

Philosophy 201: Introduction to Philosophy

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Winter 205

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?
- *The self.* Are persons identical with immaterial souls? Are persons material objects? How are persons related to consciousness, or memory? What is it for a person to continue to exist through time? Does personal identity matter?
- *Skepticism.* Is our habit of reasoning by induction justified? Are our habits of ascribing moral properties to agents and holding them morally responsible undermined by the reliance of moral properties on luck?

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 intended to serve students with an interest, but no university level background, in philosophy. The course should also be suitable for students with some background in philosophy interested in the questions to be discussed in the course.

Texts. There are two required texts: a course pack (available at the McGill Bookstore), and John Perry's *A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality* (available at Paragraphe Books). The readings will also be on reserve in the library.

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1 God

1.1 The ontological argument

Reading. Anselm, *Proslogion* (selections); 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 cosmological argument

Reading. Aquinas, 'Whether God exists?' from *Summa Theologica*.

Aquinas's five ways of showing that God exists on the basis of observable facts about the world.

1.3 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.

1.4 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.

1.5 Pascal’s wager

Reading. Pascal, *Pensees*, §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.

1.6 Belief, justification, and proof

Reading. van Inwagen, “It is wrong, everywhere, always, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.”

We will discuss the question of what the rational requirements on belief are in cases which do not admit of proof one way or the other.

2 The self

2.1 Theories of the self

Reading. Perry, *A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality*; Locke, *Essay on Human Understanding* (II.xxvii.9-29).

We will discuss the question of what persons are. We will consider, among others, the views that persons are material objects, that they are immaterial souls, and that personal identity is a matter of a kind of continuity of conscious experience.

2.2 Does personal identity matter?

Reading. Parfit, “Personal identity”; Lewis, “Survival and identity.”

An argument that personal identity should matter less to us in our practical reasoning than it in fact does, and a reply.

3 Skepticism

3.1 *The problem of induction*

Reading. Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, section IV, ‘Sceptical doubts concerning the operations of the understanding’; Strawson, “The justification of induction.”

Hume’s discussion of the difficulty in explaining our justification for inductive reasoning; Strawson’s attempt to dissolve the problem.

3.2 *The new riddle of induction*

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

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

3.3 *Morality and luck*

Readings. Nagel, “Moral luck.”

An argument that possession of many of the properties which we use in moral evaluation is based, in many cases, on luck; how this leads to skepticism about moral evaluation and attributions of moral responsibility.