

PHI 6934: Contemporary Philosophy of Religion

3.0 credits

Fall 2025

Class #18880

I. Basic Information

Meetings

Meeting days and times: Mondays periods 8-10 (3:00 PM – 6:00 PM)
Class location: Griffin-Floyd 200

Instructor

Dr. Gene Witmer
Email: gwitmer@ufl.edu
Web: <https://people.clas.ufl.edu/gwitmer>
Office: Griffin-Floyd Hall 330-A
Phone: 352-273-1830

Office Hours

Wednesdays 1:00 PM - 4:00 PM
And by appointment

Office hours are times set aside so that I am available for you to ask questions, discuss material, and so on. You do not need special appointments to show up for regular office hours. In case there are problems meeting during regular office hours and we need to meet, we can make appointments at other times.

Note that regular office hours are not held during holidays or after the last day of classes (during reading days and exam week). If a class is cancelled any office hours on that day are cancelled as well.

If we need to meet over Zoom, we can arrange that as a specific appointment. For any such meeting, the relevant Zoom link is:

<https://ufl.zoom.us/j/97202458888>

Joining requires UF authentication.

Course Description

Philosophy of religion has become over the last several decades an extremely active area of research in analytic philosophy given how it relates to core concerns in metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. This seminar is designed to focus on two lines of argument that are widely considered to be the most powerful in current debates over theism: the teleological argument for theism based on the fine-tuning of physics and the argument for atheism based on the problem of evil.

Course Materials

The following books should be available at the bookstore:

- Layman, C. Stephen. 2007. *Letters to Doubting Thomas*. Oxford University Press.
- Waller, Jason. 2020. *Cosmological Fine-Tuning Arguments*. Routledge.
- Ekstrom, Laura W. 2021. *God, Suffering, and the Value of Free Will*. Oxford University Press.

The latter two may be somewhat expensive, and if this is a problem for you, we can discuss ways of getting around this. All remaining materials are made available as PDFs on Canvas. A list of the readings, including bibliographic information, is provided on this syllabus following the schedule at the end.

Materials Fee: N/A

UF General Academic Policies & Resources

This course complies with all UF academic policies. For general information on those policies and resources for students, please see the "Academic Policies & Resources" page at <https://syllabus.ufl.edu/syllabus-policy/uf-syllabus-policy-links/>. You will find on that page information on such things as general attendance and academic honesty policies, DRC information, point values for letter grades, Gator Evals, and a budget of academic and wellness resources.

For two of those topics (attendance and academic honesty), the UF regulations only spell out some general constraints. The *specific* policies for this class regarding attendance and academic honesty are found below in the section "Class Policies," along with other class-specific policies.

II. Course Goals

Course Objectives

In this exploratory research seminar, I aim to do three main things: provide some background on the most important topics and debates in contemporary philosophy of religion, conduct a close study of a recent book devoted to the fine-tuning argument, and conduct a close study of a recent book devoted to the problem of evil in relation to free will. The goal is to acquaint students with current debates in this area and equip them for entering into those debates with their own work.

Student Learning Outcomes

A "Student Learning Outcome" is something students who successfully complete a course should be able to do as a result. A student who successfully completes this course should be able to:

- A. Identify the major issues and argumentative moves prevalent in contemporary philosophy of religion and apply this background knowledge to two important works on fine-tuning and the problem of evil. (Content)
- B. Compose and defend original arguments for claims relevant to some issues debated in contemporary philosophy of religion; produce a conference-sized paper presenting and defending such an argument at length. (Critical Thinking)
- C. Present, explain and lead discussions on some complex material drawn from contemporary philosophy of religion. (Communication)

The outcomes above are assessed by means of the following assignments. (Assignments are described below in section IV.)

- Outcome A is assessed by: Discussion board posts and the presentation.
- Outcome B is assessed by: First paper and final conference-sized paper.
- Outcome C is assessed by: Both papers and the presentation..

