

Philosophy 201: Introduction to Philosophy

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Summary. This course will be an introduction to three of the fundamental topics of Western philosophy:

- *God.* Can we prove the existence of God, either from evidence about the world or from pure reason? Does the prospect of eternal reward make belief in God rational? Can we disprove the existence of God? Is the existence of God compatible with the amount and kind of evil which exists in the world? Does rationality require that we have reasons for believing in God?
- *Free will.* Do people have free will? Is free will compatible with determinism? Is belief in free will compatible with a scientific view of the world?
- *Knowledge and skepticism.* Is our habit of reasoning by induction justified? Does science deliver knowledge? Does the concept of knowledge lead to paradox?

A principal aim of the course will be to teach students to recognize and produce good arguments. We will spend a bit of time at the beginning of the course, and occasionally throughout, discussing what good arguments are, and why they might be worth pursuing.

Requirements. The course has no prerequisites, and is open to students with an interest, but no university level background, in philosophy. There will be four written assignments: a short 1 page paper (worth 10% of the grade), a midterm (30%), a 5-page paper (30%), and a final exam (30%). Your grade may also be adjusted on the basis of participation in sections or improvement throughout the semester.

Texts. There is one required text: a course pack (available at the McGill Bookstore). The readings will also be on reserve in the library.

“McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see <http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity> for more information).”

“L’université McGill attache une haute importance à l’honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l’on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon le Code de conduite de l’étudiant et des procédures disciplinaires (pour de plus amples renseignements, veuillez consulter le site <http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity>).”

SYLLABUS

1 God

1.1 *The ontological argument*

Reading. Anselm, *Proslogion* (selection); Gaunilo, ‘A reply on behalf of the fool.’

Anselm’s argument that the fact that we can conceive of God shows that God exists; a reply to the argument by one of Anselm’s contemporaries.

1.2 *The design argument*

Reading. Paley, *Natural Theology* (selection); Hume, *Dialogues on Natural Religion* (selection).

Paley’s argument that the complexity and design of the world can only be explained by the existence of God; Hume’s argument that the observed design of the world provides no evidence for the existence of God.

1.3 *The cosmological argument*

Reading. Aquinas, ‘Whether God exists?’ from *Summa Theologica*; Leibniz, ‘On the Ultimate Origination of Things.’

Several different versions of the argument that the existence of a universe of contingent things requires explanation in terms of creation by God.

1.4 *Miracles*

Reading. Pascal, ‘The Miracles’ (section XIII, §§803-56 of the *Pensées*); Hume, ‘Of Miracles’ (§10 of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*).

Pascal’s statement of the importance of miracles for religious belief, and Hume’s argument that we are not rationally justified in believing in God on the basis of miracles.

1.5 *The problem of evil*

Reading. Mackie, ‘Evil and omnipotence’; Swinburne, ‘Why God allows evil.’

The most prominent argument against the existence of God is the ‘argument from evil’: the argument that the existence of God is incompatible with the kind of evil we observe in the world. We will read one contemporary proponent, and one opponent, of the argument.

1.6 Pascal's wager

Reading. Pascal, *Pensées*, §233 ('The Wager').

Pascal's argument that it is rational to believe in God on the basis of the knowledge that if God exists, belief in God yields an infinite reward.

2 Free will

2.1 Divine foreknowledge and human freedom

Reading. Aquinas, 'Whether the knowledge of God is of future contingent things?' (from the *Summa Theologica*); Jonathan Edwards, *Free Will* (selections).

We have seen in our discussion of the existence of God that human free will seems necessary to reconcile the existence of God with the existence of evil in the world. But free will has seemed to many to be incompatible with one of the traditional attributes of God: omniscience.

2.2 The determinist challenge to free will

Reading. Laplace, 'A Philosophical Essay on Probabilities'; Holbach, 'The Illusion of Free Will.'

A second challenge to free will comes from the thesis of determinism: the view, roughly, that future events are necessitated by past events along with the laws of nature.

2.3 Free will as compatible with determinism

Reading. Frankfurt, 'Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility' and 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person.'

Frankfurt argues that many cases where someone could not have acted otherwise are clear cases of free action, and develops a theory of free action on which we can act freely whether or not determinism is true.

2.4 Free will as incompatible with determinism

Reading. van Inwagen, 'The Powers of Rational Beings: Freedom of the Will' (ch. 12 of his *Metaphysics*).

van Inwagen argues, contra Frankfurt, that free will is incompatible with determinism; but agrees with Frankfurt that we have free will.

3 Knowledge and skepticism

3.1 *The classical problem of induction*

Reading. Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, section IV, ‘Sceptical doubts concerning the operations of the understanding.’

Much of what we ordinarily take ourselves to know, in both science and every day life, rests on inductive inferences. We will discuss Hume’s argument for the conclusion that, in a sense to be explained, those inferences rest on mere faith.

3.2 *The new riddle of induction*

Readings. Nelson Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast* (selection).

Goodman’s ‘new riddle of induction’ presents another challenge to the rationality of our ordinary scientific practice of drawing general conclusions from limited perceptual evidence.

3.3 *Paradoxes of knowledge*

Readings. John Hawthorne, *Knowledge and Lotteries* (selection); Hart and McGinn, ‘Knowledge and Necessity’; Ned Hall, ‘How to set a surprise exam’ (selections).

The concept of knowledge has been thought by many not only to be open to skeptical doubts, but also to engender paradox. We will discuss three paradoxes of knowledge: the lottery paradox, the paradox of knowability, and the surprise exam paradox.