

JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

Course: PHIL 270
Semester: Spring 2012
Professor: Peter Groff
Times: MW 3-4:22 pm
Location: Coleman 56

Office: Coleman 64
Phone: x. 73130
Office hours: TR 2:30-3:30 pm and W 1-2 pm or by appointment
Email: pgroff@bucknell.edu

Required texts:

Philo of Alexandria, *The Contemplative Life, The Giants and Selections*, trans. D. Winston (Paulist Press)
Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. C. Rabin (Hackett)
Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Silverthorne and Israel (Cambridge University Press)
Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. W. Kaufmann (Touchstone)
Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Penguin)
Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. S. Hand (Blackwell)

Some additional readings will be provided as PDFs through Blackboard.

Course Description:

This new course focuses on major philosophers from the Jewish tradition who played a pivotal role in the overall development of Western philosophy as well. We will be reading a diverse selection of historical and contemporary thinkers from a variety of geographical and cultural contexts. The first half of the course will lay the groundwork by focusing on a handful of crucial historical figures: Philo of Alexandria (1st c. CE Hellenistic Egypt), Moses Maimonides (12th c. Islamic Spain/North Africa) and Baruch Spinoza (17th c. Portugal/Holland). The second half of the course will focus on select 20th century figures in Jewish philosophy, examining key works by Martin Buber (1878-1965, Austria/Israel), Hannah Arendt (1906-1975, Germany/U.S.), and finally Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995, Lithuania/France). Some of the topics that we shall consider through these readings are: the truth-status of revelation, the existence, nature and knowability of God, the tensions between divine attributes such as omnipotence and foreknowledge and human free will, the problem of evil (from ancient philosophical engagements with the Book of Job to 20th century confrontations with the Holocaust), the origin and basis of morality and the nature of our ethical obligations to one another, the conditions of dialogue, the experience of alterity, and the relation between Jewish particularism and philosophical universalism (or alternately, the claims of revelation/tradition/faith and philosophy/science/reason).

In addition to acquiring a broad familiarity with some of the pivotal thinkers in the Jewish philosophical tradition and the questions that exercised them, the more general goals of this class are to develop the capacity to read and analyze complex, abstract philosophical texts and explain and evaluate these texts and arguments in a critical fashion, an appreciation of the fundamental ambiguities and complexities involved in the human attempt to answer questions about knowing, valuing, and living, and the ability to take a reasoned stand of one's own on these philosophical issues.

Requirements:

Class Attendance and Participation: In accordance with Bucknell's official attendance policy, you will be expected to attend all class periods. Because this class meets only twice a week, more than two unexcused absences will adversely affect your grade (class attendance and participation comprise a significant percent of this). If you have a legitimate excuse for missing class (e.g. sickness, family emergency, religious holiday) you must let me know *before* the class period, as far in advance as possible.

The format of this class will alternate between lecture and class discussion, with an emphasis on the latter. Philosophical texts are generally dense and complex, so mastering the material will require active engagement on your part. The readings will range from approximately 20-60 pp. in length, depending in part on the difficulty of the material. Some of the assignments may require a second reading for comprehension. You will be expected to bring your texts to class consistently, keep up with the reading assignments (which must be completed prior to the course meeting for which they are scheduled), read carefully and critically, participate in class discussions, and complete all writing assignments in a timely manner. Students who show up without the relevant book or have obviously not read the assigned material will be marked absent for that day. All late work without legitimate, documented excuse will be marked down in accordance with the extent of lateness (1/3 grade lower for every day they are late).

In evaluating your participation in this class, I will not be looking merely at quantity, but more importantly, *quality*—i.e., I'm not so much interested in how frequently or how much you talk, but more whether your comments, questions and suggestions reflect a thoughtful and considered engagement with the ideas and arguments we are examining. I realize not everyone is equally comfortable participating in discussion on a daily basis. While I encourage you to find your voice in class, I also count after-class discussion, office hour discussion, and email exchange as legitimate forms of participation.

NB: Absolutely *no* electronic devices (i.e., laptops, ipads, smartphones, cellphones, etc) are permitted in this class unless you have prior written authorization from the Dean. The inappropriate presence of any such electronic device (e.g., an open laptop, a cellphone in plain sight, regardless of whether it is turned on or off, etc) will result in the lowering of your attendance and participation average by one full grade (for each occurrence). The same goes for extended absences while class is in session. If you have business to take care of, please take of it either before or after the designated class period, unless it's an emergency. Cellphone chats and texting do not constitute an emergency. Leaving the room mid-class simply to talk/text is disruptive and disrespectful, and folks who interrupt class in this way will see it reflected in a very poor attendance and participation grade. So do yourself a favor and liberate yourself from these tedious distractions for the measly 2 hours and 44 minutes we have together each week!

Paper and Exams: You will be assigned three papers, based on the sources we have read in class. Because they are relatively short (ranging from 6-8 pp.) they will need to be dense papers, chockfull of philosophical explication, analysis and critique, and with no fluff or padding. It will be your responsibility to say what needs to be said as economically, clearly and precisely as possible. Detailed instructions for these assignments will be provided on topic handouts, which I will distribute approximately 2 weeks in advance of their due dates. You will also receive a more general set of guidelines/expectations for writing philosophy papers in this class.

Grading:

Your final grade breaks down as follows:

20% attendance and participation

25% 1st paper (The Hellenistic and Medieval Period: Philo and Maimonides). Due Feb 20 (M).

