

**AS 150.321**  
**African Philosophy – Fall 2014**  
**Sandy Koll**  
**Johns Hopkins University**

Instructor Contact Information:

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Office hours: Friday 11am-1pm and by appointment in Gilman 280 (Nandi Theunissen's office)

Course Meetings:

Tuesdays, 3pm to 5:30pm  
Gilman 377

Course Description:

This course surveys some distinctively Sub-Saharan African contributions to major areas of philosophical inquiry, including metaphysics, epistemology, ethics and political philosophy.

Course Overview:

The course is divided into four main parts, each of which represents an important sub-field within the field of philosophy. Though in a sense the subject matter to be studied in the course is rather broad, the course should show important interconnection of the various philosophical topics in African thought and so will form a unified survey of African philosophical thought.

In the first part of the course, we will read some material concerning the nature of African philosophy. This part of the course could be called “methodological” or “meta-philosophical” since it deals with questions about the sort of inquiry that constitutes African philosophy (or indeed, philosophy in general). A significant amount of the philosophical literature from Africa has been concerned with questions about what African philosophy is, should be, or could be. These are important considerations to address at the beginning of the course, since they inform much of what comes later.

The second part of the course moves into one of the major areas within philosophy itself – metaphysics and epistemology. In this part of the course, we will read material that exemplifies an African perspective on the nature of reality and our acquiring knowledge. After studying some readings on the general character of African metaphysical and epistemological systems, we will look at some examples of African philosophy that tackle more specific, narrower problems within metaphysics and epistemology.

In the third part of the course, we will move on to another major area within philosophy – that of ethics. In this part of the course, the focus will be primarily on *Ubuntu* – the Nguni word for a worldview that is quite widespread throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, though it goes by different names in different languages and areas. We shall begin by exploring several different conceptions of *ubuntu* as a moral theory, and then move on to consider applications of the theory to specific moral issues, such as environmental concerns and the prevention of HIV and AIDS.

In the fourth part of the course, we turn to political philosophy from Africa. The ideas associated with *ubuntu* as a moral theory will, unsurprisingly, be influential here. Once again, we will move from some rather broad accounts of political ideas that are prevalent in African philosophy to some more specific issues such as human rights and business models. Finally, the course will end with some reflections on the place of Africa in the world, especially given the technological progress that increasingly allows interaction between individuals who are physically far apart. Whereas the course begins by looking at the past, by considering the history of African philosophy, the course ends by looking to the future of African philosophy in the context of globalization.

### Assessment

- Three 2 page response papers (10% each)
- Two 7-8 page papers (25% each)
- Attendance and participation (20%)

#### *Short Response Papers:*

Students will be required to complete three short (2 page) response papers during the course. These response papers will be focused on particular readings, and will have relatively directed prompts. The purpose of these papers will be to facilitate students' understanding of particular arguments in the reading, and to hone their skills of reading, summarizing, and beginning to evaluate philosophical arguments in general. A good example of one of these short papers would clearly and concisely summarize an important line of thought in a reading, and point out a possible problem with that line of thought or a question about it. Students will not be expected to solve the problem or answer the question they identify in these short papers; the goal is simply to begin thinking critically and carefully about an issue. Prompts for these assignments will be distributed one week before the assignments are due.

#### *Longer Papers:*

Students will be required to complete two longer (7-8 page) papers during the course. Students will have a choice of topics on which to write, and one possibility will be to build on one of the short response papers. My expectations for these papers will be that the students show a good understanding of a particular reading (or small number of readings – ideally not more than two), and to be able to critically evaluate an argument in that reading. This critical evaluation could be in the form of raising an objection or two to the argument in the reading, or defending a particular line of thought against a potential problem. Prompts for these assignments will be distributed two weeks before the assignments are due.

#### *Attendance and Participation*

Students will be expected to attend class and to participate in class discussions as an important component of the course. In order to receive a good grade for this component of the course, students should attend class regularly, and be prepared to discuss the reading assigned for each week.

#### Tentative Schedule of Readings:\*

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\* The assigned readings are subject to change. I will announce in class each week what you should read for the following week. Please be sure to keep up to date with what we will be reading next.

## ***Part I: What is African Philosophy?***

### **Week 1 – Introduction and History of African Philosophy**

**September 2**

No reading.

- Introductions.
- Some background.
- Collective musings on the nature of philosophy.

### **Week 2 – Approaching “African Philosophy”**

**September 9**

Reading:

- H. Odera Oruka, “Four Trends in Current African Philosophy” in P. H. Coetzee and A. P. J. Roux (eds) *The African Philosophy Reader (APR)* 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed, (London: Routledge, 2003) pp. 120-124.
- Moya Deacon, “The Status of Father Tempels and Ethnophilosophy in the Discourse of African Philosophy,” in *APR* pp. 104-111.
- Kwasi Wiredu, “How Not to Compare African Thought with Western Thought,” in E. C. Eze (ed) *African Philosophy: An Anthology (AP)* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 193-199.

