

University of St Andrews — Department of Philosophy
PY4659 *Why Does the World Exist?*

Semester 1 2022-23

30 Credits

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Key Module Information	1
General information	2
Assessment	3
Essay Titles	5
Seminars	5
Lecture Plan & Essential Readings	5
Additional Readings & Resources	8

KEY MODULE INFORMATION

Lectures: **Tuesdays 3-5pm**, Younger Hall, Seminar Room 2

Seminars: *Starting in Week 2*

Wednesdays 9-10am, Edgecliffe, Room G03

Wednesdays 10-11am, Edgecliffe, Room G03

Wednesdays 11-12pm, Edgecliffe, Room G03

Your Team:

Module convenor and lecturer: Dr Alexander Douglas (axd@st-andrews.ac.uk)

Office hour: Thursday, 9-10pm, Edgecliffe, Room B01 (basement)

Co-lecturers: Adam Etnson (ae45@st-andrews.ac.uk)

Office hour: Thursday, 12-1pm (on Teams), or by appointment.

Assessment:

- Seminar Presentation (15%): **Varying**
- Lecture/Tutorial Questions, 20%): **Continuous**
- Reflection (20%): **26 October**
- Essay (45%): **5 December**

GENERAL INFORMATION

Module Description: This module explores what a fundamental question in philosophy: why is there anything at all? We will look at arguments about whether or not the question is a sensible one, whether, if so, it is answerable, and what knowledge we can draw upon in attempting to answer it. Besides its intrinsic interest, the question touches other deep issues in philosophy—the nature of explanation, the notion of ultimate purpose, the fundamental nature and structure of reality, the existence of supernatural beings, the presence of objective value in the universe, and so on. We will look at various approaches to the central question from within and without the Western philosophical tradition.

Intended Learning Outcomes:

By the end of the module, students will be able to:

- Discuss a range of answers to the title question.
- Critically reflect on readings and come up with probing questions.
- Reflect analytically on complex philosophical texts.
- Produce a sophisticated philosophical argument on the main question, referring to and critically analysing a range of relevant sources.

Graduate Attributes:

- The module will contribute to **leadership skills** by asking students who give tutorial presentations to introduce a topic and take a leading role in facilitating discussion.
- The module will contribute to **diversity awareness** by pursuing a multicultural approach to philosophy, fostering dialogue across a range of cultural and religious traditions.
- The module will contribute to a **global outlook** by engaging with world religions and comparative philosophy from Europe, the Middle East, North America, East Asia, and India.

Module requirements: Adequate reading, demonstrable engagement with the module content, regular attendance at tutorials and lectures, submission of all coursework, are all compulsory requirements of this module. Students with **four or more absences for whatever reason from lectures and/or seminars will fail the module** with a grade of 0X, which does not permit re-assessment. Please note that at Honours level, accurate lecture attendance records are kept.

Students are required to submit all elements of the coursework in order to pass the module as a whole. Reassessment will be permitted for those who fail the module with an overall grade of at least 4.0.

Workload: This module is worth 30 credits; hence it should typically occupy half of your working week, i.e., approximately **18 hours per week, of which three are spent in class**. You will neither achieve the grade of which you are capable, nor gain much satisfaction from the course, unless you plan your study accordingly.

ASSESSMENT

Weighting and components:

Marking and grading is on the University 20-point scale. **For a full description of marking bands and grade classification**, see the Undergraduate Marking Criteria on p. 35 of the [Undergraduate Handbook](#).

1. Seminar Presentations (~750 words, spoken)

Due Date: TBD

Weighting: %15

Students will present on their own or in teams for the eight seminars (students will be asked to sign up for presentations during Week 1).

Students will **not** be required to provide handouts or visual aids for their presentation. Rather, the exercise will be to imitate the lectures, walking the class through passages they select from the reading as being of particular interest, explaining what they find interesting/difficult in these passages, and inviting discussion from others.

Students will be assessed on how well their session serves to deepen understanding of the reading by the group, including how constructive a discussion they manage to facilitate.

2. Lecture/Seminar Questions (18 questions, up to 50 words each)

Due Date: Every Monday 7pm

Weighting: %20

Each student will be asked to submit a **question** on the lecture reading. This can be a simple point of clarification or potential criticism (e.g. “Spinoza says that ‘all things that can fall under an infinite intellect’ must exist, but what does it mean for something to ‘fall under an infinite intellect?’”). The questions will be marked on a 2-point scale—2 points for a question that shows you have clearly read and thought about the text, 1 point for a question that doesn’t quite show this, 0 points for non-submission or a completely trivial/irrelevant question.

Each student will also be asked to submit a **question** on the seminar reading, with the same specifications as for the lecture readings above.

