

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY
Philosophy 589 – Advanced Topics in Philosophy
Topic 64: Scepticism and Faith
Winter 2009

Instructor: J. J. MacIntosh
Office: SS 1249
Phone: 403-220-3164
Email: macintos@ucalgary.ca

Office Hours: January 12 - April 14 (except February 17 and March 24) T 1:30 - 3:00 **or** by appointment. After April 14: by appointment. Note that this means what it says. You are not limited to T 1:30-3, but you may need to make an appointment. If you email me to ask for an appointment, please be sure to tell me the times you are available. Remember too that emails should be signed, and that emails without a clearly identifying subject line mentioning Phil 589 (or some similar identifying device) are likely to be deleted unread.

Course Description

This course meets jointly with PHIL 627.04.

In this course we shall be concentrating on a connected group of problems involving religious belief. Graham Oppy, in *Arguing about Gods*, has recently argued that there are *no* proofs *or* disproofs sufficient to change the mind of a rational person, whether believer, atheist, or agnostic. John Schellenberg, in *The Wisdom to Doubt*, presents us with “a justification of religious skepticism.” And in *Believing by Faith* John Bishop has argued for an “acceptable fideism.” So: are conclusive rational arguments, pro **or** con, unavailable in philosophy of religion? Is scepticism the only reasonable religious stance? Is fideism an alternative for rational inquirers? In this course we shall look in depth at the current discussion.

We shall concentrate on recent work by Bishop, Oppy and Schellenberg, while also considering the recent work of a number of other authors, including Terence Penelhum, William Alston, Richard Swinburne, Alvin Plantinga, John Mackie, and John Hick.

The following topics outline the main issues to be considered.

1. Background
 - 1.1 Religion and the supernatural
 - 1.2 Meaning of ‘God’
 - 1.3 The object of religious belief
 - 1.4 Ecumenicism and consistency

2. Fideism and scepticism
 - 2.1 Classical and contemporary fideism
 - 2.2 Scepticism and its consequences

3. Standard groups of proofs for God’s existence:
 - 3.1 Ontological arguments, positive and negative
 - 3.2 Cosmological arguments
 - 3.3 Design arguments
 - (a) General
 - (b) Arguments from religious experience

4. Pragmatic proofs

- 4.1 Pascal and Pascalian wagers
- 4.2 The Jamesian version
- 4.3 Probabilistic proofs

5. Disproofs

- 5.1 The major disproof: the problem of evil
- 5.2 Arguments from the irrationality of religious beliefs
- 5.3 Humean implausibility arguments
- 5.4 The case for scepticism revisited

At some point toward the end of term 15-20 minutes at the beginning of class will be used for the Faculty student survey.

Marks: Marks will be based on two tests. Each test will be worth 50% of the final mark. The first test will be an in-class test on Feb. 23; the second will be a take home test, given out on April 6, due April 13 (no late submissions accepted). After the first test students may, if they wish, submit an optional term paper. The term paper mark will, if higher, replace the test mark for the purpose of calculating the final mark, unless the test mark was an F, in which case that mark will stand. Deadline (firm) for term paper: two weeks after the return in class of the test. A draft of the paper may be submitted (hard copy or email) up to a week before the due date: comments and suggestions for improvement will usually be available the next day. The final version may be either a hard copy or an email submission or both. The same possibility holds for the take home test. If your paper is submitted electronically please submit it as a Microsoft word document, or an rtf document, or (particularly if it contains any logical or mathematical symbols) a pdf document. There will be no registrar-scheduled final examination. The optional term paper should be long enough to allow for an adequate *discussion*—a critical investigation of the considerations *for and against* a given position—of the topic with which the paper deals. In general, a length between 3,000 and 6,000 words would be appropriate for the optional term paper. Your mark may sometimes have a slash ('/') in it, thus: B/B+. In such cases the first mark is the official mark, the second shows which end of the mark you are closer to. An A-/B+ is an A- at the lower end; an A-/A is an A- at the upper end. Letter grade marks will be averaged by using GPA numerical equivalents.