- 25% 2nd paper (The Modern Period: Spinoza). Due Mar 26 (M).
30% 3rd paper (The 20th Century: Buber, Arendt and Levinas). Due date TBA.

Academic Honesty: You are expected to know what constitutes plagiarism. If you do not, please consult the student handbook for Bucknell's policy on the matter. It goes without saying that all suspected cases of plagiarism will be automatically pursued and turned over to the Board of Review on Academic Responsibility.

Note: I will be glad to give you feedback and advice during office hours on any of the above writing assignments. If you have a rough draft or outline I'd be happy to look over it. Feel free also to stop in during office hours if you have any questions throughout the course of the semester, or just want to talk about whatever. If you cannot make it to my office during the posted hours, let me know and we can schedule some alternative time.

Reading Schedule:

Jan 18 (W): Introductory business.

PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA: Trailblazer, Synthesizer of Jewish & Greek Traditions

Jan 23 (M): Philo of Alexandria, *The Contemplative Life*, pp. xi-xiv (Preface), 79-82 (Allegory & Myth), 87-95 (The Divine Mind), and 96-109 (Cosmogony).

Jan 25 (W): Philo of Alexandria, *The Contemplative Life*, pp. 118-23 (The Soul) and 124-43 (The Divine Transcendence).

MOSES BEN MAIMON: Rabbi, Physician, Philosophical Authority

Jan 30 (M): Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides' Introduction & Bk I, Ch I, XXXV, and L-LVIII, pp. 41-49, 51-53 and 63-82 (how to interpret the Torah: Biblical language suggesting the corporeality and multiplicity of God).

Feb 1 (W): Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Bk II, Intro, Ch. I-XXVII & XXIX-XXXI, pp. 89-118, bottom of 125 -26 (philosophical demonstration of God's existence, unity and incorporeality; creation vs. eternity of the world).

Feb 6 (M): Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Bk II, Ch. XXXII-end, pp. 126-47 (prophecy).

Feb 8 (W): Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Bk III, Ch. XII-XXIII, pp. 149-73 (providence: divine omniscience and the problem of evil).

Feb 13 (M): Maimonides, *RAMBAM: Readings in the Philosophy of Moses Maimonides* [PDF on Blackboard], pp. 404-29 (excerpts from *GP*, Bk III on the revealed Law).

Feb 15 (W): Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Bk III, Ch. LI-end, pp. 184-202 (summary: human perfectability and God's providence redux).

BARUCH DE SPINOZA: Naturalist, Heretic, Founder of Modernity

Feb 20 (M): Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, Preface, Chap. 1-3, pp. 3-56 (naturalizing prophecy, the prophets, and the vocation of the Hebrews). **FIRST PAPER DUE.**

Feb 22 (W): Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, Chap. 4-6, pp. 57-96 (naturalizing divine law, religious ceremonies, historical narratives and miracles).

Feb 27 (M): Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, Chap. 7-10, pp. 97-154 (naturalistic/historical interpretation of Scripture; human authorship of the Old Testament).

Feb 29 (W): Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, Chap 11-15, pp. 155-94 (what is actually divine in Scripture; the difference between faith and philosophy).

Mar 5 (M): Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, Chap. 16-17, pp. 195-229 (Spinoza's political philosophy: the state, natural/civil rights, and the extent of sovereign powers).

Mar 7 (W): Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, Chap. 18-20, pp. 230-59 (Spinoza's political philosophy redux: limitations of religious authority and the free republic).

Mar 12 (M): **SPRING BREAK.**

Mar 14 (W): **SPRING BREAK.**

MARTIN BUBER: Mystic, Existentialist, Zionist

Mar 19 (M): Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, First Part, pp. 53-85.

Mar 21 (W): Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, Second Part, pp. 87-122.

Mar 26 (M): Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, Third Part, pp. 123-153. **SECOND PAPER DUE.**

Mar 28 (W): Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, Third Part (con't) and Afterward, pp. 153-82.

HANNAH ARENDT: Political Theorist of Totalitarianism & the "Banality of Evil"

Apr 2 (M): Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Chap. I-III, pp. 3-55. *Night and Fog* (short documentary on the Holocaust) shown in class.

Apr 4 (W): Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Chap. IV-VI, pp. 56-111.

Apr 9 (M): Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Chap. VII-VIII and XIII-XIV, pp. 112-50 and 206-33.

Apr 11 (W): Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Chap. XV, Epilogue & Postscript, pp. 234-98.

EMMANUEL LEVINAS: Talmudic Scholar, Postmodern Thinker of "The Other"

Apr 16 (M): Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, "There Is: Existence without Existents" and "Time and the Other," pp. 29-58.

Apr 18 (W): Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, "Ethics as First Philosophy," pp. 75-87 and *Totality and Infinity* Sec. III.B: "Ethics and the Face" (PDF on Blackboard)

Apr 23 (M): Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, "Substitution," pp. 88-125.

Apr 25 (W): Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, "God and Philosophy," pp. 166-89.

Apr 30 (M): Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, "The Pact" (Talmudic reading), pp. 211-26.

FINAL PAPER DUE: The final paper will be due at the end of the final exam hour established by the registrar for this course (note: although a final exam time is scheduled, there is no final exam in this course, only the final paper). Please drop your paper off at Coleman 64 (If I am not there, or you want to hand in the paper before this deadline, please slide it under my office door or leave it with Jane Baker, the philosophy department secretary, in Coleman 69).