
Phil 1112

The (Ir)Rationality of Religious Belief

Uris 382, MWF 12.20-1.10

Instructor: Nate Bulthuis

E-Mail: neb67

Office Hours: M, 1-2, or by appt.

Office: Goldwin Smith 215

Course Description

Is belief in God ever rational? We will seek to answer this question by critically examining some recent and not-so-recent philosophical arguments about the rationality of religious belief. Related topics include the nature of faith, the relationship of religious belief to other kinds of belief (e.g. scientific, perceptual), and the relevance of wide-spread religious disagreement in the world to the rationality of religious belief. A central goal of this course is to develop the ability to write philosophy well - that is, the ability to provide clear, reasoned argument which successfully communicates the thoughts of the author. But such writing is often a by-product of engaged and critical reading. So not just writing well but reading well will be a central theme in this course.

Learning Outcomes

Philosophy at its best is clear, cogent, and insightful. This requires the ability to engage intelligently with the philosophical views of others. So in this course you will

- Learn to read a philosophical text slowly, carefully, and actively (get your pencils/pens/laptops out!)

Such engagement involves intense mental processing, and the best way to train yourself to think in this way is by learning to write philosophically. In writing a philosophical essay, you will

- Locate and state what the argument of a given text is
- Show through a clear explanation in your own words of the premises of an argument that you understand that argument
- Scrutinize that argument and the central premises in it, providing an analysis of the coherence of that argument and of the justification of its central premises
- Show through critical examination of various texts that you understand the central concepts at issue in this course, including but not limited to the concepts of belief, faith, rationality, proper basicity, normativity, and disagreement

Course Materials/Reading Assignments

With few exceptions, course materials will be made available to you *via* the course website. However, you must purchase the following book:

Faith and Rationality, edited by Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff [ISBN: 0268009651]

This book is available at the Cornell bookstore. It is also available online. I suggest bookfinder.com; it will often locate the least expensive option for any given book. Amazon.com is, as always, another good place to look. But please purchase a new copy; you don't need someone else's liner notes. We will need *Faith and Rationality* beginning week 7.

Reading assignments must be read before the first class of the week. Philosophical writing, even clear philosophical writing, is often difficult to understand on a first or a second reading. So I encourage you to read the required assignments a number of times, and engage those texts actively. Active engagement means marking up texts - highlighting, making comments in the margin of the text, etc. You will also be keeping a philosophical journal (also titled 'analytic journal' or simply 'journal') where you will be tasked with responding to some stretch of argument from the core texts of this course. These journals will be a central element of this course; you must complete one journal entry for each week of the course, beginning in week 2. Think of journal entries as one of the first stages in a larger writing project - a chance to try out ideas or raise questions. Journals are graded with a rudimentary check-plus (2 pts), check (1 pt), and check-minus (0 pt) grading scale. Check-plus denote especially good analysis of a text, and check-minus denotes a lack of intelligent engagement with the text. Please upload your journal entry for the week into the dialogue box provided in the journal entry section on the course website.

Writing Assignments & Workshops

Writing assignments are developed to help you think and write thoughtfully and critically about the philosophical texts that we will read in class and, more generally, about the central philosophical issues at stake. Writing assignments are due at the time and date listed on the posted assignment, and must be turned in through the course website in .doc or .docx format. All writing assignments that you submit will be considered public matter for the course. In other words, your work can be used in the instruction of this course itself - e.g., as an example of what writers in philosophy should strive to do. While perhaps such a practice may seem unnerving at first, we all learn best when we learn from each other. So be ready to share your work!

Standard Formatting Rules Apply. In other words, I expect 12pt Times New Roman font with what is equivalent to a 11x8.5 inch sheet with 1" margins on all sides.

At different points in the semester, we will conduct writing workshops, where students will be responsible for critically evaluating draft copies of the work of fellow students. The purpose of these workshops is (a) to receive valuable insight from your peers about your own work and (b) to critically examine the work of a fellow classmate, allowing you to both provide and gain insight about the writing process.

Grading

Grading will be determined by a combination of class participation (successful class participation requires having closely read the reading assignments for the week) and writing assignments. Below is a tentative breakdown of the weight of the factors which go into your grade, though evidence of improvement throughout the semester may be considered in the final grade assessment.

Attendance & Participation	15
Analytic Journal Entries	15
Essay 1	0
Essay 2	10
Essay 3	15
Essay 4	20
Essay 5	25

General Course Policies

Academic Integrity: I take issues of academic integrity seriously. Very seriously. I cannot emphasize this enough. Academic misconduct is often easy to discover by someone well read in the literature, and advances in technology have made this task even easier. You will be found out. The consequences for academic misconduct are also very high - at a minimum, failure of the assignment, and potentially expulsion from the university.

