

Syllabus
PHIL 215-0 (3 Cr.)
Philosophy of Religion
Fall 2025

Instructor: Dr. Kristopher G. Phillips
Office: Pray Harrold 702-B
Student Hours: M: 2:00p-4:00p (office), T: 10:00a-12:00p (zoom), W: 10:00a-11:00a (office) & also by appointment

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Class Meets:
MW 12:30p - 1:45p in Pray-Harrold 402

COURSE DESCRIPTION: Well-mannered folks regularly refrain from discussing religion over dinner. The reason is plain: on the one hand we may strongly disagree about the topic. On the other hand, we consider religion of the utmost importance. Given this combination, discussions about religion can raise our blood pressure, which is bad for digestion. Yet, given the importance of religion, the subject demands our careful attention. In this class we will consider reasons for and against the existence of God, also exploring questions such as: what is the nature of God? Can the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing God be consistent with human free will? What sorts of things count as evidence for a belief in God's existence? How should we respond when others share their firsthand religious experiences? Do reason and logic apply to considerations about religious belief? Our goal is to explore the ongoing scholarly dialogues surrounding religious belief and religious experience and see where they take us, rather than attempting to convince anyone of any particular answer to any of these questions. We should think carefully about religion; the purpose of this class is to help provide some tools that will help you do so.

This course fulfills the *Humanities Knowledge Area* for the General Education Program (GEKH).

Rationale for Knowledge of the Disciplines:

Philosophy of Religion is an introduction to philosophy through the study of various aspects of religious belief, many of which have a direct bearing on the lives we choose to live. *PHIL 215 - Philosophy of Religion* fulfills the humanities requirement of the [*Knowledge of the Disciplines*](#) category of the [General Education](#) program because it is an introduction to the discipline of philosophy which enables students to discover what and how the content and methods of philosophical inquiry contribute to one's overall intellectual development. Generally, philosophic method develops one's critical reasoning abilities - skills transferable to many areas of one's life - and the philosophy of religion, in particular, applies these skills to some of the fundamental concepts involved in religious belief: whether God exists, and what difference our answer to this question plays in decisions we make regarding how we live our life.

Course Learning Outcomes (GE):

- Contextualize and think critically about texts, ideas, and genres in the humanities.
- Use and construct arguments.
- Reflect on personal growth with respect to imagination, empathy, or social and political agency using the methods of the humanities.
- Draw connections between course content and contexts outside of the classroom using the disciplinary tools of the humanities.

Course Learning Outcomes (Mine):

- *Charitable Thinking:* The successful student will begin to approach the positions and arguments of philosophers charitably (i.e. to take seriously and try to understand how a smart, thoughtful, and careful person might hold a view like that). A successful student will begin to understand why, even if it looks at first as if a view must be wrong, there are good reasons for why others might think it is correct.
- *Close Reading:* The successful student will demonstrate the ability to identify what a passage actually says (without imposing assumptions onto the text), what a passage logically implies, and how to connect a passage to its broader context.

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ASSIGNMENTS, EVALUATION, POLICY:

“Extrinsic motivation, which includes a desire to get better grades, is not only different from, but often undermines, intrinsic motivation, a desire to learn for its own sake” – Alfie Kohn (1999), *Punished by rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A’s, praise, and other bribes*. Rev. ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Let’s Talk Motivation: In recent years I have become increasingly unhappy with grades as a measure of anything at all. I often tell my students that it’s probably easy to get an A in my class – you can relatively easily “hack” my grading system and figure out the “formula” for writing a paper for me. Once you figure it out, getting an A on papers in my classes is easy. But I don’t want you to get an A by “hacking the system.” I want you to push yourself to learn new things because you found something you’re excited about and wanted to try to go beyond what’s comfortable and familiar. I’ve long thought that an A- or a B+ that was the result of taking risks was worth more than a safe, but well-written A paper.

In short, grading is not a good measure of learning, and the focus on grades distracts from the real goal of education. If you’re aiming for a specific grade, you’re not aiming to get the most out of your educational opportunities.

