

FYSEM 110GF: God, Free Will, & Morality

Mount Holyoke College

Fall 2015

professor. Katia Vavova

office. 217B Skinner

office hours. Tuesdays 11:30-12:30 and Thursdays 1:30-2:30.

telephone. x2367

email. evavova@mtholyoke.edu

About the course. This course will introduce students to philosophy and its methods by looking at what philosophers, past and present, have said about three important and interrelated topics: God, morality, and freedom. We will ask questions such as: Does God exist? Is it rational to believe in God? What should I do if I want to do the right thing? When is it ok to criticize other cultures? How much do I owe to others? Do we have free will? Can we ever be held responsible for anything? The hope is that students will come out of the class better thinkers, better writers, and better equipped to tackle difficult questions like these with rigor and care.

Meetings. TTH 10-11:15 in Clapp 126

Schedule. All readings are available on Moodle.

Note that this is tentative: assigned readings may change in response to class discussion.

Note also that readings marked with a * are only there for your reference. You should not read them for class—you should focus on closely and carefully reading the assigned readings. After we have discussed those, you may go back to the extra readings on your own time, if you're curious.

First Day. Introduction. What is philosophy? What are its tools and materials? What is its purpose and importance? What, if anything, distinguishes philosophical questions? What might we want to ask about God, morality, and free will? What might our answers look like? Also, why should we care?

Week 1. Some thoughts on writing, learning, and bullshit.

George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language"

Harry Frankfurt, "On Bullshit"

Ken Bain, "What makes an expert?"

Weeks 2-4. Unit I: Reason v. Faith. Does God exist? Should I believe it? Is an action good because God commands it, or does God command it because it is good? Is there morality without God?

God exists!

Samuel Clarke, The Cosmological Argument (selection)

*Saint Anselm, "On the Existence of God"

William Paley, The Teleological Argument (selection)

Charles Darwin, Autobiography (selection)

*Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (selection)

*Helen De Cruz, "The enduring appeal of natural theological arguments"

We can't know if God exists, but we should believe in God anyway.

Pascal, "The Wager" (selection)

God doesn't exist—just look at all the suffering in the world!

J.L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence"

Eleonore Stump, "The Mirror of Evil"

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* (excerpt)

* Eleonore Stump, "The Problem of Evil"

* Eleonore Stump, "Dante's Hell Aquinas's Moral Theory, and the Love of God"

* Marilyn McCord Adams & Stewart Sutherland, "Horrendous Evils & the Goodness of God"

Weeks 5-8. Unit II: Morality. How could anything be right or wrong if there is no God? If I want to do what is right, what ought I to do? When is it ok to criticize and interfere with other cultures for doing things I take to be wrong? How much do I owe others? Must I feed all the world's hungry? Or just the guy who lives in the alley behind my house?

Can there be morality without God?

Plato, *The Euthyphro* (selection)

William Lane Craig, "God and Objective Morality: A Debate"

Louise Antony, "Good Minus God"

* Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, "God and Objective Morality: A Debate"

Does anything really matter, or did we just evolve to think so?

Sharon Street, "Does anything really matter..."

Can we know what's right for others and if so, can we make them do it?

Mary Midgley, "Trying out one's new sword"

Martha Nussbaum, "Judging Other Cultures: The Case of Genital Mutilation"

What do we owe to others? To ourselves?

Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality"

Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints"

Weeks 8-12. Unit III: Do we have free will? If not, then we lose one of our best responses to the problem of evil. We also may lose our motivation to care about what is right: if what I do is not up to me, then why should I try to do the right thing? Perhaps we also lose our ability to praise and blame people: if what we do is not within our control, then how can we be held responsible for what we do?

Are we free? No, because determinism is true.

Paul Holbach, "The Illusion of Free Will"

“A brief introduction...” by Fisher, Kane, Vargas, and Pereboom

Freedom is compatible with determinism.

Harry Frankfurt, “Alternative Possibilities and Moral Responsibility”

Does insanity get us off the hook?

Susan Wolf, “Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility”

*Harry Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person”

What about moral monsters?

Gary Watson, “Responsibility and the Limits of Evil: Variations on a Strawsonian Theme”

Assignments.

- **Weekly reading responses.** 15%
- **Assignment 1** 250 words. Summarize argument. 5%
- **Assignment 2** 500-700 words. Summarize argument and raise objection. 10%
- **Assignment 3** 700-1000 words. Summarize argument, raise objection, consider reply. 30%
- **Assignment 4** 1000-1200 words. Summarize argument, raise objection, consider reply. 40%

N.B. I do not grade on a curve. The grading system, however, is designed to take improvement into account automatically: later assignments are worth more, and since you’ll have improved your skills by then, this improvement will be reflected in your final grade.

