

Special Topic: Atheism
Rel. 297, Fall 12

Instructor: Dr. Arash Naraghi

Office location: Comenius 106

Email: anaraghi@moravian.edu

Phone: (610) 625-7835

Office Hours: Tuesday 11am-12pm, Wednesday 4pm-5pm and by appointment.

Lectures: MW 2:35pm- 3:45pm, Main St. Campus, Comenius Hall, 105

Course Description:

Atheism is the belief that there is no God or gods. Many people believe that by denying the existence of God, we have to accept that there is no morality, and no meaning to life. And many people believe that atheism is the same as materialism or physicalism, i.e., the belief that the only things that exist are material objects. In this course, we provide a better understanding of what atheism is and what its consequences are. After discussing different conceptions of what atheism is, we discuss the following topics: (1) the origin and the function of religion from psychological and sociological perspectives. We specifically focus on Freud's view on religion in his book, *Future of an Illusion*, and Durkheim's in his book, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*; (2) then we examine the rationale behind atheism, i.e., how an atheist rationally defends his view. In this part, we first discuss atheist's objections to the arguments for the existence of God. Among all, we discuss The Argument from Design, The Cosmological Argument, The Moral Argument, and The Argument from Miracles. Then we discuss atheist's arguments for atheism; among all, The Argument from the Existence of Evil, and The Argument from Divine Hiddenness. (3) We also discuss why atheists refute the possibility of personal life after the bodily death in the light of different theories of personal identity. And (4) finally we discuss whether or not human life without God is meaningless.

Course Objectives:

- To develop an ability to read, interpret, analyze, and evaluate philosophical texts.
- To introduce students to major themes of ancient Greek philosophy.
- To facilitate thoughtful and respectful dialogue on important philosophical, moral, and religious issues.
- To understand the relevance of "fundamental questions" to everyday life concerns.
- To learn how to distinguish between good and bad pieces of reasoning.
- To diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes our mind against speculation.
- To enrich our intellectual imagination.
- To learn how to think and write things explicitly, clearly, and succinctly.
- To think creatively, and to be able to imagine alternatives about the nature of human condition.
- To exercise scholarly fairness, sympathy, and tolerance toward different conflicting views, and expand our intellectual horizon.

Required Texts:

- *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, David Hume, Penguin Classics, 1990, ISBN 978-0-14-044536-7.
- *Future of an Illusion*, Sigmund Freud, W. W. Norton & Company, 1989, ISBN 978-0-393-00831-9
- *Atheism and Theism*, J.C. Smart, Wiley-Blackwell, 2nd edition, 2002, ISBN 978-0-631-23259-9
- *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Emile Durkheim, Oxford University Press, 2008, ISBN 978-0-19-954012-9.
- *Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, Michael Martin, Cambridge University Press, 2008, ISBN 978-0-521-60367-6

(Some additional material will be posted on Blackboard. Please make sure you have access to Blackboard.)

Note: You will find that you get the most out of the course if you read each assignment before lecture and then re-read the assignment after the lecture.

Lecture attendance:

It is not possible to perform well in the course without attending lectures regularly. We will cover substantial amounts of material in the lectures not necessarily included anywhere in the readings. It is highly unlikely that you will learn this material adequately by, e.g., borrowing your friend's lecture notes. You have two class sessions you can miss with no question asked. Beyond those two class sessions, any further missed classes without a really good excuse (involving a note from your doctor, psychiatrist, parole officer, etc.) will cost you 2% of your final grade.

Academic honesty:

Students are required to honor academic integrity. The course imposes the application of Moravian College's Academic Honesty Policy. The policy is to be found at Moravian College's *Student Handbook*.

Important Note: Please turn off your cell phones before walking into class! If you are having an emergency that requires you to have your cell phone on, please tell me at the beginning of class. No text messaging is allowed during the class, and the use of computers should be strictly confined to the things directly related to the class.

Course requirements:

- (1) A regular final exam, scheduled for **Wed. December 12, at 8:30am**, plus a midterm (tentatively scheduled for **Wed. October 3**). You will receive Study Guide for the Midterm and Final Exams prior to the exams to know what kind of questions you should expect on the Midterm and Final Exams. Make up final exam will be administered only under the most extraordinary of circumstances, and only in light of appropriate supporting documents.
- (2) One paper (700-1500 words). On **October 24**, the paper topic will be posted on Blackboard. The paper due is **November 7**. Paper should be typed, double spaced, and spell-checked. You are responsible to submit a hard copy of your paper. In some exceptional cases, you may be allowed to submit your paper through email. If so, you must receive a confirmation email from me,

otherwise, you must assume that I have not received your paper. If the paper is turned in late without prior permission, the grade will be adjusted downwards by a third of a grade for each day the paper is late (e.g., A to A-, A- to B+, B+ to B, etc.). It is always helpful to discuss the draft of your paper with your friends, roommates, or classmates so as to solicit feedback.