Evaluation: Here’s what we will do. I will ask you to first share a short reflection paper in order to help us both better understand how you can get the most out of this class. In your reflection, please consider the following questions:

- (a) What are your reasons for taking this class?
- (b) What do you hope to get out of this class?
- (c) Where and how do you think you can improve on your academic work?
- (d) What do the course learning outcomes mean to you? How do you think you can work on improving with regard to them?
- (e) What are three concrete goals you’d like to work on over the course of the semester with regard to your academic work/performance? For example, you might want to work on reading comprehension, charitable interpretation, speaking up in class more often, etc.

In your initial reflection, I ask that you please identify a some concrete goals that you intend to work on in my class this semester. Ideally, you’ll also find a time to meet with me one-on-one so that we can work out how to make the class work best for you – this can be during my student hours or by setting an appointment to meet and chat.

I will ask you to do a mid-semester check-in reflection paper where you will discuss the efforts you’ve put in, any progress you’ve made, and offer insights into how we can continue the upward trajectory or improve things in the second half of the term. In this and the final reflection, I expect you to point to the feedback you’ve received on your written work as evidence for your claims.

We will meet up again at the end of the semester to discuss what progress have you made with regard to our goals.

The idea is that we will **collaboratively** come to a determination about what sort of progress you’ve made, where you think you can continue to improve (and how to best do so). As such, I will not provide you with numerical or letter grades on individual assignments. I will provide *qualitative* feedback on your work (discursive comments regarding clarity, precision, critical engagement, etc.), but the gradebook will only

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note whether you turned the assignment in. With each assignment, I will inquire into the amount and nature of feedback you would like on your written work.

You are responsible for working with me to determine your final grade in this class. We will come to an **agreement** based on formal self-assessments, the collected feedback you received from me over the course of the semester, and a final discussion. It's really important that you develop a clear sense of the quality of your own work and how to evaluate it. It's a difficult skill to master and requires tremendous self-awareness. That's why we're going to work together to ensure that the assessment reflects the work you've done over the course of the term.

Before the midterm reflection, I will provide a rubric to help you identify, in terms of a grade, what your performance might look like. Again, your final grade will be determined **collaboratively** with me.

I reserve the right to adjust the final grade, but I will not do so without discussing such a change with you first.

Assignments (Due dates are subject to change):

- **Introductory Self-Reflection Paper** (Due **Aug. 31st, 11:59p**).
- **Big Question in the Philosophy of Religion Proposal** (Due **Sept. 15**).
- **SEP/Source Discussion and Tentative Thesis** (Due **Oct. 2**)
- **Mid-point Reflection Paper** (Due **Oct 10**).
- **FALL BREAK** (Oct. 13-19).
- **Paper Outline** (Due **Nov. 3**).
- **Paper Draft** (Due **Nov. 17**).
- **Final paper** (Due **Dec. 8**).
- **Final Meeting** (During finals week). We will meet to discuss your progress toward your goals over the semester, and determine your final grade. I will post the Calendly link as we get closer.
- **Weekly Reading Reflection Assignments** (due by **9a each Monday**).
- **Participation** Philosophy is best done in open, careful dialogue with one another. I know not everyone is comfortable speaking in front of their peers, but I want to encourage you to genuinely engage one another regarding the ideas in the class. There are a number of ways one can be an active participant in the course. Whether that is asking questions in class, organizing discussion boards, setting up study groups, visiting during student hours, or something else you come up with, I'd like to see you really engage with both the material and one another. In order to do so, you must **attend class regularly**.

Scaffolded Term Paper (40% of your grade)

Over the course of the semester, I will ask you to write a philosophy paper on some topic of your choosing (as long as it's related to the *philosophy* of religion). I want you to start with a big question. What is something you've always wondered about? I will help you tailor the question and find sources that address that question. I will then ask you to carefully read and articulate what various philosophers have said about that question. I want to see how you engage with the texts, so I expect to see a thoughtful, charitable, reconstruction of the arguments at issue grounded in the texts themselves. At this point, I would also like to see a tentative thesis – what are you adding to the conversation? I would like to see some sort of critical engagement with the argument (where are possible weaknesses) and some discussion beyond what was covered in class. This is about demonstrating understanding and thinking critically, not about content retention. Then I'll ask you to produce a paper (roughly 1200-1500 words) on that subject. I will give more details in class.

