

Ryerson University
Department of Philosophy

PH 8104: Philosophy of Religion (Fall 2010)

Contact Information:

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Course Description:

Contemporary analytic philosophy of religion is a vibrant sub-field within philosophy. This is a dramatic change from a few decades ago, when religious claims were thought to be not just false, but literally *meaningless*, and so did not receive much attention from analytic philosophers. Today, philosophers of religion debate a vast array of topics, including various models of God and the divine attributes; arguments for and against the existence of God; the relationships between faith and reason, religion and science, and religion and morality; particular doctrines held by religious traditions; and the relationship between different religions. In this course, we will narrow our focus to a set of arguments for the *non*-existence of God that are receiving considerable attention in the contemporary literature, including arguments from evil; arguments from reasonable non-belief; a series of arguments connected to the theistic idea that God chooses a possible world to make actual; and arguments that appeal to religious diversity and disagreement. In each case, our goals will be to clarify the steps in these arguments, the objections to these steps, and to subject both to critical scrutiny.

Evaluation Scheme:

Grades will normally be determined in the following manner:

Task	Value	Due Date and Submission Information
Short Response Papers In six of the twelve weeks, you will write a very short (2-3 page) paper in response to the readings for that week, <i>in advance of the class meeting</i> .	40%	Six Wednesdays of your choosing, 12:00pm. Email your paper to me at kraay@ryerson.ca . Your papers will be uploaded to Blackboard before the class meets on Wednesday evening.
Final Paper (10-20 pages)	40%	December 15 th , 12:00pm. Email your paper to me at kraay@ryerson.ca .
Contributions to Class Discussion	20%	

Course Policies for PH 8104:

Late Penalty

- Assignments submitted late without sufficient justification will be penalized at the rate of 10% per day, including weekends.

Alternate Arrangements

- Students shall inform the instructor, in advance, when they will miss a deadline for (1) medical reasons; (2) compassionate reasons; or (3) reasons covered under Ryerson's policy concerning accommodation of student religious, aboriginal, and spiritual observance. When circumstances do not permit informing the instructor in advance (e.g. in an emergency), the student must inform the instructor as soon as possible. Students who fail to abide by this requirement will be assigned a late penalty. Alternate arrangements may include the setting of a make-up test or assignment; transferring the weight of a missed test or assignment to another test or assignment, or extending a deadline. Ryerson's policy concerning alternate arrangements for medical and compassionate reasons may be found at www.ryerson.ca/senate/policies/pol134.pdf. Ryerson's policy concerning accommodation of student religious, aboriginal, and spiritual observance may be found at www.ryerson.ca/senate/policies/pol150.pdf.
 - (1) Medical Considerations:** In order for alternate arrangements to be made on medical grounds, the student must supply the instructor with a *Ryerson Medical Certificate*, or a letter on letterhead from a physician with the student declaration portion of the *Ryerson Medical Certificate* attached. The *Ryerson Medical Certificate* may be found at www.ryerson.ca/senate/forms/medical.pdf.
 - (2) Compassionate Considerations:** In order for alternate arrangements to be made on compassionate grounds, the student must supply the instructor with documentation supporting the claim, where possible.
 - (3) Religious, Aboriginal, and Spiritual Observance:** Students are strongly encouraged to notify instructors of an observance accommodation issue within the first two weeks of classes. Requests for accommodation of observance can be made informally or formally to the instructor. Informal requests will be made verbally through private discussion or through an email between the student and instructor. For formal requests, student must submit a clear explanation of the observance and requested accommodation along with a copy of the Accommodation of Student Religious, Aboriginal and Spiritual Observance form, which may be found at www.ryerson.ca/senate/forms/relobseryforminstr.pdf.
- Alternate arrangements will *only* be made on the basis of circumstances that are both (1) legitimate and (2) unforeseeable. Some examples of circumstances that typically fail to meet one or both of these conditions are: extra-curricular activities, employment obligations, multiple deadlines, and computer malfunctions.

Academic Misconduct

- For detailed information concerning academic misconduct and the relevant penalties, see Ryerson University's *Student Code of Academic Conduct* at www.ryerson.ca/senate/policies/pol60.pdf.
- Students should be aware that the instructor reserves the right to conduct an oral examination on the contents of any submitted assignment.

PH 8104: Provisional Schedule of Topics and Readings

All readings will be posted on the Blackboard site for this course. Students are expected to bring the readings to class each week, in either paper or electronic form. The list of readings below may be revised as the course progresses, depending on the interests of the class and the pace of discussion.

Week One: Introduction

No readings are assigned for the first week of this course. The first class will be used to orient students to the sub-discipline of philosophy of religion, and to cover some important foundational material.

Arguments from Actual Evil

The best-known and most influential objection to theism concerns evil. In this unit we will examine a few *inductive*, or *evidential*, arguments from the apparent existence of pointless evil in the actual world. We will also examine two important objections. The first attempts to block the inference from the claim that some evils *appear* pointless to the conclusion that, probably, some evils *are* pointless. The second attempts to cast doubt on the widespread claim that God would not permit any pointless evil to occur.

- William Rowe, Daniel Howard-Snyder, and Michael Bergmann (2004), “Is Evil Evidence Against the Existence of God?”
- Michael Bergmann (2009), “Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil”, pp.374-381; 386-399 only.
- William Hasker (2004), “Can God Permit ‘Just Enough’ Evil?”

