

PHST 4811 DOES GOD EXIST?

Anselm Ramelow, O.P.

Fall 2020

Time: W 9:40-12:30pm

Location: online, by Zoom; and if again possible: DSPT #2

3 units

[15 max enrollment; Auditors excluded]

Office Hours:

By appointment: I can be reached under (415) 567 7824 (St. Dominic's Parish, ask for Fr. Anselm) or aramelow@dspt.edu; I am also available after class.

Course description:

More recently a kind of "evangelical new atheism" has gained momentum and wishes to present a challenge to all those who believe in God or have religion. In response, the case has been made that this atheism is its own kind of religion. In this seminar, however, we do not want to take on the current polemics (although we will not avoid them either), but rather take them as an occasion to revisit the rational resources that are available to people of faith. We will study arguments for and against the existence of God in their historical development and explore their argumentative force.

Format

The format of the class is a seminar; attendance and participation in the discussion is therefore important. There will be a **synchronous** modality, consisting in the weekly class meetings on Zoom (= 100% of *class* time), and an **asynchronous** element, consisting in the assigned readings, your research for and writing of the paper (including the paper proposal), as well as the distribution of handouts in anticipation of class sessions, as described below. I will send out a group email at the beginning of the course that can serve for further asynchronous engagements at the initiative of the students: you may, at any time, raise a question by replying to the whole group and start a conversation (participation in this conversation, however, is *optional*).

Please notice that you need to be familiar with **Zoom**, and how to access it through **Moodle** (help can be found [here](#); you can also contact Moodle support at moodle@gtu.edu. Students will receive a response within 24 hours).

- To access Moodle, visit: moodle.gtu.edu and log in using your school email address and password.
- In Moodle, the course will appear in your *Dashboard* under *Courses*. All course content including lectures, readings, activities, assignments, and discussions will be posted on our Moodle course page.
- Google Chrome or Mozilla Firefox are recommended to access Moodle. Safari is not recommended.
- Students can also use their smartphone to access Moodle. When accessing Moodle from a mobile device, students should use a browser instead of the mobile app.

Technology Requirements

Students should have the following technology on hand in order to actively engage in the course and complete all course requirements:

- A computer, laptop, or tablet with an updated operating system (Windows, Mac, Linux) and an internet browser (Chrome or Firefox)
- A webcam
- A microphone

As an **outcome**, the student will have gained an understanding of the various types of proofs for the existence of God, their historical context and the status of such proofs in general. The student will be able to defend or articulate critically various arguments orally as well as in research and writing.

The student will demonstrate this knowledge through

- Class participation and contribution to the discussions.
- Taking turns in preparing texts that are to be discussed in class.
- a 15-20pp research paper (75%)

This will include an evaluation of the student in the following areas:

- Deep Learning** ([Institutional Goal A.1](#) and 2): based on the paper, according to the published [rubrics of assessment](#).
- Collaborative learning** (Institutional Goal B.1); based on
 - class participation
 - the paper proposal you are submitting and integration of feedback
 - your contribution to the common good of the class:
 - class preparation
 - class participation
- Self-direction** (Institutional Goal A.3):
finding your own paper topic will demonstrate this ability
- Leadership** (Institutional Goal B.1)
Your paper and its topic can be an opportunity to show that you can identify relevant issues and address them.

Students will take turns in the **class preparation**: this preparation should articulate the argument of the text in a *brief and concise* manner (ideally stating the thesis of the text in **3 sentences**), so as to give the participants a starting point for discussion. It should make the text's logic as clear as possible and might offer some reflection questions for discussion. It is always helpful to use **handouts** (they are best sent to the group ahead of time, by email; in addition, it is possible to share one's screen on Zoom).

Guidelines for paper topic:

The content of the paper is subject to approval. I would expect something like the following:

- choose one proof
- explain the argument and its context (historical and textual)
- make an argument for or against it
 - for it: how would you defend it/explain it/make it intelligible to a contemporary uneducated audience (e.g. Richard Dawkins)?
 - against it: your arguments, but also other's objections

Or:

- take an atheist objection
- try to answer it by using other philosophers/secondary sources

For this purpose, I ask you to give me a **paper proposal by TH 11/4**. This proposal should consist of a short paragraph, describing the topic of your choice, and a bibliography. The bibliography is most important. Please make your bibliography *as specific as possible*. Do not quote general handbooks or the textbooks of the class. Please also consult the *paper guidelines* at the end of this syllabus.

As one possible **research tool** I recommend as a starting point the “[philosopher’s index](#)” that is available on the GTU library website (there is also a new tool, called [Summon](#), which you might want to try).

In time of COVID, you do still have access to **library resources** for your research; please visit the following site for more information: <https://www.gtu.edu/library/remote-resources-gtu-library>.

The **deadline** for the paper is TH 12/16. Given the COVID situation, please submit this paper **electronically, in Word Format (not as Pdf)**.