I welcome revisions on all written work in light of comments. I firmly believe that we get better at writing, thinking, and so forth by returning to our work and refining it in light of feedback. I want you to succeed, but as this is likely

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to be your first (and perhaps your *only*) introduction to philosophy, I'd like to afford you the opportunity to get as much as you can out of this class. As the final paper is due during finals week, there will not really be an opportunity to revise that paper, but my hope is that by that point in the term you'll have a better idea of how to write a philosophy paper than you do coming in, so you should be in good shape.

In-Class Short Writings (10%)

At random intervals in class I will ask you to break up into groups of 3-4 and analyze a piece of text, or produce a brief response to a topic/theme in class. Philosophy is notoriously difficult to read and understand, so we will practice identifying and reconstructing arguments, identifying the "voice" in a passage, and stepping back and considering why we are reading and discussing the material. This will be an in-class activity, so you must be in class and participate to receive credit. I do understand that life happens, so I will allow make-up text analyses for the times you miss them (but the make-up will be more difficult than the in-class portion).

If you miss an in-class textual analysis, you are allowed to make those up on your own time. Here is what you must do:

1. Write out each sentence of the passage as it appears in the text.
2. Explain what the sentence is saying in your own words.
3. Identify any ambiguous referents ("this" or "that" or any ambiguous pronoun use), and define any key terms that the author is using.
4. Move on to the next sentence and continue for the whole passage.
5. After doing this with the whole passage, identify the conclusion – what is the claim the author is trying to convince you of in the passage as a whole?
6. Identify the premises put forth in support of that conclusion.

You may then submit this document to Canvas.

Ten Reading Reflections (50%)

In addition to your papers and in-class argument analyses, I expect you to keep up on the reading. To facilitate discussion and keep you on track, you are expected to complete weekly responses.

I will post more details on Canvas but in short, the responses must engage with the text in three different ways total (though you're allowed to engage in more ways than this, if you want to). Your three reflections must be from at least two different groups (comprehension, queries, connection, criticism, epiphany, or other). Use separate paragraphs for each reflection task. There is no word minimum or maximum, but you should write at least three sentences for each of your three engagements. Be sure to label each reflection, include the page numbers from which you're getting the information, and state how long it took you to do the reading as well as how long it took to do the reflection.

Note: I recognize that the texts are challenging and that you can probably find a summary of most of them online. Please do *not* do this. These reading responses are a low-stakes opportunity to practice getting better at reading and interpreting challenging texts. There are a number of times in your life where people will rely on your inability or unwillingness to read difficult material and will thus hide things in obscure writing. This is an opportunity to head that off.

Revisions: You are more than welcome to revise your written work at any time and as frequently as you would like in order to take full advantage of our feedback. This is not a requirement for the course, but those students who do take the time to thoughtfully respond to my feedback and revise their work will get the most out of the class and will develop the most as writers and thinkers.

Late Work: I get that life happens and things sometimes take longer than we anticipate. As a result, I will accept late work for up to 24 hours after the deadline with no questions asked. I ask that you do your best to meet the deadlines – please consider that I too am a busy person with a life outside of school, and that I have to budget and schedule time carefully. If too many people turn in papers late, it throws off my plans and creates more work for me. Please

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try to be mindful of the work you create for others. If you are going to need more than 24 hours, you must contact me we can discuss how to move forward.

Academic Dishonesty Academic dishonesty of any kind is expressly prohibited. Engaging in academic dishonesty of any kind will result in failure of the course, a referral to the [Office of Wellness and Community Responsibility](#) for disciplinary action, and a deeply uncomfortable final conversation at the end of the term. You're already paying an awful lot of money to take this class, and I am committed to helping you develop the philosophical, intellectual, and personal skills to the best of your ability. Engaging in any form of cheating really cuts against the whole purpose of the whole education thing.