Spelling and grammar: More than five grammatical or spelling mistakes on any one page of an optional term paper will lead to the paper being returned for corrections before a mark is assigned. Corrections are due within two days of the return. Two examples of the same mistake count as two mistakes. Standard U. S. spellings (e.g., 'neighbor' for 'neighbour', 'center' for 'centre', 'skeptic' for 'sceptic', etc.) are acceptable. Common mistakes in philosophy papers include: (1) misspellings of 'existence,' 'conceive,' 'argument,' and 'separate'; (2) the misuse of 'i.e.' for 'e.g.'; (3) the misuse of 'phenomena' and 'criteria' as singulars. They are plurals. The singulars are 'phenomenon' and 'criterion.' Finally there is (4) the increasingly common use of 'it's' as a possessive. Perhaps this almost ubiquitous error will become standard, but it has not done so yet, and just as we do not speak of "he's book," or "she's pen" so we should not refer to "it's colour." Of course you should avoid sexist language. In particular, remember that 'man' and 'he' are not gender neutral, and that 'girl' is not an appropriate term for adult women. (No doubt these remarks will have little practical relevance for *this* class; I put them in mainly to ensure that they remain unnecessary.)

Texts:

Graham Oppy, *Arguing about Gods* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)
John Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007)
John Bishop, *Believing by Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007)

Students should note that a number of works in philosophy of religion published by Oxford (including *Believing by Faith*, and many by Swinburne) are available on-line through our Library. As usual, students at this level will be expected to find and read relevant journal and other literature themselves.

Students' Union: The Students' Union has requested that instructors put the name of the appropriate Faculty Representative on course outlines in order to facilitate student consultation with the Students' Union. The Faculty Representative for Humanities this year is Daniel Pagan, MSC 251, 220-3913, humanitiesrep@su.ucalgary.ca.

Students with Disabilities: following is the University's statement regarding students with disabilities that may adversely affect their academic performance:

It is the student's responsibility to request academic accommodations. If you are a student with a documented disability who may require academic accommodation and have not registered with the Disability Resource Centre, please contact their office at 220-8237. Students who have not registered with the Disability Resource Centre are not eligible for formal academic accommodation. You are also required to discuss your needs with your instructor no later than fourteen (14) days after the start of this course

Plagiarism: It is not plagiarism to use, expand, or alter the argument of another person, provided that the source is clearly indicated. Giving your sources has three functions: first, it shows that you are not indulging in casual theft, hoping to pass off someone else's hard won ideas as your own; secondly, it allows your readers to check the matter out for themselves; and thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, it will allow *you*, on some future occasion, to find the original of a worthwhile but only half-remembered point. I do not expect plagiarism to be a problem in this particular class, but plagiarism is unfortunately a problem in our university and I hereby, *pro forma*, draw your attention to the University statement concerning

INTELLECTUAL HONESTY

Intellectual honesty is the cornerstone of the development and acquisition of knowledge and requires that the contribution of others be acknowledged. As a result, cheating or plagiarism on any assignment or examination is regarded as an extremely serious academic offence, the penalty for which may be an F on the assignment and possibly also an F in the course, academic probation, or requirement to withdraw. The University Calendar states that plagiarism exists when:

- *the work submitted or presented was done, in whole or in part, by an individual other than the one submitting or presenting the work (this includes having another impersonate the student or otherwise substituting the work of another for one's own in an examination or test;*
- *parts of the work are taken from another source without reference to the original author;*
- *the whole work (e.g., an essay) is copied from another source; and/or*
- *a student submits or presents work in one course which has also been submitted in another course (although it may be completely original with that student) without the knowledge of or prior agreement of the instructor involved.*

While it is recognized that scholarly work often involves reference to the ideas, data and conclusions of other scholars, intellectual honesty requires that such references be explicitly and clearly noted. Plagiarism is an extremely serious offence. Plagiarism occurs not only when direct quotations are taken from a source without specific acknowledgement, but also when original ideas or data from the source are not acknowledged. A bibliography is insufficient to establish which portions of the student's work are taken from external sources; footnotes or other recognized forms of citation must be used for this purpose.