**Introduction to Philosophy**

(Religion 414)

Instructor: Kurt Prescott

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**Course Description**

What is really real? How do I know what I know? Do I have free will? What is the good? These and other speculative questions have troubled the Western mind for millennia. This course follows a topical approach to the history of Western philosophy and focuses on such issues as metaphysics, epistemology, the problem of evil, the philosophical roots of ethics, and existentialism. Students will read from the works of ancient and modern writers such as Plato, Aristotle, Sartre, Kant, Hume, Bentham, and Camus to assist them in coming to their own understanding of these topics. Students will discover what philosophy is and how philosophers question and reason.

**Course Requirements, Evaluation, and Policies**

**I. Required Text(s):** Readings will be handed out in class, which will include the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Sartre, Kant, Hume, Bentham, and Camus, among others.

**II. Evaluation**

**i. Classroom Preparation/Participation (30%) –** Students are expected to come to class prepared and ready to engage with one another. More often than not, we will be making use of the Harkness method, which means bringing questions and observations to class based on careful reading, stepping back to look at the bigger picture of our study as we move along, listening to and drawing out your classmates, and in general forming a community of inquiry into our subject. Smaller homework assignments will be factored into this grade.

**ii. Short Essays (45%) –** Short papers (max. three pages) will be assigned periodically throughout the term. They are concise by design and will necessitate clear and thoughtful articulation of one’s ideas.

**iii. Final Project (25%) –** This will take the form of a 4-5 page essay, due during exam period. Details and logistics will be discussed later in the term.

**iv. Late Work –** Please note that technological problems will likely occur, are difficult to verify, and are consequently not an acceptable excuse for lateness. Plan accordingly!If you feel that you will be unable to complete an assignment by the due date, please speak to me in advance about the possibility of an extension (at least 48 hours). It is **unacceptable** to wait until the due date to ask for an extension. Late papers will receive a grade no higher than that of a C and will be marked down 1/3 of a letter grade for each additional day of lateness.

**v. Grading Philosophy –** A short note on grades: I do not grade on a curve but according to standards derived from my own teaching experience. Students start in the middle (B-/C+) and work their way up or down. “A” work stands out in all respects, not just meets the requirements: it is cogent, complete, and accurate, showing the ability to use what you know, not just regurgitate it; “B” work is excellent as far as it goes but is less complete; “C” work is acceptable, but less complete, increasingly inaccurate or careless; “D” work is severely deficient and often inaccurate. I will be happy to discuss with you at anytime the consistency with which I have applied these standards, but not about the standards themselves.

**III. Religious Observances –** Some students may wish to take part in religious observances that fall during the term. Should you have a religious observance that conflicts with participation in the course, please contact me as soon as possible to discuss appropriate accommodations.

**IV. Disabilities –** Students with learning, physical, or psychiatric disabilities who may require disability-related classroom accommodations are encouraged to see me as soon as possible to discuss your particular needs. All discussions will remain confidential, though I may consult Student Health Services to discuss appropriate implementation of any accommodation requested.

**V. Illness –** As noted above under Classroom Preparation/Participation, regular attendance is essential if one is to succeed in this course. However, I recognize illness is an unavoidable part of any academic year. If you will not be able to attend class due to illness, **it is the student’s responsibility** to e-mail me so that appropriate plans can be made to make up missed work. Failure to do so could potentially harm one’s grade.

**VI. Academic Integrity** – Please review the material on page five of the school handbook and note that plagiarism is rarely successful and will result in the severest of consequences. Proper citation is always required – when in doubt, cite!

**Schedule of Assignments**

**(Please note that assignments are subject to change)**

**Unit 1: Metaphysics and Epistemology**

**Thursday, September 24 – Metaphysics/Review**

* Due: Paper

**Monday, September 28 – A Phenomenological Perspective**

* Read: David Abram, “Philosophy on the Way to Ecology: A Technical Introduction,” in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, pp. 32-53.

**Wednesday, September 30 – Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Intersubjectivity**

* Read: David Abram, “Philosophy on the Way to Ecology: A Technical Introduction,” in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, pp. 53-72.

**Unit 2: Free Will and Determinism**

**Thursday, October 1 – Oedipus and Predestination**

* Read: Sophocles, “Oedipus, King of Thebes,” in *Philosophy: A Literary and Conceptual Approach*, ed. Burton F. Porter, pp. 206-223.

**Monday, October 5 - Marx & Engels: Economic Determinism**

* Read: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “The Communist Manifesto,” in *Philosophy: A Literary and Conceptual Approach*, ed. Burton F. Porter, pp. 248-257.
* Due: Short Response

**Thursday, October 8 - B.F. Skinner and Behaviorism**

* Read: Ken Heyman, “Skinner’s Utopia: Panacea, or Path to Hell?,” *TIME* (September 20, 1971), pp. 47-53.