Class **attendance** is mandatory. Attendance and participation will impact the grade.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Required

- **Reader**
 - o I will provide a Reader before the semester begins.
 - o It will, this semester, be made available electronically.
- **Michael Palmer: *The Question of God: An Introduction and Sourcebook***
 - o Paperback: 384 pages
 - o price: \$50.95 (with cheaper options on Amazon)
 - o Publisher: [Routledge](#) (May 24, 2001)
 - o ISBN-13: 978-0415223874(NB: Palmer is an atheist, but this appears to be the most substantial selection of primary texts, and the introductions are comparatively fair)
- **Richard Swinburne: *Is there a God?***
 - o Paperback: 144 pages
 - o price: \$16.95 (with cheaper options on Amazon)
 - o Publisher: [Oxford University Press](#), USA; rev. edition (February 1, 2010)
 - o ISBN-13: 978-0199580439(this is the easy version of Swinburne’s “The Existence of God”, which you might also want to consult)

Recommended:

For additional **background information** you might consult on the **internet**:

[Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)

[The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)

(These are also helpful for up-to-date bibliographies.)

CLASS SCHEDULE

The class schedule is subject to revision. Please note that some topics are rather heavy in reading assignments; however, they typically extend over more than one session and the reading can be divided up accordingly. We may also decide to drop some texts; this is meant for maximal availability and for your own future reference.

W 9/9 **Introduction:** what counts as evidence, what is a valid argument?

Hermeneutics of Suspicion and the Genetic Fallacy

- a) Accusation and Counteraccusations
Reader p. 3-24 (Freud, Sam Harris, D'Souza and Feser)
- b) Naturalism and Genetic Fallacy
Reader p. 24-47 (Freud, Dennett (*Spell* and on Burkert),
Holt on Dawkins, Hahn/Wiker)
- c) Positivism and Verification
Reader p. 47-55 (Logical Positivism text and Flew/Hare)

Faith and Reason

- a) Reader: p. 55-76 (Ramelow¹, Dulles, Vat. I, CCC and Scripture)
- b) [*optional*: Swinburne p. 3-19 on God]

W 9/16 (...**introductory discussions *continued***, as needed)

Cosmological Proofs

- a) **motion and causality:** Aquinas, Hume and Kant
 - a. Palmer p. 49-89
 - b. Reader p. 97-106 (Aquinas: 5 ways, ScG)
 - c. [*optional*: Reader p. 76-96 (Plato and Aristotle)]
- b) **Big Bang and Creation from Nothing**
Reader p. 106-127 (Craig, Aquinas, Leibniz)
[*optional*: a critique by Grünbaum (2009), see [here](#)]

W 9/23 **Cosmological Proofs** continued

W 9/30 **"Alethological" proofs**

Reader p. 127-181 (Augustine, Bonaventure, Aquinas,
Descartes, Spaemann, Reppert)

W 10/7 **Proofs from Perfection**

- a) **participation**
Reader p. 182-204 (Aristotle, Augustine, Anselm;
Aquinas: 4th way, De potentia, ScG, In Ioannem;
on Bonaventure; Norris Clarke)
- b) **necessary being**
Reader p. 205-222 (Aquinas: 3rd way, ScG,
Richard of St. Victor, Clarke, Plantinga,
Maimonides, Dewan, Leibniz)²

¹ Read the whole article, but focus on part 2-4 of this article; we will return to the first part later.

² For further study: J. F. X. Knasas, "Making Sense of the *tertia via*," *The New Scholasticism* 54 (1980): 476-511. For other, contemporary issues: Stanford Encyclopedia: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/god-necessary-being>.

Paper Guidelines

As to the topic, you will find my suggestions above. There is flexibility, and I do encourage you to use topics of your own interest or background. There are many graduate student conferences now; you might want to write a paper with an eye to presenting it in such a venue. An increasing number of students have done so successfully.

The topic is, however, subject to approval. You can talk to me before or after your proposal.

The paper is a **research paper (15-20 pages, 12pt, double space)**. Hence I expect you to research and use secondary literature. This is to be documented in the use of footnotes (**not endnotes!**) and in a **bibliography**.

The **bibliography** is most important. Please make your bibliography *as specific as possible*. I would like to see at least **three pertinent journal articles** in your bibliography; this is more important than generic books. As a help: please use the “[philosopher’s index](#)” at the [GTU library](#), although this might only provide you with a starting point. Topics without pertinent literature are not viable; if it requires very extensive research on primary texts, you should leave it for your dissertation.

To avoid some common pitfalls: please **focus on your topic**. There is no need for biographical introductions on philosophers. (Biographical details can, of course, be brought in, if they explain some subject matter.)

Please avoid flowery or cryptic **language**. Be as sober as possible. Building literary smoke screens will not make your paper appear more profound, but only less intelligible. Focus on making arguments and positions clear.

Do some **proofreading**. If English is your second language, it can be a good idea to ask someone else to help you. Please do write complete sentences that have a proper grammatical structure. (Unfortunately that does not always seem to be self-understood.) Shorter sentences can make that easier. Grammatical correctness is more important than political correctness (e.g. do not use “they” as a singular).

Subdividing it into chapters (with headlines) can help the structure of your paper. It will help the clarity of your own thought process – as well as that of the reader. Please use page numbers.

Plagiarism is unacceptable and will result in a failing grade.

Proposal

The proposal is due the class after reading week. It consists in 2 or 3 sentences, stating your topic, plus a pertinent bibliography. (Please do not include the textbooks of the class.) This exercise is meant to help you to clarify your topic and focus your bibliography; after that, the paper should come easy. It is also a good exercise for a future thesis proposal. The topic is subject to approval.