Due dates. (Note: some are tentative.)

Reading Responses: Mondays by 8 pm.

A1: Monday, September 28th, 8 pm.

A2: Thursday, October 22nd, 10 am.

A3: Sometime around November 15th - 25th, 10 am.

A4: Tuesday, December 15th, 10 am.

FAQs.

What does it take to pass a reading responses? Don’t bullshit, don’t get it completely wrong, and write it in clear, grammatical English.¹

What does it take to pass a paper? Same as above. See below for more detailed descriptions of letter grades.

Can I have feedback on reading responses? I will always read all of your reading responses, but I won’t always comment on them. I will comment on an average of 5 reading responses every week. These will be chosen randomly. At the beginning of the semester, I will aim to give you more comments than at the end. You are always welcome to come to my office hours to discuss an assignment—whether or not I’ve commented on it.

¹ I mean ‘bullshit’ here in its many moods and tenses, but especially in Frankfurt’s sense which we will discuss.

When will my paper be graded? In a class of this size, I aim to return papers within at most two weeks of the date they were submitted. I realize it's hard to wait, but it's also hard to grade. I want to give your work the time and attention it deserves.

Reading assignments will be marked pass/fail within a week.

For the papers, grades and comments will be available on Moodle.

For the *final paper*, I offer face-to-face feedback toward the start of the following semester. (For example: if you write a final paper for me in the fall semester, I will offer feedback at the start of the spring semester). If you're interested in this, get in touch with me during the first week of the following semester and we will schedule a time. If one of us is not on campus that semester, we will find another way of communicating.

Can I send you a draft to read? I'm happy to help you on your paper, but I don't read drafts. Feel free to come by my office hours with questions, an outline, an argument you're considering, etc. We can talk through your ideas and questions. Don't forget also that you can go to the SAW mentor and SAW center with drafts. Also keep in mind that you will be getting some feedback on reading assignments, and I will always do my best to be clear about my expectations. Don't hesitate to ask if anything is unclear.

What sources should I use for writing my paper? You **do not** need to read any additional material beyond the assigned reading. In some cases, it might be helpful to read one or two additional articles connected to your topic—especially if you're having trouble understanding it. I am happy to give you additional reading suggestions if you are interested. You may also find searching the following sources helpful: philpapers.org, plato.stanford.edu, and mtholyoke.edu/lits. Do not blindly rely on what you Google, however, and remember to always cite your sources.

I'd like to talk about my grade. If you ever find yourself confused about the comments you receive on your assignments, or cannot see why you received the grade you received, please come see me as soon as possible. Grades are non-negotiable, but I'm always happy to talk about how you did and how you could improve on your next assignment.

What happens if my assignment is late? Three principles are at the heart of my late policy.

1. Work should be assessed on its quality and on whether it shows that learning goals have been met.
2. Each assignment has a purpose, and there comes a point at which an assignment is too late to fulfill that purpose.
3. Deadlines allow us to organize our time and learning and to meet our goals.

In light of these, late *reading responses* will not be accepted for credit. The goals of these assignments are (1) for you to practice working through and understanding the readings on your own and (2) to prepare you for class discussion. These goals are defeated if you do not complete the assignment before class.

Late *papers* will be accepted up until the day that we discuss the assignment together in class (typically, this will be within a week). After that, they will not be accepted for credit. However, you'll still want to get papers in by the due date otherwise I cannot guarantee you comments. This is not about punishing you for getting in late work. It's about enabling me to schedule my time.

Getting your papers in on time allows us to stay together as a class—to discuss assignments after everyone has finished and long before the next assignment is due (so you have time to reflect and improve). We all have so many demands on our time, and we need to be able to plan ahead. If people complete assignments late, they fall behind, cannot contribute to class discussions, and can hold us back during assignment based in class activities. Worse yet, they hurt their own learning.

Meeting deadlines is thus an opportunity to show respect: respect for yourself, your time, and your learning; respect for your classmates' time and learning; and respect for my time and my teaching.

All that said, keep in mind first, that I am here to help. Get in touch if you're worried about anything. Second, when it comes to assignments, late > never > plagiarized.

Do I have to participate in class? Absolutely. Philosophy is a communal activity, and you've chosen to join our community this semester. Keep in mind, however, that no one expects brilliant commentary. Much of doing philosophy is about asking simple, clarificatory questions. I'll expect you to do at least that much regularly. I realize that participation is more difficult for some of us than others, but writing papers, understanding the readings—these too are more difficult for some of us than others. If you have trouble speaking in class, please see me and we will work on it together—just as we would on any other aspect of the class that you find difficult.

