

**COURSE SYLLABUS  
ETHIOPIAN PHILOSOPHY**

**DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY  
SPRING SEMESTER, 2013**

VERHAREN 806-6811 (Dept.)  
PHONE: 806-6779 (Office)  
E-Mail: cverharen@howard.edu

OFFICE: ROOM 310, LOCKE HALL  
OFFICE HOURS: TTH 5:10-6-30  
And by appointment

**COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

**PART ONE: THE STATUS OF CLASSICAL AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY**

In the first part of the course we will consider why ancient African thought in Egypt and Ethiopia is not commonly regarded as part of the global body of philosophy. We will examine arguments for separating philosophy from other intellectual disciplines such as science and history. Finally we will argue that philosophy as the ground of all other disciplines must be a continuous process in the history of thought. We will focus on the traditions of the Oromo, the largest linguistic group in Ethiopia, in this part of the course.

**PART TWO: CLASSICAL ETHIOPIAN PHILOSOPHY**

Many current philosophy anthologies offer a truncated version of Zara Yakob's *Hatata*. Roughly contemporary with the first truly modern European philosopher Descartes, Zara Yakob's philosophical aims and methods are strikingly similar to those of that 17<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher. In fact, Italian researchers attributed the work to early Italian missionaries in Ethiopia because of its sophistication. Claude Sumner, professor in the department of philosophy at Addis Ababa University, conclusively refuted the Italian claim. Yakob's aim is to doubt all claims except those which the "pure light of reason" protect. A deeply religious philosopher, Yakob claims that all religious claims whether Jewish, Christian or Muslim, are suspect unless they can stand the test of reason. We will start the course with a close reading of the *Hatata*. We will continue with a close reading of Walda Heyat's work. Heyat was a disciple of Yakob

**PART THREE: CONTEMPORARY ETHIOPIAN PHILOSOPHY**

The text for the course will be *Philosophy in Ethiopia Now*, edited by Bekele Gutema, former chair of the philosophy department of the University of Addis Ababa, and your professor, Charles Verharen. The first section of this part will focus on the roles philosophy should play in university education. Other sections will include reflections on the philosophies of religion, anthropology, women, as well as the traditional Ethiopian concept of *naaga*, translated as peace or harmony.

**OBJECTIVE OF THE COURSE:**

On completing the course students should be able to have a clear understanding of the reasons for the omissions of ancient African thought in standard anthologies and histories of philosophy. They should be able to assess arguments for and against these omissions in light of their own understanding of the nature and history of philosophy, and to present compelling arguments for their own positions. Students should also be able to compare and contrast ancient, classical and contemporary Ethiopian philosophy with other historical philosophies such as the holism of Hinduism and Taoism and the pluralism of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies. Finally, they should be able to assess arguments for correlations between ancient Ethiopian philosophy and pre-Socratic and other early Greek philosophy.

**COURSE READING: REQUIRED**

*African Philosophy in Ethiopia*, Bekele Gutema and Charles Verharen, vol. I in series, *Philosophy in Africa Now*, editor. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: Addis Ababa University Philosophical

Studies, 2012. Reprinted as *African Philosophy in Ethiopia: Ethiopian Philosophical Studies II*. Washington, DC: Council for Research on Values and Philosophy, 2012. The text is available online or through your professor.

*Hatata*. Zara Yakob. The text will be supplied electronically by your professor.

## **REQUIREMENTS:**

**PEER GROUPS:** You are encouraged to form peer groups to help you rewrite your notes and reading critiques, and to study for exams. If you have missed a class, it is your responsibility to secure replacement notes from several of your peer group members. If you are having difficulty forming a group, please ask for help from your instructor. On appropriate occasions, peer groups will conduct class discussion.

**EXAMS:** There will be two examinations during the semester. The exams will be essay form, and the questions will be taken from the three parts of the course described above. There will be no final examination. Homework is assigned daily. All work must be completed by the last day of formal classes. The first exam will be scheduled two weeks before the mid-semester grade reports are due in the registrar's office. The second exam will be scheduled for the week preceding the last full week of classes before the final examination period.