III. Grade Determination and Policies

Grade Determination

Your course grade is determined by the following factors:

Assignment	Weight
Discussion board posts and participation	20%
First Paper	20%
Presentation	20%
Final conference-sized paper	40%

Grading Scale

The grading system I use is rather different from that used by many other instructors. I will use the Canvas gradebook, but the way I use it makes use of the grade scale described below. You'll see that on the Canvas gradebook every graded assignment is worth 4 points total; you should see the appropriate letter grade show up, but the underlying mechanics uses 4 points, multiples of 4 points, and percentages of those point totals.

Many faculty use a grade scale based on 100 points—defining an A as a score between (for example) 94 and 100, an A- as 90 to 93, and so on. For various reasons I am convinced this is not a good method for calculating grades in a philosophy class. Instead, all grades in my classes are based on the 4-point scale for letter grade values, where an A is 4 points, an A- is 3.67 points, and so on.

Assigned work is initially assigned a letter grade; they are then entered into the gradebook as numeric values. Going from the grade symbol to the numeric value looks like this:

Letter	Numeric		Letter	Numeric
A	4		C	2
A-	3.67		C-	1.67
B+	3.33		D+	1.33
B	3		D	1
B-	2.67		D-	0.67
C+	2.33		E	0

If you get a B+ on a particular assignment, for example, I record it as 3.33. Each graded element is given a number in this way.

For the course grade, *each element is multiplied by its percentage weight for the course grade and the results summed* for the course grade as a numeric value. The result is a numeric value between 0 and 4. That numeric value then needs to be turned back into a letter grade, and there are various options for how one might do that. For example, suppose someone has a numeric course grade of 3.44. Should that count as a B+ or as an A-? An A- is worth 3.67 (more than 3.44) but a B+ is worth 3.33 (less than 3.44). So where should the threshold be set?

As this is a graduate course, the threshold is set at the most demanding level: right at the midpoint between the two points, so that to get an A one needs a numerical course grade of 3.835 or higher. On this choice, then, your final numeric course grade (or the percentage equivalent, as Canvas deals only with percentages) is turned into a letter grade according to the following table:

Numeric value greater than or equal to	Percentage value greater than or equal to	Resulting letter grade
3.835	95.88%	A
3.495	87.38%	A-
3.165	79.13%	B+
2.835	70.88%	B
2.495	62.38%	B-
2.165	54.13%	C+
1.835	45.88%	C
1.495	37.38%	C-
1.165	29.13%	D+
0.835	20.88%	D
0.165	4.13%	D-
0	0.00%	E

IV. Assignments and Expectations

Written Work: General Policies

Topics for paper assignments.

I expect graduate students to not be in need of any help in coming up with topics for paper assignments. The assignment will indicate a general range of topics (e.g., “a paper presenting an argument concerning some material discussed in the class up to this point”) but you are on your own in coming up with the ideas to start.

Help with writing papers.

I have previously written for undergraduate students a document entitled “Argumentative Essays – Writing Advice.” While designed for undergraduates, some graduate students have told me that they’ve found it helpful, so I am making it available on the Canvas site as a possible resource.

I am happy to meet with you in office hours to discuss your work in progress on philosophy papers. I have a policy, however, that I will *not* look at any actual *drafts* of those papers. You can bring to our meeting a draft and/or notes on your paper and talk through what you are doing in the paper instead.

The reason for this policy is that I have learned from (frustrating) experience that commenting on actual student drafts often does more harm than good. Students find it very hard to resist reacting to such comments by thinking that their job is to make no changes in the paper other than those that are direct responses to specific comments made by the professor. And this, I can tell you, is not a good approach. Most of the time, the revisions you need to do are much more extensive than that, and it is often a good idea just to start a new file—a blank document—and start writing again, as opposed to constant tinkering with what you already wrote.

Discussion board posts and participation

To ensure engagement in the class and provide additional opportunities for discussion, everyone in the class will be required to post contributions to a discussion board on Canvas. Here's how these will work.

