unclear about something, email me, come by my office hours, ask a classmate, Google it, etc. The point is: get on it.

Writing. A major goal of this class is to improve your writing skills. Chances are that you haven't done this sort of writing before—at least not at the level at which we will do it—so you will need to practice. (At the same time, you will see, it is a much more natural and intuitive way of writing than what you may have been taught in the past.) I hope you will emerge as stronger writers capable of producing clear, concise, and convincing argumentative essays. This skill will serve you well wherever you go from here. But acquiring it will be difficult. It will require a lot of writing and rewriting, and, crucially, patience.

Rewriting. You are required to rewrite the first paper. The requirement is not a mere revision—you must start a new document *from scratch*. No sentence from the earlier paper should remain unless it passes some serious scrutiny. Think of it as writing a brand new paper.

Academic Honesty. Upon entering Amherst College, you each signed a pledge to uphold the honor code. In particular, you agreed to the *Statement of Intellectual Responsibility*, which states:

Every person's education is the product of his or her intellectual effort and participation in a process of critical exchange. Amherst College cannot educate those who are unwilling to submit their own work and ideas to critical assessment. (See <https://www.amherst.edu/campuslife/deanstudents/acadhonesty>)

I expect you will all honor the pledge you signed. EVERYTHING YOU TURN IN SHOULD BE YOUR OWN WORK and IN YOUR OWN WORDS. If you do find that discussing the reading with your friend, dog, parent, helpful, make sure you cite them in your work (dated personal correspondence). You are not expected to consult outside sources, but if you do, you must credit them appropriately. Even—especially—the ever popular Wikipedia. (Don't trust just any website you find, but if you decide to trust it, cite it.)

****In short, do not plagiarize. I will fail you.****

Formatting. Please prepare your assignments as follows and submit them on the course website. Assignments that fail to meet these guidelines will not be accepted until they are remedied. If that is after the deadline, they will count as late.

- Submit files in PDF format. Name them as follows: lastname_assignment.
- *Name and date* on top left of first page, no cover page.
- *Page number and last name* on bottom right of remaining pages.
- *Word count* at end of paper (exclude prompt, bibliography, and such when calculating).
- *Reading questions or essay prompt* at top of first page (single spaced and indented).
- *Double space* (except block quotes which should be single spaced and indented).
- *Standard margins* (1 inch), font size (12pt), style (Times New Roman), etc.
- *Cite sources* in a clear, consistent way, e.g.,
http://www.chicomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html.

Grading. Your paper will be evaluated along three main dimensions:

1. The clarity and soundness of the *argument* for your *thesis*.
2. Your demonstrated understanding of readings and material covered in class.
3. Your insight and creativity in engaging the issues.

Grades.

A This is a truly outstanding paper. It is clearly written, well-argued, and original. A paper that just gives a straightforward or "obvious" response to some philosophical or interpretative problem would not merit an A, even if it is clear. An A paper does something extra—but *not at the cost of a clear treatment of the problem.*

A- This is a really good paper, one that operates at an advanced level. It is clearly written. (If there are any significant problems with the writing or the organization of the paper, then it won't merit an A-. This is because good clear writing and organization are not separable from good philosophical thinking.) The paper may have a couple of minor mistakes or confusions, or it may fail to unpack some of its arguments sufficiently. It may have an original argument or interpretation, but if so, that will be offset by some other flaw. For example, in a longer paper, perhaps there is too little philosophical back-and-forth (considering objections and challenges, and responding to them). Or perhaps it is not as engaged with the texts as it should be.

B+ This is a well-written paper with nothing terribly wrong. The writing may have some small problems, or it may be flawless. The paper may make some mistakes or have some ambiguities that have to be sorted out, but overall it will be a good paper. It will show more promise or originality than a B paper, but nothing will make it stand out like an A- paper, or it won't be operating at as advanced a level as an A- paper. (Or perhaps the paper would stand out if some of its ideas were properly developed, but as it stands they aren't.)

B This is a solid paper, with some notable mistakes or obscurities, but no serious misunderstandings. The writing may not be super-clear. To earn a B, the paper needs to make it clear why the problem addressed in the paper is a problem, and offer some response to it. (It may be a straightforward or unoriginal response; it may not be a decisive response; the paper may even end by showing that a certain response doesn't work. But the paper must put forward or examine some response to the problem.) A B paper does not seriously misrepresent the views of other philosophers.