### **Week 3 – Approaching “African Philosophy” Continued**

**September 16**

*First short paper assigned*

Reading:

- Kibujjo M. Kalumba, “Sage Philosophy: Its Methodology, Results, Significance, and Future,” in Kwasi Wiredu (ed) *A Companion to African Philosophy (ACAP)* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 274-281.
- Mabogo P. More, “Albert Luthuli, Steve Biko, and Nelson Mandela: The Philosophical Basis of Their Thought and Practice,” in *ACAP* pp. 207-215.
- Steve B. Biko, “Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity,” in *APR* pp. 79-85.

## ***Part II: African Metaphysics and Epistemology***

### **Week 4 – Metaphysics and Epistemology: Western and African Perspectives**

**September 23**

*First short paper due*

Reading:

- Lebisa J. Teffo and Abraham P. J. Roux, “Themes in African Metaphysics” in *APR* pp. 161-174.
- Didier N. Kaphagwani and Jeanette G. Malherbe, “African Epistemology,” in *APR* pp. 219-229.

### **Week 5 – Metaphysics and Epistemology in Africa – General Issues**

**September 30**

Readings:

- Godwin S. Sogolo, “Logic and Rationality,” in *APR* pp. 244-258.
- Kwasi Wiredu, “The Concept of Truth in the Akan Language,” in *APR* pp. 239-243.

### **Week 6 – Metaphysics in Africa – Specific Problems**

## **October 7**

*First long paper assigned*

Reading:

- Godwin S. Sogolo, “The Concept of Cause in African Thought,” in *APR* pp. 192-199.
- Kwame Gyekye, “The Relation of *Ōkra* (Soul) and *Honam* (Body): An Akan Conception” in *AP* pp. 59-66.

## **Week 7: Epistemology in Africa – Specific Problems**

### **October 14**

Reading:

- Philip M. Peek, ““Divination”: A Way of Knowing?” in *AP* pp. 171-172.
- E. Chukuwdi Eze, “The Problem of Knowledge in “Divination”: the example of Ifa,” in *AP* pp. 173-2175.
- Olufemi Taiwo, “*Ifa*: An Account of a Divination System and Some Concluding Epistemological Questions,” in *ACAP* pp. 304-312.

## **Part III – African Ethics**

## **Week 8 – Introduction to *Ubuntu* – Different Conceptions**

### **October 21**

*First long paper due*

Reading:

- Augustine Shutte, “*Ubuntu* as The African Vision in M. F. Murove (ed) *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics (AE)* (Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009) pp. 85-99.
- Nhlanhla Mkhize, “*Ubuntu* and Harmony: An African Approach to Morality and Ethics,” in R. Nicolson (ed) *Persons in Community (PC)* (Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008) pp. 35-44.
- Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Random House, 1999) (excerpts).

## **Week 9 – Conceptions of *Ubuntu* Continued**

### **October 28**

*Second short paper assigned*

Reading:

- Thaddeus Metz, “Toward an African Moral Theory,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 15 (2007): 321-341.
- Thaddeus Metz, “An African Theory of Moral Status: A Relational Alternative to Individualism and Holism,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 15 (2012): 387-402.

## **Week 10 – Applications of *Ubuntu* to Specific Moral Issues**

### **November 4**

*Second short paper due*

Reading:

- Jason Van Niekerk, “The Virtue of Gossip,” *Southern African Journal of Philosophy* 27 (2008): 400-412.
- Musa W. Dube, “‘I Am Because We Are’: Giving Primacy to African Indigenous Values in HIV&AIDS Prevention,” in *AE* pp. 188-217.

## ***Part IV: African Political Philosophy***

### **Week 11 – Political Philosophy in Africa – General Issues**

**November 11**

*Third short paper assigned*

Reading:

- Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) pp. 182-190.
- Augustine Shutte, “Politics and the Ethic of *Ubuntu*,” in *AE* pp. 375-390.
- Thaddeus Metz, “African Moral Theory and Public Governance: Nepotism, Preferential Hiring and Other Partiality,” in *AE* pp. 335-356.

### **Week 12 – Specific Issues in African Political Philosophy**

**November 18**

*Third short paper due*

*Second long paper assigned*

Reading:

- Barbara Nussbaum, “*Ubuntu* and Business: Reflections and Questions,” in *AE* pp. 238-258.
- Thaddeus Metz, “Human Dignity, Capital Punishment, and an African Moral Theory: Toward a New Philosophy of Human Rights,” *Journal of Human Rights* 9 (2010): 81-99.

**\*\*\*THANKSGIVING BREAK\*\*\***

### **Week 13 – Africa and The Rest of the World – Globalization**

**December 2**

*Second long paper due*

Reading:

- D. A. Mosolo, “Rethinking Communities in a Global Context,” in *APR* pp. 558-573.
- M. F. Murobe, “Globalization and African Renaissance: An Ethical Reflection,” in *APR* pp. 574-587.