The class will be divided into two groups — group A and group B — where each group has responsibility for posting contributions during alternating weeks. Note that your mandatory contribution must be posted by no later than noon on the class day it is due; that day is just the day of the class meeting of the week for which you have an assigned contribution.

A mandatory contribution must include three elements, numbered as 1, 2 and 3. (You can have additional ones as well, but each one must have at least 3.) These elements should be one of the following:

- Questions about important parts of the material, asking for clarification, how such-and-such author would reply to such-and-such questions, and the like.
- Questions about relations between such-and-such recently discussed material and such-and-such previously discussed material.
- Specific objections to claims or arguments made in the material assigned for that week, or to claims made in one of the recent class discussions.
- Original arguments inspired by the material recently under discussion, so long as you relate them explicitly to the material that inspired them.

Your online contributions should be written in a careful, somewhat formal style. They should not be sloppy, stream-of-conscious notes or the like. You should take some care to make them clear, organized, and explicit. However, they don't need to be anything like papers, proto-papers, or whatnot. They can be much more modest than that. They just need to be written in a way careful enough to enable all of us reading them to benefit from thinking about them.

The three elements need not be related to each other in any significant way. There is no specific expectation as to length, either. I imagine appropriate ones might often be a few paragraphs each, but they can be shorter or longer as you deem fit. The point is that they should be useful for thinking about the issues.

I will at times post contributions or replies to such on the boards as well, and I strongly encourage you to post additional comments in reply to those made by other students in the class (and to me, especially if you think I've said something false!).

Note that you can post items that are not part of your mandatory contributions; those should have different subject headings, based on whatever is the subject matter of your post. You can also respond to others posts as you see fit; I encourage you to use the discussion boards as a venue for enhancing the class.

One reason for requiring such posts is that they may end up feeding into in-person discussions in class, so you should be prepared to have your contribution spotlighted in class in this way.

The grade for this assignment is based on two factors: First, did you in fact do all the required contributions? Second, were they reasonably good in quality? A good quality contribution will (i) be written in a careful and clear fashion; (ii) demonstrate a fair understanding of the materials under discussion; and (iii) raise significant issues. For a rough guide to assessment, I consult the following

chart. Note that this chart describes characteristics typical of work that earns the indicated grade but it does not present a strict formula for determining the grade.

Completion	Clarity	Comprehension and Significance	Discussion Post Grade
All completed	Most very clear	Most show fair comprehension and select significant issues	A
All completed	Most very clear	Either some nontrivial number do not show fair comprehension, or some nontrivial number do not select significant issues	B
Two or more not completed	A significant number that are not very clear	Some nontrivial number do not show fair comprehension and some nontrivial number do not select significant issues	C
Three or more not completed	OR most are not clear at all	OR most fail to show fair comprehension or fail to select significant issues	E

First paper

You will complete one argumentative paper that is of modest size, where that means roughly in the range of 1500 to 2000 words. Papers are assessed as any argumentative paper in philosophy is assessed: on whether it is clearly written, whether it shows comprehension of the issues, and whether the argument presented has any merit, including whether you anticipate and respond to objections in an effective way.

Presentation

Each of you will select some portion of one of the books we are reading to present during the relevant class session. Early in the semester you will be given a chance to indicate your preferences and I will work out an assignment of such that tries to meet those preferences as far as is feasible.

In indicating your preferences, you should aim to select something you find of sufficient interest that you might well want to make it central to the final paper you write for the course. (Note, though, that you are not committed to using it that way.)

A presentation requires you to (i) produce a handout that you will use in class when giving your presentation. This handout will need to be submitted to Canvas by noon of the day you are up for presentation. Your presentation itself should be planned so as to occupy something in the range of 30 to 45 minutes, though we will be flexible about this. I will provide hard copies of your handout to distribute to the class, and you will use it to lead a discussion for that time.

The presentation will select some key claims and arguments in the reading you are presenting, but you are not required to give a summary of the entire reading. You are to be selective: aim for depth, not breadth. Select key claims and arguments in the reading that seem to you to be especially important and worth investigating.