Arguments from Reasonable Non-Belief

In this unit we will examine what has been called the “problem of divine hiddenness.” If theism is true, it has been argued, then no one could rationally *disbelieve* in God. (This claim is grounded in the idea that a loving being would seek a personal relationship with all creatures.) But, since it seems that disbelieving in God is perfectly rational for many individuals, some philosophers have concluded that God does not exist. We will examine several versions of this argument, and several theistic responses.

- J.L. Schellenberg (2004), “Divine Hiddenness Justifies Atheism”.
- Michael Murray (2002), “*Deus Absconitus*”.
- Andrew Cullison (forthcoming), “Two Solutions to the Problem of Divine Hiddenness”.

An Interlude: Would the World be Better With or Without God?

The debate about whether God actually exists is complex and multifaceted. But quite distinct from this debate is an important issue that has received scant attention in the literature: is it more reasonable to prefer that God exists, or to prefer that God does not exist, or to be indifferent? (How one answers this question will be determined by the value or disvalue one thinks God’s existence confers on the world.) We will critically examine each position.

- Guy Kahane (forthcoming), “Should we Want God to Exist?”.

Arguments from the Actual World’s not Being the Best Possible

We will begin this unit by covering some important preliminary matters pertaining to possible worlds, and to the theistic idea that God selects exactly one such world for actualization. We will then turn to a family of arguments for atheism that assume that there is a unique unsurpassable possible world. On this view, one

might expect God to actualize the best world. But it has been urged that the actual world is *not* the best possible, in which case atheism follows. This argument can be elaborated with reference to evil or divine hiddenness, but it need not be, so it is distinct from the arguments considered in foregoing units. After clarifying these arguments, we will evaluate two distinct responses.

- Robert Adams (1972), “Must God Create the Best?”.
- William Rowe (2004), “Must God Create the Best World?”.
- Bruce Reichenbach (1982), “Must God Create the Best Possible World?”.
- George Schlesinger (1977), “A New Solution” and “The Removal of Objections to the Last Solution”.

“The Problem of Perfection and Freedom” and “The Problem of No Best World”

We then turn to a family of arguments for atheism that assume that there is *no* unique unsurpassable world, but instead an infinite hierarchy of increasingly better worlds. These arguments typically run (roughly) as follows. If, no matter which world God chooses, there’s a better one available, then God’s *action* in creating a world is necessarily surpassable. And if God’s action in creating a world is necessarily surpassable, then *God* is necessarily surpassable. This result threatens theism, which, after all, insists on an unsurpassable deity. We will clarify this argument, and examine several influential responses.

- William Rowe (1993), “The Problem of Divine Perfection and Freedom”
- Bruce Langtry (1996), “God and the Best”
- Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder (1994): “How an Unsurpassable Being can Create a Surpassable World”
- Thomas Morris (1993), “Perfection and Creation”

“The Problem of Thanks and Praise”

Theists typically claim that God is properly to be thanked and praised for God’s actions. But theists also often hold that God is incapable of sin, and indeed incapable of performing anything other than the best action available. Some see a challenge for theism here, which we will explore in this unit.

- Daniel Howard-Snyder (2009), “The Puzzle of Prayers of Thanksgiving and Praise”

The Argument from *Possible Evil*

God is a traditionally held to be a necessary being – one who exists in all possible worlds. And it seems plausible to suppose that there are very bad possible worlds – ones that it would be morally impermissible for God to actualize. But if God is a necessary being who is the creator and sustainer of all that is, then in such worlds, God is *responsible for* their being actual. Since this is unacceptable, Guleserian (1983) claims, theists should either give up their belief in God, or dramatically revise their understanding of the divine attributes. We will critically examine this argument, along with two responses.

- Theodore Guleserian (1983), “God and Possible Worlds: The Modal Problem of Evil”
- Thomas Morris (1987), “The Necessity of God’s Goodness”
- Michael Almeida (forthcoming), “Theistic Modal Realism”

The Epistemic Challenge of Religious Diversity

Some philosophers have claimed to find an epistemic objection to theism grounded in the diversity of religious belief systems in the world. In this unit we will study and assess two influential philosophical positions on religious diversity: *exclusivism*, which holds that it need be neither immoral nor irrational to insist

on the truth of theism in the face of religious disagreement; and *pluralism*, which attempts to account for the data of religious diversity by understanding the competing truth-claims of religious systems as imperfect attempts to describe an unknowable ultimate reality.

- Alvin Plantinga (2000), “A Defence of Religious Exclusivism”
- David Basinger (2002), “Diversity and Epistemic Obligation”
- John Hick (1973), “Religious Pluralism and Ultimate Reality”
- John Hick (1989), “The Pluralistic Hypothesis”
- Keith Ward (1990), “Truth and the Diversity of Religions”

The Epistemology of (Religious) Disagreement

In our final unit, we will consider the epistemology of disagreement more generally. Suppose that two individuals (1) are *epistemic peers* – they possess the same intellectual virtues to roughly the same degree; and (2) have considered a shared body of evidence equally thoroughly. And suppose that these individuals disagree with respect to some proposition, and know that they disagree. On the one hand, it can seem that both individuals now possess a *rebutting defeater* for their position, and so should revise their beliefs accordingly. But on the other hand, there is a strong temptation to suppose that the fact of disagreement does not rationally require belief revision. We will canvass and evaluate various positions in this discussion.

- Richard Feldman (2007), “Reasonable Religious Disagreements”
- Thomas Kelly (2005), “The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement”
- Roger White (2005), “Epistemic Permissiveness”