**Columbus Day Break!**

**Thursday, October 15 - Sartre and the Affirmation of Free Will**

* Read: John-Paul Sartre, “The Humanism of Existentialism,” in *Philosophy: A Literary and Conceptual Approach*, ed. Burton F. Porter, pp. 481-491.
* Due: Question Sheet

**Monday, October 19 - David Hume and Compatibilism**

* Read: David Hume, “Of Liberty and Necessity,” in *About Philosophy*, ed. Robert Paul Wolff, pp. 110-117.
* Due: Short Response

**Unit 3: The Problem of Evil**

**Thursday, October 22 - Matthew 4: The Temptation of Jesus**

* Due: Paper

**Monday, October 26 - The Grand Inquisitor: Free Will and Suffering**

* Read: Fedor Dostoevsky, excerpt from *The Brothers Karamazov*, in *Philosophy: A Literary and Conceptual Approach*, ed. Burton F. Porter, pp. 83-99.
* Due: Reading Response

**Wednesday, October 28 – Leibniz: The Best of Worlds?**

* Read: Gottfried W. Leibniz, excerpt from *Discourse on Metaphysics*, in *Philosophy: A Literary and Conceptual Approach*, ed. Burton F. Porter, pp. 144-150.
* Due: Reading Response

**Thursday, October 29 - Voltaire: Evil as a Reality to be Overcome?**

* Read: Genesis 2:4 to 3:24.
* Read: Voltaire, excerpt from *Candide*, in *Philosophy: A Literary and Conceptual Approach*, ed. Burton F. Porter, pp. 151-164.

**Monday, November 2 - Kierkegaard: Abraham and Absolute Faith**

* Read: Genesis 22
* Read: Søren Kierkegaard, excerpt from *Fear and Trembling*, in *Philosophic Classics: From Plato to Derrida,* eds. Forrest E. Baird and Walter Arnold Kaufmann, pp. 197-215.
* Due: Reading Response

**Thursday, November 5 - Film: God on Trial**

* Read: Lance Morrow, “Evil” *TIME* (June 10, 1991), pp. 40-45.

**Monday, November 9 - The Book of Job**

* Read: Job 1:1-2:10; 10:1-22; 21:1-34; 24:1-25; 38:1-40:2; 42:1-17
* Due: Paper

**Unit 4: Ethical Ideals**

**Wednesday, November 11 - Teleological Ethics: Utilitarianism**

* Read: Robert Paul Wolff, “Introduction,” in *About Philosophy*, ed. Robert Paul Wolff, pp. 331-337.
* Read: Jeremy Bentham, “The Principle of Utility,” in *About Philosophy*, ed. Robert Paul Wolff, pp. 338-345.
* Read: Norman E. Bowie and Robert L. Simon, “Some Problems with Utilitarianism,” in *Reason at Work: Introductory Readings in Philosophy*, eds. Stephen M. Kahan, Patricia Kitcher, and George Sher, pp. 81-84.

**Thursday, November 12 - Deontological Ethics: The Categorical Imperative**

* Read: Immanuel Kant, excerpt from *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, pp. 85-104.
* Due: Short Questions

**Monday, November 16 - Ethical Relativism**

* Read: Edward Westermarck, “The Relativity of Ethics,” in *About Philosophy*, ed. Robert Paul Wolff, pp. 389-401.

**Thursday, November 19 - Applied Ethics**

* Read: Case 5.1, “Yahoo in China,” in *Moral Issues in Business*, eds. William H. Shaw and Vincent Barry, pp. 248-249.
* Due: Short Paper

**Thanksgiving Break!**

**Unit 5: Existentialism**

**Monday, November 30 - Despair, Faith, and Becoming a Self**

* Read: Søren Kierkegaard, excerpt from *The Sickness Unto Death*, in *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, ed. Robert Bretall, pp. 339-349, 351-353, 360-361, 365-366.
* Due: Reading Response

**Thursday, December 3 - Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd**

* Read: Albert Camus, “The Plague,” in *Philosophy: A Literary and Conceptual Approach*, ed. Burton F. Porter, pp. 471-480.

**Monday, December 7** - **Research Session**

* No assigned readings; class will meet in the library to work on final projects

**Wednesday, December 9 - Hell is Other People**

* Read: Jean-Paul Sartre, “No Exit”, pp. 3-46.

**Thursday, December 10 - The Matrix & Philosophy**

* No assigned readings

**Monday, December 14 - Reading Day**

* I will be available in Blake Hall for questions related to final projects. Please e-mail me to make an appointment.

**Wednesday, December 16 - Final Exam Block (12:30 to 2:30)**

* Due: Final Research Paper

**Bibliography**

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*God on Trial*. DVD. Directed by Andy DeEmmony. 2008; Boston, MA: WGBH Boston Video, 2009.

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Sartre, Jean-Paul. “The Humanism of Existentialism.” *Philosophy: A Literary and Conceptual Approach.* Ed. Burton F. Porter. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974. 481-491.

Shaw, William H. and Vincent Barry. *Moral Issues in Business*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2010.

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Wolff, Robert Paul. *About Philosophy*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995.