The handout itself must be no more than two pages (so that it can be fit onto one piece of paper using both sides). It should include at the top of the front page information on the reading and your own name as the presenter. The handout should include four kinds of things:

1. A summary in your own words of those key claims or arguments you have selected. You can use some select quotations but you should not lean unduly on such. Be sure to provide page references not only for quotations for to indicate where in the reading you find these claims you are discussing.

2. Questions about those claims or arguments. These can be questions asking for clarification on points that are obscure to you, questions about what relevant background might be needed to understand or evaluate these points, or the like.

3. Evaluative/critical remarks about those claims or arguments. These can include both negative and positive remarks; if positive, they would presumably be defenses of the author's comments against criticisms you expect someone might raise. These critical comments can be relatively rough; think of this as an opportunity to get help from your peers in improving those critical comments.

4. One original thesis and supporting argument of your own related to the material. The more definite the thesis, the better, though it is not a disaster if it remains rough in certain ways. But aim to provide some claim that you can imagine writing a paper defending, and provide some statement of support for that claim.

You should keep in mind in designing the handout that you will use it in leading the discussion. You are expected to present the summary of key claims of interest, elaborating beyond just the words you have on the handout as needed to say what you want to say. After that point, the presentation becomes a discussion. Everyone present (including myself) will be expected to chime in at will with questions, comments, and such, and your job is to manage the discussion as best you can.

Comments on your presentation will be returned to you via comments on that handout.

Final conference-sized paper

The final paper is another argumentative paper, this time of a size suitable for a conference. This means roughly in the range of 2500 to 3500 words. You should think of it as something you might hope to submit to a conference in the future. This means thinking of it as something that could be presented to a professional audience who has not been in the class with us, where there is likely a critical commentator lying in wait to tear your argument apart.

V. Class Policies

Attendance

Unexcused absences for a graduate course are quite unacceptable. If you miss a class, excused or not, you need to take responsibility for finding out what you have missed. If you do have a good excuse for an absence or a missed assignment, you need to get in contact with me in a reasonable amount of time and make any relevant arrangements. Of course, if you are seriously ill, do not worry about that and seek medical attention immediately, letting me know later when it is feasible to do so. In general, I aim to give students the benefit of the doubt about these matters, but I may demand documentation on a case-by-case basis.

Class Participation

It is critical for your own education that you actively participate in class discussions. For this reason, I have a policy of "cold-calling" on students. That is, I will call on people even if they don't volunteer, and even if others are volunteering. I do this as a matter of course, aiming to get everyone to participate. The reason I do it is to help you get past any reluctance you may have in articulate your thoughts in a challenging environment. I have seen many students in the past switch from being silent observers to eager participants as a result of being prodded to participate, and it is clear they benefit from being able to do so.

Academic Honesty

UF students are bound by The Honor Pledge which states "We, the members of the University of Florida community, pledge to hold ourselves and our peers to the highest standards of honor and integrity by abiding by the Honor Code." On all work submitted for credit by students at the University of Florida, the following pledge is either required or implied: "On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing this assignment." The Conduct Code specifies a number of behaviors that are in violation of this code and the possible sanctions. See the UF Conduct Code website (<https://sccr.dso.ufl.edu/policies/student-honor-code-student-conduct-code/>) for more information. If you have any questions or concerns, please consult with the instructor or TAs in this class. Students are responsible for knowing that these behaviors are prohibited.

Any incident of academic dishonesty is reported to the Student Conduct & Conflict Resolution committee (see <https://sccr.dso.ufl.edu/>), which may impose sanctions up to and including expulsion from the university. In this course, *I have a zero-tolerance policy for academic dishonesty*. In my view, any case of academic dishonesty *should result in a failing grade for the entire course*, and I will advocate for such in communications with SCCR. If you remain enrolled in this class past the end of the drop/add period, you thereby indicate agreement with this policy.