I don't like doing this, and let me be clear – I trust you. I am not going to look to bust you, and I do not see our professional relationship as adversarial. If you're struggling and you don't know what to do, how to cite sources, etc. **please come talk to me.**

A Note on AI, Large-Language Models, and Their Use Using AI tools appropriately is supposedly a big part of our cultural development at this point in our history. This class is focused on building your philosophical skills, especially interpreting, designing, and critiquing arguments and theories. AIs can sort of do some of these things (not all that well though), but there are myriad reasons *not* to employ them in place of doing the work yourself. One such reason is that allowing an AI to do any part of the coursework for you is not just cheating yourself out of the opportunity to get better at philosophy (that is, thinking, reading, writing, and being a person), it is failing to do what the assignment is asking you to do – display and develop *your* philosophical abilities. **As such, I ask that you *do not* use AI, LLMs, or such tools on any assignment** (this includes ChatGPT, some versions of Grammarly, Gemini, and others). I want to see how *you* think – and writing *is* thinking.

Thus, if there is good reason to believe an AI did the work for you, any of the following may well occur: you will be asked to meet to discuss the work, you will be asked to redo the work without the help of generative AI, you will receive an incomplete for the assignment, or you will fail the class. In class we will discuss further reasons to refrain from having AI do the work *for* you.

Classroom Conduct: The classroom constitutes a community of which we are each an important part. The very foundation of philosophy as a discipline is the ability to charitably listen, understand and represent the views of ourselves and others. Philosophy as a discipline requires careful dialogue. As such, respect for your fellow student, your instructor, and the course is of critical importance. We can, should, and will disagree with one another often, but this *MUST* be conducted with respect. As such threatening behavior, offensive language (including “hate speech”) will not be tolerated.

Attendance: I do not have a formal attendance policy, but philosophy is hard even if you come to class. AND! The in-class assignments cannot be made up, so skip at your own risk. You are responsible for information that I offer in lecture that is not in the readings. I will not provide notes for absences so get to know your classmates.

OTHER IMPORTANT POLICIES & RESOURCES

University Policies In addition to the articulated course specific policies and expectation, students are responsible for understanding all applicable university guidelines, policies, and procedures. The [EMU Student Handbook](#) is the primary resource provided to students to ensure that they have access to all university policies, support resources, and student's rights and responsibilities. Changes may be made to the EMU Student Handbook whenever necessary, and shall be effective immediately, and/or as of the date on which a policy is formally adopted, and/or the date specified in the amendment. Electing not to access the link provided below does not absolve a student of responsibility. For questions about any university policy, procedure, practice, or resources, please contact the Office of the Ombuds: 248 Student Center, 734.487.0074, emu_ombuds@emich.edu, or visit the website at www.emich.edu/ombuds. [CLICK HERE to access the University Course Policies](#)

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Disability Resource Center I warmly welcome any of you who have disabilities. Students with medical, psychological, learning or other disabilities desiring academic adjustments, accommodations, or auxiliary aids must contact the Disability Resource Center (DRC). The [DRC](#) works collaboratively with students, faculty, and staff to create an accessible, sustainable, and inclusive educational environment.

Recording Class I will not record class meetings and I ask that you also please refrain from recording the class meetings without prior, explicit, written permission both from me and from your classmates (except as necessary as part of a university approved accommodation. Students with such accommodation must inform me prior recording *any* class activity. Regardless of accommodation, all students must stop recording during small group work unless they obtain written permission from the members of their group prior to recording. Any approved recordings are exclusively reserved for the student's own private use.

University Library Research support is available to all students, 24/7. This includes getting started with research, identifying sources to search, developing search strategies, evaluating resources, and more. See <https://www.emich.edu/library/help/ask.php> for all of the ways in which you can get help with research. Some University Library services have changed, and may continue to change, in response to the pandemic. Please check for current information at <https://www.emich.edu/library/news/covid.php>

University Writing Center The [University Writing Center](#) (UWC) offers writing support to all undergraduate and graduate students. In doing so, we value the diversity of our campus and honor all students and the languages they bring with them to the university.

Holman Success Center Provides [Academic Support](#) through a variety of virtual and in-person services.

Sexual Misconduct Prevention & Response Office (formerly Title IX Office): Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex under any education program or activity receiving federal financial aid. Sexual assault and sexual harassment is a form of sex discrimination prohibited by Title IX. [What you need to know about Title IX](#)

Student and Exchange Visitor Statement The Student Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) requires F and J students to report numerous items to the [Office of International Students & Scholars](#) (OISS)

Disclaimer: Information contained in this syllabus, other than the grading, late assignments, makeup work, and attendance policies are subject to change, with advance notice, as I deem appropriate.