I'm not a strong writer. Should I be worried? No, but you should be prepared to work extra hard and get all the help you can from me, the SAW center, and other strong writers you know. A major goal of this class *is* to improve your writing skills, so I plan to give you many chances to.

I'm a strong writer. I'm guessing I don't have to worry. Not so fast. I will be expecting you to write more clearly, concisely, and carefully than you've probably ever have before. This will be good: it will make you stronger writers capable of producing clear, concise, and convincing prose. Like any skill, this one requires practice and patience. Acquiring it will be difficult: you will have to do a lot of writing and rewriting. I am committed to helping you get there because I know that the ability to think critically and express your ideas in clear, crisp prose will serve you well wherever you go from here.

Finally, I cannot put it better than David Foster Wallace did in his own syllabus:

If you want to improve your academic writing and are willing to put extra time and effort into it, I am a good teacher to have. But if you're used to whipping off papers the night before they're due, running them quickly through the computer's Spellchecker, handing them in full of high-school errors and sentences that make no sense, and having the professor accept them "because the ideas are good" or something, please be informed that I draw no distinction between the quality of one's ideas and the quality of those ideas'

verbal expression, and that I will not accept sloppy, rough-draftish, or semiliterate college writing. Again, I am absolutely not kidding. If you won't or can't devote significant time and attention to your written work, I urge you to drop... and save us both a lot of grief.²

I too am absolutely not kidding. If you chose to be in this class, you'll have the opportunity for deep learning and serious self-improvement. So, step up and put your best work forward.

I like big words and I cannot lie... Good for you. Don't use them unless they say what you want to say better than a small word would. In general, take Orwell's writing advice to heart. We'll talk more about this in class.

Can I bring my laptop to class? I'd rather you not. The empirical evidence is pretty clear that people don't learn as well with laptops in the classroom. (Please also leave phones and other gadgets at home.) Plus, you won't need it. You'll be expected to join in the discussion, not write down everything that is said. And I'll often provide handouts which summarize the main points. That said, if for some reason you really do need to bring some technology to class, please see me and we'll discuss it.

I couldn't make it to class the other day. Did I miss anything important? Of course you did. Never ask that. To learn what you missed, contact your classmates, check Moodle for handouts, and make sure you get caught up. That said, you are expected to attend every class. Most of the action happens in class—it is where I give away all the answers. Seriously. This is not one of those classes in which you can learn by yourself. So, you won't want to miss class.

What if I'm late for class? Please don't be. While there's no official penalty for tardiness, it is disruptive and disrespectful to me and to your classmates. Try to get to class a few minutes before it starts, settle in, review the readings or your notes, or chat with your classmates.

Can we meet outside office hours? I try to keep all my student meetings during my office hours. If you have another class scheduled during my office hours and would like to meet, send me an email or talk to me after class and we can arrange an alternate time. Class conflict is the only reason for such an exception. This is again, not punitive but a matter of planning my time.

These readings are hard. Help! Most of the readings we will look at are short, but quite tricky. Give yourself time to digest them. I recommend a three step approach: first, skim, and second carefully read each piece before we discuss it in class. Don't worry too much about understanding while you're skimming. You're just trying to get the lay of the land, and will absorb more than you realize. Then, when you read carefully, use the reading questions to help focus your attention on what is most important. Jot down questions and confusions and raise them in lecture. Third, skim the reading again after we've discussed it. It should be much easier to understand at this point. If you're still unclear about something, get help: ask your classmates, come by my office hours, etc.

² <http://alasophia.blogspot.com/2008/09/david-foster-wallaces-syllabus.html>

How should I format my assignments? Presenting your assignments in a professional manner is important. It demonstrates respect for yourself and for your audience. Don't waste your reader's time with easy to fix mistakes, like typos, and don't distract them with crazy fonts or weird formatting. Here's what I'll expect.

Reading responses will be copied and pasted into the text box on Moodle. Use a standard font in a standard size and cite your sources using the Chicago Parenthetical style. The Chicago Manual of Style is free online and they provide a quick summary of parenthetical ("author-date") format here: http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html

The other assignments should be uploaded to Moodle as PDFs and named as follows:

assignment_MMDDYY.pdf

- Why? PDFs are more professional than .docs and allow you to control how your work looks to your audience. If you don't know how to convert a document into PDF format, figure it out: ask Google, the help desk, or your classmates.

Please also:

- Include a *word count* at end of paper (exclude bibliography, etc. when calculating),
- *Double space* (except block quotes which should be single spaced and indented).
- *Standard* margins (1 inch), font size (12pt), style (e.g., Times New Roman), etc.