Please take the following advice to heart. If you find yourself having trouble with a particular assignment and are tempted to cheat, keep in mind that a poor grade for one assignment without a record of dishonesty kept in the Dean's Office is obviously better than a failing grade for the entire course with a record of dishonesty in that office. You can always seek help to improve in later work.

Collaboration

The honor code specifies a number of activities that constitute academic dishonesty as well as the sanctions (that is, penalties) that may result, including suspension and expulsion. Please note that *collaboration in this class is forbidden unless stated otherwise*. No student may collaborate with any other person (in this class or not) on any assigned work. If group work is assigned or this policy changes, I will provide that information in writing on individual assignment instructions.

This prohibition on collaboration does not mean that you cannot make use of ideas from others that arise during the class, *so long as you give credit in an appropriate way*. For instance, in class discussion a student might say something that you want to use in your paper. You can refer to that idea in your work, so long as you include a reference like this:

as suggested in class discussion on March 1, 2022.

You can also cite the work of other students when that work is put online for the class to see. In that case, you might include a reference like this:

as suggested by McX in their discussion post dated March 1, 2022.

If the class includes discussion boards online where students' names are used, you can cite posts on that board with both the date and the actual student's name.

Use of AI

As I see it, the most important skill you develop in a philosophy class is the ability to think, write and speak clearly and carefully about issues that are often confusing, slippery, and frustrating. Developing this skill requires practice — especially practice in writing, as it is in writing that you force

your thoughts into a coherent form that can be examined carefully and critically. One way to see this is to think of writing as making a thought vulnerable. Once you've written it out, there it is for yourself and others to inspect, to evaluate in a conscientious fashion. A clearly written sentence makes it even more vulnerable, since it is easier in that case to see where the thought might be mistaken. This makes writing scary in ways, but that is also what makes it so valuable. Think about it this way: before you buy a car, say, you want to know that the manufacturer has tested it thoroughly. And you want those tests to be good ones — ones that actually expose whatever weaknesses are there. Likewise, if you give a damn about the quality of your thoughts, you want them tested thoroughly, and clear writing is the best method for exposing weaknesses or errors in your thoughts. Only then can you build a serious intellectual product.

If you use ChatGPT or other generative AI programs to produce writing, you are not getting in the practice of hammering your thoughts into a thoroughly tested product. You can get some good summaries of information, and you can even get some well written essays. But you're not developing your own skills at doing this. If you think that other people have already figured out all the correct answers to the questions we address in philosophy, then perhaps you don't care about having that skill yourself. But who are we kidding? Even on the most optimistic view of existing philosophical work, it is obvious that, at the very least, it is not obvious where in that work one can find the truth. We're stuck having to do our own work in figuring out to the best of our ability what is true, and that requires developing these skills.

I understand that some professors see ChatGPT as a technology that might be fruitfully used as a learning tool, and I am sure it can be used in certain ways that are helpful. But it is hard to see how it can be allowed in a philosophy class without making it simply too easy for you to succumb to the temptation simply not to put in the work required for developing the cognitive and verbal skills you should be developing. In light of all this, my policy is to prohibit all and any use of generative AI for producing text that is in any way used for assignments in this class: writing exercises, papers, or other written work if such is assigned. To emphasize:

AI SOURCES PROHIBITED

The use of ChatGPT or other generative AI applications in generating text, outlines, or notes for any assignment in this course is strictly prohibited unless explicitly allowed for a particular assignment. Use of such counts as academic dishonesty and merits the standard penalty for academic dishonesty, namely, a failing grade for the entire course.

Rights Reserved

The prohibition on using AI to produce text is, of course, one that may be difficult to enforce. There are various telltale signs that might indicate that AI was used, but they are from conclusive. Here, however, is something that is a very good method of detection. If you did not write the work yourself, you will have a hard time explaining it verbally to someone else — especially me. In light of this, I have the following policy.