**READING CRITIQUES:** Students must complete no less than ten brief reports on their readings in ancient Ethiopian philosophy as a preparation for writing a research paper. Reading critiques will be graded both by peer groups and the instructor. Both the reading critiques and the research paper should cover the following nine elements, although not necessarily in the order listed. You may not be able to cover all nine steps in your first few reading critiques. If you're having trouble, talk to me or members of your peer group. (1) State the problem you have chosen for your research, and show why you think the problem deserves our attention. You choose your problem out of your own interests, but many other authors will have worked on some aspect of your problem. (2) Show how your approach to the problem will be philosophical. (3) To the degree that you are able, present a brief history of other attempts to solve your problem. This may be difficult to do on your initial reading critiques, but this element should play a prominent role in your final research paper. (4) Present a brief, compelling, clear account of your author's attempt to solve your problem. (5) Show how the author fails to solve your problem--from the author's point of view. This step reveals philosophy's most important first step: showing someone wrong from her own point of view. (6) Show how the author fails to solve your problem--from your own point of view. (7) How might you improve or correct your author's solution? (8) Show how your solution to your problem might be wrong--from your own point of view. (9) Briefly indicate the next steps you need to take to solve your problem.

**GROUNDS FOR CRITIQUE:** You may try to show how someone (including yourself!) may be wrong from her own point of view with the following considerations. (1) Are all the elements of the language the person uses to express her theory meaningful--both to herself and her readers? (2) Do the consequences drawn from the person's theory correspond to her own experience? (3) Are the elements of the person's theory consistent with her own assumptions? (4) Is the person able to use her theory to achieve the results she designed the theory for? (5) Does the theory cover the widest possible range of experience? (6) Does the theory cover its intended range of experience with a minimum number of symbols? (7) Does the theory stimulate new ways of thinking about the problem that led to its development?

**SYMBOLS USED FOR WRITING CRITIQUE:** Both the instructor and your peer group members will use the following symbols to point out aspects of your writing that you may wish to

improve. “S” = Structure, “T” = Transition, “R” = Relevance, “D” = Details, “D/E” = Definition and Explanation, “CA” = Critical Apparatus (citations and bibliography), “Why Φ” = Why Is Your Analysis Philosophical?, “C/A” = Criticism and Argumentation, “?” = Clarity Problem. Other symbols will be used to address the mechanics of your writing. “G” = Grammar, “Sp” = Spelling, “Pct.” = punctuation, “SL” = Sexist Language, “A” = Above (point already made above, why repeated?).

**JOURNALING:** You are encouraged to “freewrite” your responses to class and peer group discussions. You may use a “double entry” form, listing your notes in one column and your responses in a parallel column, or you may reserve separate sections of your notes for your response. Your journal entries should criticize class presentations, discussions, your assessment of what you do and do not understand in class, your peer group discussions, or your readings.

**RESEARCH PAPER:** A research paper of no less than ten typed pages on ancient Egyptian philosophy must be turned in no later than the last week of class. A provisional topic should be submitted to your peer group after the second week of class. A provisional outline (including a possible annotated bibliography) of this paper must be turned in by the fourth week of class. Submit the outline and bibliography to your peer group before handing in to the instructor. A very rough draft must be presented by the sixth week of class. Students are expected to revise their drafts weekly through the last week of class. Both the instructor and the peer groups will critique the drafts.

**RESEARCH PAPER STRUCTURE:** Consult with the course instructor before deciding on the structure of your research paper.

**RESEARCH PAPER MECHANICS:** Use bibliography and note cards to construct both your paper outline and rough drafts. See the instructor if you are unfamiliar with these tools.

**RESEARCH PAPER STYLE MANUAL:** The APA Style Manual is standard. Other style manuals should be chosen only in consultation with the instructor.

**RESEARCH PAPER ABSTRACTS:** Students will present abstracts of their research papers in the final two weeks of class. Each abstract will be assigned a student commentator, who will write a formal comment. The abstracts together with comments must be e-mailed to the instructor and class members at least one week before the presentation is scheduled.