B- There are starting to be some serious problems. Perhaps the writing is really unclear or the paper is poorly organized. Or perhaps there are straightforward mistakes and misunderstandings about what the problem is, or about what other philosophers say. Or perhaps the paper presents the problem correctly, but doesn't really address it. Still, there is an effort. The author has some understanding of the problem and of the relevant texts. She does offer some argument. A paper with no argument won't merit a B-.

C+ There are more serious problems. Either the writing is really hard to get through; or the paper has no discernable structure; or the author doesn't understand the text or the positions she is discussing; or the paper doesn't really attempt to offer any argument.

Papers with more problems will earn grades of C or below. It is difficult to give a general gloss on those grades since the problems that beset these papers are quite varied.

I'm always happy to answer questions about your grade or my comments. To decipher the latter, see the Comment Key. (Keep a copy of this handy when reading my feedback.)

Comment Key.

G - grammar

SP - spelling

Agr. – agreement (e.g., subject-verb, subject-subject, something else, etc.)

FORMAT – incorrect paper formatting

SS/DS - single space/double space

T – improper use of term

CT – be consistent in your term use

Awk. – awkward

:(- unhappy sentence/paragraph

WC – word choice

W – unnecessarily wordy

LS – long sentence

P – What is the purpose of this sentence?

(...) – text in parentheses is superfluous; remove it

C – citation needed

SLOP - sloppy construction/sentence/term use

Y/N – I know what you mean, but you don't say it

R – Is this relevant?

U – unclear sentence or idea

M? – What do you mean by this?

E – explain this/more explanation needed here

? – Huh?

Q – too quick

E.g.? – For example?

Underlined text – questionable or not a good way of putting your point

F? – what does this follow from? *Or* does it follow from what you claim it follows from?

W? – Where does the author say this?

SUPP - this needs better support/argument

√ - yes!

X – no.

* - see earlier comment(s)

Tentative Schedule.

First Day. Introduction. What is philosophy? What are its tools and materials? What is its purpose and importance? What, if anything, distinguishes philosophical questions? What might we want to ask about God, morality, and free will? What might our answers look like?

Weeks 1-4. Unit I: Reason v. Faith. Does God exist? Should I believe it? Is an action good because God commands it, or does God command it because it is good? Is there morality without God?

God exists!

Samuel Clarke, "A Modern Formulation of the Cosmological Argument"

William Paley, "The Argument from Design"

Saint Anselm, "On the Existence of God"

God doesn't exist—just look at all the suffering in the world!

J.L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence"

The rationality of religious belief—believe in God anyway.

Pascal, "The Wager"

Weeks 5-8. Unit II: Morality. How could anything be "right" or "wrong" if there is no God? If I want to do what is right, what ought I to do? When is it ok to criticize and interfere with other cultures for doing things I take to be wrong? How much do I owe others? Must I feed all the world's hungry? Or just the guy who lives in the alley behind my house?

Can we know what's right for others and if so, can we make them do it?

Mary Midgley "Trying out one's New Sword"

Martha Nussbaum, "Judging Other Cultures: The Case of Genital Mutilation"

How should we treat animals?

Peter Singer, "All Animals are Equal"

Michael Pollan, "An Animal's Place"

What should you do? Whatever leads to the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

John Stuart Mill, "Utilitarianism"

What do we owe to others? Utilitarianism and Kantianism in action.

Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality"

Onora O'Neill, "Kantian Approaches to Some Famine Problems"

Weeks 8-12. Unit III: Do we have free will? If we do not have free will, then we lose one of our best responses to the problem of evil. We also may lose our motivation to care about what is right: if what I do is not up to me, then why should I try to do the right thing? Perhaps we also lose our ability to praise and blame people: if what we do is not within our control, then how can we be held responsible for what we do?

Are we free? No, because determinism is true.

Paul Holbach, "The Illusion of Free Will"

"A brief introduction..." by Fisher, Kane, Vargas, and Pereboom in *Four Views on Free Will*

Freedom is compatible with determinism.

Harry Frankfurt, "Alternative Possibilities and Moral Responsibility"

Does insanity get us off the hook?

Susan Wolf, "Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility"

Application: Letting off the serial killer

Gary Watson, "Responsibility and the Limits of Evil: Variations on a Strawsonian Theme"