Important: I use Moodle's anonymous-grading option, so ***please do not put your name anywhere in or on your assignment.*** Respecting deadlines and formatting in a simple, standard, professional way are also important for this reason: late or unusually formatted papers compromise anonymous grading.

Why do you grade anonymously? Anonymous grading has better, more just results. Studies have repeatedly shown that we have implicit biases: people of all genders tend to give the same paper different grades depending on whether the paper has a "male" name or a "female" name (e.g., John and Jane). This effect also happens due to race-based implicit biases (e.g., Shawn and Quayshawn). Consequently, students absolutely must not include their names anywhere on their graded work. For a particularly striking study, see:

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/07/upshot/how-elementary-school-teachers-biases-can-discourage-girls-from-math-and-science.html?_r=1&abt=0002&abg=1

A note about communication. Important announcements and assignments will be communicated to you via email or in class. It is your responsibility to make sure you are up to date with the latest news. So check your email daily and don't miss class. If you do miss class, check with your group members, whose contact information you can write here:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Of course, you are always welcome to email me with any questions. But please keep in mind:

- I do not answer emails in the evening or on weekends.
- I respond as promptly as I can, but not always on the same day.

- I can't guarantee a response to emails about assignments that due within 24 hours of the email.
- I do not answer questions that are clearly answered by the syllabus or assignment instructions. If you're not hearing back from me, that may be a hint to double check the relevant materials. That said, after you've carefully examined the assignment *and* checked with your group, you shouldn't hesitate to ask me to clarify anything. I have many wonderful students. This is the only way I can manage to respond promptly to questions that *do* need to be answered via email.

Very Important. For Tuesday, September 15th, do the following.

The assigned readings, in this order:

1. Vavova, The Syllabus. (All of it. Seriously.)
2. Orwell
3. Frankfurt
4. Bain

Assignment:

1. Take the plagiarism tutorial (even if you've done it before): <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/lits/ris/Plagiarism/>.
2. Answer this question: Did you learn anything from taking the plagiarism tutorial? If so, what? If not, why not?
3. Copy the following statement, inserting your name: "I, <insert name here>, have read the entirety of the syllabus for FYSEM 110GF and agree to follow its dictates while enrolled in the course."
4. Explain what the "M&M clause" is in a clear way, so that an intelligent ten year old would understand it. Google it, if you don't know. Cite your sources.

Format this according to the above instructions—except the one about excluding your name. To submit, bring a hard copy to class. Also: complete and separately submit (on Moodle) reading assignment 1.

Academic Honesty. Upon entering Mount Holyoke College, you each signed a pledge to uphold the honor code. It is your responsibility "to read *A Guide to the Uses and Acknowledgment of Sources* and the Student Handbook, which define the standards adopted by the College; to observe the established procedures in preparing assignments and writing papers and examinations, and to submit as [your] own only that work that [you have] originated."³ I expect you will all honor the pledge you signed. Therefore, everything you turn in should be *your own work* and *in your own words*. If your discussions of class topics with your friends, dogs, parents, etc., are helpful, cite them. Credit all sources appropriately, even (especially) Wikipedia and anything from your Googling bounty.

Important. It is a requirement of this class that you take the plagiarism tutorial: <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/lits/ris/Plagiarism/>. I will trust you have completed it. It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty and to avoid it. Accidental plagiarism should not be possible. If in doubt, cite, cite, cite.

****In short, do not plagiarize. I *will* fail you.****

³ https://www.mtholyoke.edu/deanofstudents/student_handbook

Assistance. Besides myself, there are many resources to help you succeed in this class.

* You should go to the **SAW center** for help on your assignments. Well-trained peers are there to look over your drafts, help you plan your arguments, etc. There are drop-in hours, and you may go as many times as you want. This is a great resource. Use it.⁴

* There may be a **SAW mentor** in this course. If there is, *go to her*. She is there to read drafts, help you organize your thoughts, and so forth.

* In order to receive reasonable accommodations for a disability, you must register with the **Office of AccessAbility Services**. This office will provide a letter describing the appropriate accommodations. Once you have this letter, set up an appointment with me and we will discuss how to accommodate you.⁵

Grading. Your paper will be evaluated along three dimensions of roughly equal weight:

1. The clarity and soundness of the *argument* for your *thesis*.
2. Your demonstrated understanding of readings and material covered in class.
3. Your insight and creativity in engaging the issues.