- I reserve the right, for any written work you hand in for any assignment, to require you to meet with me in person soon thereafter to answer questions about your written work so that I can establish that you understand what you handed in.
- If I determine in the process of this discussion that it is not credible to suppose that you are the author of your own words, I reserve the further right to require you to do a new writing assignment comparable to the first in a controlled environment where you cannot make use of any external aids.

- If it gets to that point, I will grade the new writing done under controlled circumstances and use that grade as the grade of the original assignment.

VII. Course Schedule

The schedule below provides information on readings and due dates for assignments. The schedule may need to be adjusted to accommodate disruptions or student needs; any such changes will be announced in class and noted on Canvas on the document called "most recently updated schedule", a link to which can be found on the website's home page. (The schedule on the syllabus page will not be updated.)

Week	Monday	Readings	Assignments
1		<i>Classes begin Thursday 8/21; our first meeting is Monday 8/25</i>	
2	8/25	No reading; introductory discussion	
3	9/1	<i>No class – Labor Day</i>	
4	9/8	Van Inwagen 2008, Craig 1980, Taylor 1992, Malcolm 1960, Manson 2009	Discussion Post: Group A
5	9/15	Alston 1986, Hume 1748, Hambourger 1987, Mackie 1955, Plantinga 1974, Adams 1977	Discussion Post: Group B
6	9/22	Layman 2007	Discussion Post: Group A Student presentations begin
7	9/29	Layman 2007	Discussion Post: Group B
8	10/6	Collins 2009, Waller 2020	Discussion Post: Group A Modest paper due by Friday 10/10
9	10/13	Waller 2020	Discussion Post: Group B
10	10/20	Waller 2020	Discussion Post: Group A
11	10/27	Pereboom 2005, Ekstrom 2021	Discussion Post: Group B
12	11/3	Ekstrom 2021	Discussion Post: Group A
13	11/10	Ekstrom 2021	Discussion Post: Group B
14	11/17	Catchup and/or readings to be determined	
15	11/24	<i>No Class – Thanksgiving Week</i>	
16	12/1	Catchup and/or readings to be determined	
17	12/8 – 12/12	EXAM WEEK	Conference sized paper due by Wednesday 12/10

Van Inwagen, Peter. 2008. "The Idea of God." Chapter 2 of his book *The Problem of Evil*. Oxford University Press.

Craig, William Lane. 1980. "Philosophical and Scientific Pointers to *Creatio Ex Nihilo*." *Perspectives on Science & Christian Faith* 32: 5-13.

Taylor, Richard. 1992. "The Principle of Sufficient Reason." Selection (pages 100-108) from his book *Metaphysics*, 4th Edition. Prentice Hall, 1992.

Malcolm, Norman. 1960. "Anselm's Ontological Arguments." *Philosophical Review* 69: 41-62

Manson, Neil. 2009. "The Fine-Tuning Argument." *Philosophy Compass* 4 (1): 271-286.

Alston, William P. 1986 "Perceiving God." *Journal of Philosophy* 83 (11): 655-665.

Hume, David. 1748. "Of Miracles." Section 10, Part 1 of *Enquires Concerning Human Understanding*. Public domain.

Hambourger, David. 1987. "Need Miracles Be Extraordinary?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 47 (3): 435-449.

Mackie, J. L. 1955. "Evil and Omnipotence." *Mind* 64 (254): 200-212.

Plantinga, Alvin. 1974. "God, Evil, and the Metaphysics of Freedom." Chapter 9 of *The Nature of Necessity*. Clarendon Press.

Adams, Robert. 1977. "Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14 (2): 109-117.

Layman, C. Stephen. 2007. *Letters to Doubting Thomas*. Oxford University Press.

- Collins, Robin. 2009. "The Teleological Argument: An Exploration of the Fine-Tuning of the Universe." In William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Waller, Jason. 2020. *Cosmological Fine-Tuning Arguments*. Routledge.
- Pereboom, Derk. 2005. "The Problem of Evil." In William E. Mann, ed., *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Religion*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Ekstrom, Laura W. 2021. *God, Suffering, and the Value of Free Will*. Oxford University Press.