- (3) You will be required to write some short paragraphs (roughly two pages) consist of your critical evaluation of the material to be discussed in the class. In the paragraphs, you should concentrate on a specific concept, theme or question. You are required to complete 5 assignments of this sort by the end of the semester, that is, you have the option of choosing 5 out of roughly 7 assignments I am to assign throughout the semester. The topic for the reflecting paper will be posted on Wed., and the due date will be the next Wed.
- (4) You will be divided into two groups, and groups are required to participate in 5 class discussions. As a group you receive a grade between 0 and 10 for each discussion. If you miss a discussion, you individually receive 0 for that discussion, unless you have an extremely good excuse for your absence. If your absence is excused, then I will decide how you may make up for the missing discussion. However, if you miss more than one discussion, the make up policy applies only to one of them, and you will receive 0 for the rest.

Important note: *By the end of the semester, all five above-mentioned requirements (midterm exam, final exam, weekly assignments, paper, and class discussions) must be completed in order to pass the course. In order words, if you miss at least one of the above requirements, we will fail the course automatically.*

Grading:

Final Exam: 30% - Midterm Exam: 30%- Paper: 20% - Class discussions: 10% - Weekly Paragraphs: 10%.

The grading scale is as follows:

| Points | Grade | 4-point conversion |
|--------|-------|--------------------|
| 95-100 | A | 4 |
| 90-95 | A- | 3.7 |
| 87-90 | B+ | 3.3 |
| 84-87 | B | 3 |
| 80-84 | B- | 2.7 |
| 77-80 | C+ | 2.3 |
| 74-77 | C | 2 |
| 70-74 | C- | 1.7 |
| 67-70 | D+ | 1.3 |
| 64-67 | D | 1 |
| 60-64 | D- | 0.7 |
| 0-60 | F | 0 |

Tentative Lecture Schedule:

Part I: What is Atheism? (Preliminary Remarks): August 27, 29.

Readings:

- “Atheism and Religion”, by Michael Martin, in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, Ch. 13.
- “Naturalism and Physicalism”, by Evans Fales, in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, Ch. 7.

Part II: Freud on the Origin and the Function of Religion: September 5, 10,

Readings:

- *Future of an Illusion*

First Discussion: September 12.

Part III: Durkheim on the Origin and the Function of Religion:

September 17,19, 24, 26

Readings:

- *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*

Second Discussion: October 1

Midterm Exam: October 3

Part IV:

Section One: Arguments for the Existence of God: October 10, 15, 17, 22

1. Argument from Design
2. Cosmological Argument
3. Moral Argument
4. Argument from Miracles

Section Two: Arguments against the Existence of God: October 24, 29, 31, Nov.5

The Problem of Evil

1. Divine Hiddenness

Readings:

- *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*
- *Atheism and Theism*, Ch. 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12.

Third Discussion: November 7.

Part V: Life After Death: Nov. 12, 14.

Reading:

- *Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality*, John Perry (Will be posted on Blackboard)

Fourth Discussion: Nov. 19

Part VI: Meaning of Life: Nov. 26, 28

- “The Absurd”, Thomas Nagle (Will be posted on Blackboard)
- “A Free Man’s Worship”, Bertrand Russell (Will be posted on Blackboard)
- “The Meaning of Human Existence”, Richard Taylor (Will be posted on Blackboard)

Fifth Discussion: Dec. 3

Review Session: December 5 (The Last Day of Classes)

The Final Exam will be held on Wednesday, December 12, 2012, at 8:30am, Comenius Hall, 105.

Important Notes:

- Students who wish to request accommodations in this class for a disability should contact Elaine Mara, Assistant Director of Learning Services for Academic and Disability Support, 1307 Main Street, or by calling 610-861-1510. Accommodations cannot be provided until authorization is received from the Academic Support Center..
- The Writing Center is located in a building that is not accessible to persons with mobility impairments. If you need the services of the Writing Center, please call 610-861-1392. The Writing Center tutors will make arrangements with the student who needs tutoring services to meet in an accessible location, such as the library or a study/conference room in PPHAC.