Here is what the Mount Holyoke College student handbook says about grades: "As a general guide to instructors, the faculty has agreed to the following equivalencies to letter grades:

A = excellent

B = good

C = satisfactory

D = minimally passing

F = failing." ⁶

Consider: 'B' means 'good'. The obvious question is: what does 'good' mean? I take 'good' to mean good. Therefore, if you do a good job on a paper, you will get a B. This means you have done a good job, and should be happy. 'A' means 'excellent'. This does not mean you have to write a publishable paper or be God's gift to philosophy to get an A. It does mean that you have to demonstrate some real understanding and aptitude for doing philosophy.

Students are often puzzled by the grading standards for papers. Some ask, "If I answered the question competently without making any significant errors, why didn't I get an A?" Here is a guideline for how papers in this course are graded.

B is the baseline grade for good, competent, but not exceptional work; a solid paper, with some notable mistakes or obscurities, but no serious misunderstandings. At the very least, a B paper does the following:

- addresses all parts of the paper topic
- offers consistent, coherent arguments for a clearly articulated position that makes sense
- considers a significant objection to that position
- replies to that objection

⁴ <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/saw/peer/center>

⁵ <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/accessability>

⁶ https://www.mtholyoke.edu/deanofstudents/student_handbook

- makes relevant use of course readings and lectures, displaying a grasp of their content
- is generally well-written and well-organized
- does not contain significant misunderstandings

Papers deserving a grade higher than a B meet all these criteria, but do something more.

B+ This is a well-written paper with nothing terribly wrong. It meets all the criteria for a B paper, but also shows more promise or originality. It may do this by working out ordinary ideas to a greater depth than usual, or develop relevant arguments that demonstrate real mastery of the course readings without merely replicating them. Alternatively, a B+ paper might present an unusually apt analogy that illuminates a previously obscure aspect of the problem; a clever counterexample to a seemingly persuasive claim; a sharp distinction that does real philosophical work; a subtle point drawn from a close reading of a text; a compelling illustration or application of a principle, and so forth. A B+ paper receives the beginnings of distinction, but its ideas need further development: it doesn't stand out like or operate at as advanced a level as an A- paper.

A or A- These grades are reserved for outstanding work that operates at an advanced level. A paper that just gives a straightforward or obvious response to some philosophical or interpretative problem would not merit an A or A-, even if it is clear. An A or A- paper does something extra—but not at the cost of a clear treatment of the problem. If there are any significant problems with the writing or the organization of the paper, then it won't merit even an A-: this is because good clear writing and organization are not separable from good thinking. An A or A- paper thus meets all the criteria for a B+ paper, but does something more. For example:

- working out the original, striking, or powerful idea, argument, or illustration/application fully and deeply, demonstrating a firm grasp of the underlying concepts, principles, facts, and argumentative strategy
- offering an unusually comprehensive survey of possible moves by both sides, and clearly and systematically evaluating them, to come to a closely reasoned conclusion. The survey is systematic, not scattershot: it develops the alternatives logically and to substantial depth.
- offering an unusually sophisticated, close and systematic reading of a text, paying attention to tensions and contradictions in the author's work, alternative interpretations of passages (offering persuasive arguments for preferring one interpretation to another), or interpretations that bring out philosophically significant points, especially if they offer fresh, unconventional readings

Papers deserving a grade lower than a B fail to meet the criteria and demonstrate carelessness or confusion.

B- This paper contains significant errors, omissions or misunderstandings, but still, there is an effort. The author has some understanding of the problem and of the relevant texts. She does offer some argument. A paper with no argument won't merit a B-. Some ways such a paper might go wrong include:

- the writing is distractingly unclear
- organization is poor: important points aren't logically ordered or signposted
- there are straightforward mistakes and misunderstandings about what the problem is, or about what other philosophers say

- the problem is presented clearly but not really addressed
- doesn't answer one part of the paper topic
- misunderstands a substantial philosophical point or confuses distinct positions
- doesn't articulate a consistent position
- doesn't consider objections to one's position
- wastes space on issues not pertinent to the paper topic
- offers a confused, sloppy, superficial, or erroneous interpretation of course readings or other cited texts

C+ There are more serious problems. Either the writing is really hard to get through; or the paper has no discernible structure; or the author doesn't understand the text or the positions she is discussing; or the paper doesn't really attempt to offer any argument.

Papers with more problems will earn grades of **C or below**. Papers that plagiarize or don't make a serious effort will not pass.

Do keep in mind: a low, even failing, grade on the first assignment is not cause for immediate concern. It is cause for reflection, learning, and working harder. A failure to improve over the course of the assignments is cause for concern. Even if you submit an A paper, I will expect you to do better on your next assignment. If you aren't improving, wherever you start from, neither of us is doing our jobs well.