Students will receive an overall mark out of 20 for their combined lecture/seminar questions (a mark out of 16, for the 8 seminar questions, will be multiplied by 1.25 to get a mark out of 20, this will be averaged with a mark out of 20 for the 10 lecture questions).

If there are two readings for a lecture in one week, the submitted question need only address *one* of the readings (though it can also address both!)

Lecture and seminar questions must both be submitted by **Monday, 7pm**, in each week of term. There will be a submission portal available for this on MMS.

Note: Questions submitted **late** will be capped at a mark of 1. Penalties will only be waived in extreme circumstances.

3. Reflection (up to 1000 words)
Due Date: 26 October, 23:59
Weighting: %20

This reflective exercise involves choosing one of the readings from the module (lecture, seminar, or supplementary) that you find interesting and writing a critical reflection on it. Imagine that you are talking about the reading with a friend who is interested in the subject but isn't taking this module. You are explaining what the reading says and also what you think about it. Does it contain an argument that you find convincing or unconvincing? Does it give answers to difficult questions that you find satisfying? What questions does it leave unanswered? Has it changed the way you think about the subject?

4. Essay (up to 2250 words)
Due Date: 5 December, 23:59
Weighting: %45

Please note the following requirements for the essays:

- Essays must be submitted via MMS.
- Essays must be word-processed and double-spaced. **Please use the essay template provided on the Moodle page for the module. No other format will be accepted.** In particular, you **must** submit any coursework **in Word format** only (the exception is logic assignments that may require LaTeX typesetting).
- Essays will be marked anonymously so **do not include your name** anywhere in the document.
- On the first page of your essay, write your matriculation number, the module name and number, your tutor's name, the essay question you've answered, and the word count.
- Essays must not exceed 2250 words; The word count must include everything **except bibliography and title page**; that is to say, the word count must include all footnotes, quotations, etc.
- Please note that we implement the word count policy very strictly indeed. Where the word limit is exceeded, **even by one word**, the following penalties will be applied:
 - **1 mark for work that is over-length to any extent, then a further 1 mark per additional 5% over.**
- Your **bibliography** must give full details of all sources consulted. If you quote from or paraphrase any of those sources in your essay, you must give clear references that allow the sources to be identified in the bibliography. Further information about academic integrity and plagiarism can be found in the University's [Good Academic Practice](#) policy and our [Undergraduate Handbook](#).

ESSAY TITLES

There is only one essay title for this module: *Why does the world exist?*
Students are responsible for framing and interpreting the question appropriately.

SEMINARS

Each seminar will be based on a single reading (listed below). The seminar presenter(s) will lead the group through passages they have selected from the readings, providing commentary and inviting discussion. When there are multiple presenters, they will have to agree beforehand on how to divide up the reading, though different presenters can cover the same passages from different angles if they like.

LECTURE PLAN & ESSENTIAL READINGS

Each lecture will focus on a distinct answer to the main question *why does the world exist?*

1. Because it's a brute fact (Adam) – 13/9

Lecture Reading

- Derek Parfit, 'The Puzzle of Reality: Why Does the Universe Exist?' in *Metaphysics: The Big Questions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), eds. P.V. Inwagen & D.W. Zimmerman, pp. 418-427.
- Richard Swinburne, 'Response to Derek Parfit' in *Metaphysics: The Big Questions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), eds. P.V. Inwagen & D.W. Zimmerman, pp. 427-429.

No Seminars in First Week!

2. It came from nothing (Alex) – 20/9

Lecture Reading

- Donald F. Duclow: 'Divine Nothingness and Self-Creation in John Scotus Eriugena' – <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1201686>

Seminar Reading

- Ellen Marie Chen, 'Nothingness and the Mother Principle in Early Chinese Taoism' – <https://doi-org.ezproxy.st-andrews.ac.uk/10.5840/ipq19699332>

3. It couldn't have come from nothing (Adam) – 27/9

Lecture Reading

- Parmenides, "On Nature" in "Parmenides of Elea", *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, Second Edition), eds. G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven, & M. Schofield, Ch. 8, pp. 239-254. --- [feel free to read on to page 262 if you like, but this won't be covered in class].
- James Warren, "Parmenides" in *Presocratics* (New York: Routledge, 2014), Ch. 5, pp. 77-103. - <http://library.st-andrews.ac.uk/record=b1957922~S5>

Seminar Reading

- Leucippus & Democritus, fragments in 'The Atomists: Leucippus of Miletus and Democritus of Abdera' in *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, Second Edition), eds. G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven, & M. Schofield, Ch. 15, pp. 402-429.