But I recognize that what counts as academic misconduct is often not clear to students just entering university. As a first step, please read the university's policy on academic integrity, paying close attention to what counts as academic misconduct. You should have received that policy in some materials given to you during orientation. You can also find the Cornell's policy on academic integrity here: <http://theuniversityfaculty.cornell.edu/pdfs/AIAckWorkRev90620.pdf>. At a minimum, academic integrity requires that you clearly acknowledge the source of quoted texts, particular arguments or objections, and more generally the source of ideas and concepts central to the claims you are making. If you are unsure whether a particular idea or argument merits attribution to another source, err on the side of caution. Part of the draft process will be learning when it is and is not appropriate to provide acknowledgment. But it is always better to start this process with too much acknowledgment than with too little. Additionally, feel free to talk to me whenever you have questions relating to issues of academic integrity.

Late Assignments: Late assignments will be docked one third of a letter grade for every 24 hours that they are late. E.g., a paper that would have received a B if turned in on time will receive a B- if turned in up to 24 hours late, a C+ if turned in up to 48 hours late, and so on. Exceptions to a due date will be given only in extreme circumstances, and must be approved by me at least 48 hours before the deadline of the assignment. Failure to turn in assignments of suitable quality before the end of the term will result in an incomplete for the course; in other words, you cannot simply not turn in an assignment, or turn in an assignment that does not evidence serious work.

Attendance: Attendance is expected at every class session. Due to the nature of this course, one missed session can set you back severely. Absences will be noted, and they will adversely affect your grade (see Grading above). Exceptions will be made only for university-approved reasons, including religious observance, physician-approved illness, or other university commitments. If you know of a date that you will be unable to attend class, please contact me in advance. It will make things easier both for me and for you.

Technology: I view technology as a tool, in and of itself having neither merit nor demerit. But I think recent electronic technology in particular has a tendency to distract from a learning environment. No cell phone use will be permitted in my class. Use of a computer requires prior authorization from me, and that use can only involve note-taking. Any evidence that a computer is being used for anything other than note-taking (e.g. checking email, surfing the internet) will result in immediate suspension of your right to use your computer in my class.

Academic Accommodation: I will make every opportunity to accommodate a student's needs, whether those involve particular physical or mental disabilities, conflicts with religious commitments, or other university-approved reasons. Please do not hesitate to ask.

	Topic	Reading(s)	
Week 1 1/20- 1/26	Core Concepts: God and Justification	Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Epistemology, §2, 4 Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, The Epistemology of Religion Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Philosophy of Religion, §4.1	Essay 1 final: 1/23
Week 2 1/27-2/2	Core Concepts: Religious Belief and Faith	S. MacDonald, <i>Christian Faith</i>	
Week 3 2/3-2/9	Evidentialism	W.K. Clifford, <i>The Ethics of Belief</i>	Essay 2 draft: 2/8
Week 4 2/10- 2/16	Evidentialism	W. James, <i>The Will to Believe</i>	
Week 5 2/17- 2/23	Verificationism	A.J. Ayer, <i>Critique of Theology</i> J. Hick, <i>Eschatological Verification</i>	Essay 2 final: 2/24
Week 6 2/24-3/2	The University Debate	Flew, Hare & Mitchell, <i>Theology and Falsification</i>	
Week 7 3/3-3/9	Fideism	N. Malcolm, <i>The Groundlessness of Belief</i> D.Z. Phillips, <i>Prayer and Verification</i>	
Week 8 3/10- 3/16	Reformed Epistemology, Week 1	W. Alston, <i>Christian Experience and Christian Belief</i> [Faith and Rationality]	Essay 3 final: 3/15
Week 9 3/24-30	Reformed Epistemology, Week 2	A. Plantinga, <i>Reason and Belief in God</i> [Faith and Rationality]	
Week 10 3/31-4/6	Reformed Epistemology, Week 3	N. Wolterstorff, <i>Can Belief in God Be Rational?</i> [Faith and Rationality]	Essay 4 draft: 4/1
Week 11 4/7-4/13	Reformed Epistemology, Week 4	{Reformed Epistemology Spillover Week}	Essay 4 final: 4/14
Week 12 4/14- 4/20	Religious Disagreement, Week 1	R. Feldman, <i>Reasonable Religious Disagreement</i>	Essay 5 draft: 4/21
Week 13 4/21- 4/27	Religious Disagreement, Week 2	G. Oppy, <i>Disagreement</i>	
Week 14 4/28-5/4	Religious Disagreement, Week 3	{End of Semester Spillover Week}	Essay 5 final: 5/5