**CLASS NOTES:** Because the course does not restrict itself to textbooks, a comprehensive, analytic set of class notes is required. Students will be invited to the instructor's office throughout the semester for a periodic review of their notes. If a student misses a class period for any reason, it is her immediate responsibility to secure competent notes for that period. Class notes will be graded both by peer groups and by the instructor.

**PERFORMANCE PORTFOLIO:** Students will be expected to bring a portfolio including notes, journal entries, reading critiques, rough drafts, and sample exam essays to the instructor for a comprehensive performance review once a month during the semester.

**GRADING:** Eighty percent of the final grade will be based on the arithmetical average of the two exam scores and the research paper. Performance scores on reading critiques, classroom performance and notes will make up twenty percent of the final grade. Abstracts of media materials and superior journaling can yield up to two percent extra credit.

**ATTENDANCE:** Because philosophy by its very nature requires a dialogical approach, classroom discussions are essential to apprenticeship in the discipline. Daily attendance is compulsory, a class roll is kept, and students missing more than three class periods or tardy for more than three class periods without excuse will be penalized up to one full letter grade. Subsequent blocks of three absences or tardiness will be penalized by one full letter grade. Written excuses for reasons of health, employment, law, or family are required.

**MISCONDUCT:** Misconduct on any exam or plagiarism on any written assignment will result in a grade of "F" for the course, not for the exam or assignment. Students must be absolutely certain of the meaning of the term 'plagiarism' before undertaking any writing assignment.

**LATE WORK:** No late work, whether papers or examinations, will be accepted except in documented cases of medical, financial, legal, or family emergencies.

**WITHDRAWAL:** Students who are uncertain about the possibility of completing the course successfully should pay particular attention to the last date set by the registrar for dropping the course.

### **PHILOSOPHY'S ROLE IN CREATING NEW KNOWLEDGE: SAMPLE QUESTIONS TO GUIDE HBCU STUDENT RESEARCH**

- 1) What are the greatest problems facing you in your life—whether positive or negative? The former attract your attention because they are inherently compelling; the latter are hurdles you must get through in order to get on with your life.
- 2) What are the greatest problems facing your city, state, nation? And the world itself?
- 3) How did your interest in your chosen set of problems lead you to choose a major and minor concentration? If you have not yet chosen a major, will focusing on your problem set help you to choose your major?
- 4) How will your interest in your problem-set lead you to professional or graduate school after your undergraduate career?
- 5) If you are not planning on continuing your education, will your undergraduate career give you a sufficient foundation for solving the problems you'll be interested in working on for the rest of your life?
- 6) What are the problems you're interested in working on right now?
- 7) Do you see your choice of a problem as a research choice that may have a major impact on the rest of your life? That is your first philosophical or foundational research choice.
- 8) What are the radically different kinds of solutions that have been proposed for your problem?

- 9) Which of those solutions do you think are most promising? For what reasons or arguments? Do you see this choice as the second philosophical or foundational choice of your research program?
- 10) In what discipline or disciplines will you find the research skills necessary to start working on a solution to your problem?
- 11) What prominent figures in your discipline have set up oppositional approaches to the solution of your problem?
- 12) Do you see how the radically different choices about how to solve a problem in your discipline make up the philosophy or foundation of your discipline?
- 13) Do you now have enough information to structure your research?
- a) State the problem.
  - b) Show how your approach to your problem will be philosophical or foundational.
  - c) Show how philosophy and your major discipline work together toward a solution of your problem. If your major has nothing to do with your problem, rethink your choice of major, and substitute the appropriate discipline for your research paper.
  - d) Show how your philosophical choice of a particular research method in your discipline advances your work toward a solution of your particular problem.
  - e) Conclude your paper with an assessment of progress. What have you accomplished toward a solution of your problem? What additional research skills or research proper will you need to advance your work on a solution? Should you look for other researchers whose collective efforts might help yours?
  - f) Have you set up a sufficient foundation or philosophy to start your senior thesis? Will you need to go to graduate or professional school to do more apprentice work to solve your problem?
  - g) Will you be able to transfer any of the problem-solving skills you've gained in writing this research paper to the communities that most need your problem solved? Can you join or help inaugurate a student/community organization to transfer those skills?