6AANB025 Philosophy of Religion

Course title  Philosophy of Religion
Course code  6AANB025
Value  15 Credits
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Aims and learning outcomes

Aims

The aim of this course is to give students an understanding of the contemporary debate in the philosophy of religion. Religious beliefs raise many distinctive philosophical issues which relate to central areas of philosophy, especially epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics. For example, Philosophy of Religion deals with the rationality of religious belief, proofs of God’s existence, the possibility of miracles, the problem of evil, divine command theories of ethics, and religious language. This module covers a selection of such issues. It intends to encourage students to think critically about different approaches to central questions in the philosophy of religion, and to show how contemporary philosophy of religion relates to traditions of philosophical thought about God and religious truth.

Learning outcomes

Generic skills
By the end of the course the student will be able to demonstrate an advanced ability:- to analyse texts and arguments
to summarise and present arguments
to research, plan and present essays to specified deadlines

Course specific skills
Students should become familiar with some key thinkers in contemporary philosophy of religion; understand contemporary theories on religious belief; understand the main strengths and weaknesses of contemporary arguments in philosophy of religion in the light of past philosophical traditions.

Teaching arrangements

This level 6 module is taught in Semester II with 1 hour weekly lectures and 1 hour weekly seminars.
Course description and teaching plan

In the first five weeks of the course we will be looking at natural atheology. We will be considering what might be called "arguments via naturalism" against the existence of God, along with traditional "arguments from evil". (Arguments via naturalism arrive at the nonexistence of God via some version of the premise that all there are, are atoms and the void). Although reference will be made to some historical sources (e.g. Aquinas), for the most part, readings will be taken from contemporary sources (e.g. Mackie, Sainsbury, Plantinga, Shalkowski). The last five weeks of the course will focus on contemporary religious epistemology (e.g. Alston, Hick, Plantinga, Swinburne). Students will gain an understanding of the contemporary debate on religious epistemology through an analytical survey of some of the most important answers to the question of how, if at all, belief in God can be rationally justified.

The course will be taught over 10 weeks (exclusive of reading week).

First part of the course

Week 1: Atheism and the Burden of Proof


Week 2: Atheism and Naturalism

    Armstrong, "Naturalism, Materialism, and First Philosophy", *Philosophia* 8 (2-3):261-276

Week 3: The Logical Argument from Evil and the Free Will Defence

    Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence", *Mind* 64, 254 (1955)


Week 4: The Logical Argument from Evil and Redeeming Goods


Week 5: The Evidential Argument from Evil and "Skeptical Theism"


W. Alston, “Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts on the Evidential Arguments from Evil" (in The Evidential Argument from Evil)

**Second part of the course**

Week 6

Introduction: the rational justification of religious belief.
Natural Theology. Richard Swinburne.


Week 7

The epistemology of religious experience I (Richard Swinburne and John Hick).


Week 8

The epistemology of religious experience II (William Alston).


Week 9

Reformed epistemology I (Alvin Plantinga: The ‘proper basicality’ of religious beliefs).

Alvin Plantinga, ‘Is Belief in God Properly Basic?’, ch. 9 in Geivett – Sweetman, *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*.


Week 10

Reformed epistemology II (Alvin Plantinga: the notion of ‘warrant’).

Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. vii-xvi (‘Preface’) and ch. 6 (pp. 167-198).


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Seminars: weekly meetings for 10 weeks (excluding reading week). See above for weekly reading.
Assessment

The assessment consists of two parts:

1. Summative assessment: 1 x 2-hour exam in May/June (Period II).
2. Formative assessment: 2 x 1,000-word essays, to be submitted to your teaching tutor.

1. Exam:

The course will be assessed through one 2-hour unseen written examination (100% of final grade).

2. Formative Essays:

The mark does not count toward the final grade. However, students MUST submit two formative essays (1,000 words each) by the deadlines indicated below. Students who do not submit their essays will fail the module. Extensions can be granted only by the course convenor, Dr Hughes, and only in exceptional circumstances (e.g. illness). If you need an extension present your reasons to your teaching tutor who will contact Dr Hughes.

First Essay (1000 words) to be emailed to your teaching tutor by Monday 27 February.
Second Essay (1000 words) to be emailed to your teaching tutor by Friday 6 April.

Essay Titles

Atheism, Broad and Narrow

(1) What is naturalism? Does it imply atheism? Are there (on-balance) good reasons to be an atheist?

(2) What is the strongest argument against the coherence of the concept of God? How good is it?

(3) Why, if at all, should one think that, even though there are no reasons to disbelieve in God, there are reasons to disbelieve in a perfect (i.e. all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful, and entirely practically rational) God?

Religious Experience and the Justification of Religious Belief

(1) Are there good (sola ratione) arguments for supernaturalism—that is, the view that reality does not consist exclusively of things in nature (together with, perhaps, abstract entities)? If so, are there good (sola ratione) arguments for the existence of God?
(2) What is the principle of credulity? Does it play an essential role in the justification of religious beliefs?

(3) What is “epistemic circularity” (as Alston understands it)? Do attempts to justify religious belief sooner or later exhibit epistemic circularity? If so, what implications, if any, does that have for the justification of religious belief?

(4) “Attempts to settle the question of the reasonability of belief in God, while leaving open the question of its truth, are bound to fail.” Discuss.

BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR SECOND PART OF THE COURSE

Introductions and surveys

Brief introductions:


Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy (available on line: see University of London databases): Religion and epistemology [A. Plantinga]; Internalism and externalism in epistemology [by W. Alston].


More advanced:


Anthologies

A number of papers which will be read during seminars are included in R. Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetman (eds.), Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.


Journals

Some of the most important journals in the philosophy of religion are: International Journal for Philosophy of Religion, Faith and Philosophy, Religious Studies and Sophia. JSTOR is particularly useful for finding journal articles.

1) Natural theology


T. Penelhum, Problems of Religious Knowledge, London: Macmillan, 1971 (Ch. 3 ‘Not being Able to Prove the Existence of God’).


2) The Epistemology of Religious Experience


3) **Reformed epistemology**


P. L. Quinn, P. L., "In Search of the Foundations of Theism" in *Faith and Philosophy* 2 October 1985, p.469-86


Stewart C. Goetz, ‘Belief in God Is Not Properly Basic,’ ch. 12 in Geivett – Sweetman, Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology.


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INTUTE: Philosophy: “Web resources for the study of ideas concerning the nature of reality, value, and experience, as well as Philosophy's own history. … Each resource has been evaluated and categorised by subject specialists based at UK universities.”

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