4. Because it was created: part one (Alex) – 4/10

Lecture Reading

- Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book 2, Chs.6, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 23 – <https://isidore.co/aquinas/ContraGentiles2.htm#6>

Seminar Reading

- Norman Kretzmann 'A General Problem of Creation: Why Did God Create Anything At All?' – <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.7591/9781501728372-011/html>

5. Because it is good for it to exist (Adam) – 11/10

Lecture Reading

- Plato, *Timaeus* (27e-31b) in *Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), ed. J.M. Cooper, pp. 1234-1237. [You can also read from pp. 1124-1234 for an enjoyable introduction].
- Sarah Broadie & Anthony Kenny, 'The Creation of the World' in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume* (2004), Vol. 78, No. 1, pp. 65-92 – <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4106947>

Seminar Reading

- Sarah Broadie, 'The Separateness of the Demiurge' in *Nature and Divinity in Plato's Timaeus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press, 2011), Ch. 1, pp. 7-27 –
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511997815.002>

6. Independent Learning Week

7. Because it was created: part two (Alex) – 25/10

Lecture Reading

- Robert Cummings Neville, 'Some Contemporary Theories of Divine Creation' – <https://doi-org.ezproxy.st-andrews.ac.uk/10.2307/j.ctt2851mv.13>

Seminar Reading

- Yonghua Ge, 'Creatio ex nihilo and Ancient Chinese Philosophy: A Revisiting of Robert Neville's Thesis' – <https://muse-jhu-edu.ezproxy.st-andrews.ac.uk/article/690289>

8. Because something is more probable than nothing (Adam) – 1/11

Lecture Reading

- Peter Van Inwagen, 'Why is There Anything at All?' in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (1996), 70: 95-110 – <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4107004>
- E.J. Lowe, 'Why is There Anything at All?' in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (1996), 70: 111-120 – <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4107004>

Seminar Reading

- Thomas Baldwin, 'There Might be Nothing' in *Analysis* (1996), Vol. 56, No. 4, pp. 231-238 – <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3328513>

9. Living without an answer (Adam) – 8/11

Lecture Reading

- Susan Wolf, 'The Meanings of Lives' in *Varieties of Value: Essays on Morality, Meaning, and Love* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2015), Ch. 6, pp. 89-107.
- Albert Camus, 'The Myth of Sisyphus' in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York: Penguin, 1979), pp. 107-111.

Seminar Reading

- Thomas Nagel, 'The Absurd' in *The Journal of Philosophy* (1971), Vol. 68, No. 20, pp. 716-727 – <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2024942>

10. Because it is necessary (Alex) – 15/11

Lecture Reading

- Ibn Sīnā, *The Salvation* II.1-5 and 12 – in *Classical Arabic Philosophy: An Anthology of Sources*, pp.211-215.

Seminar Reading

- Spinoza, *Ethics* Part One (Cambridge University Press), pp.1-18 – <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781107706972.004>

11. It doesn't exist! (Alex) – 22/11

Lecture Reading

- Jan Westerhoff, 'An argument for ontological nihilism' – <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0020174X.2021.1934268>

No Seminars – Essay Discussion

ADDITIONAL READINGS & RESOURCES

1. Because it's a brute fact

- Jim Holt, "Confronting the Mystery" & "Philosophical Tour d'Horizon" in *Why Does the World Exist? An Existential Detective Story* (New York: Liveright, 2012), Chs. 1 & 2, pp. 3-13, 17-36.
- Tyrone Goldschmidt, 'Understanding the Question' in *The Puzzle of Existence: Why is There Something Rather Than Nothing?* (New York: Routledge, 2013), ed. T. Goldschmidt, Ch. 1, pp. 1-21.
- Richard Dawkins, "The Anthropic Principle: Cosmological Version" in *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006), pp. 141-151.

2. It came from nothing

- Ellen Marie Chen, 'The Origin and Development of Being (*Yu*) from Non-Being (*Wu*) in the *Tao Te Ching*' – <https://doi-org.ezproxy.st-andrews.ac.uk/10.5840/ipq197313338>
- Robert Neville, 'From Nothing to Being: The Notion of Creation in Chinese and Western Thought' – <http://www.jstor.com/stable/1399009>
- May Sim, 'The Question of Being, Non-Being, and "Creation Ex Nihilo" in Chinese Philosophy' – <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.st-andrews.ac.uk/stable/j.ctt2851mv.6>
- Zhihua Yao, 'Typology of Nothing: Heidegger, Daoism, and Buddhism' –

<https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1006&context=comparativephilosophy>

- David Chai, 'Daoism and Wu' – <https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/phc3.12171>

3. It couldn't have come from nothing

- David Furley, *The Greek Cosmologists: Volume I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), Ch. 4.3-4.4, 9, & 10, pp. 36-49, 115-151.
- David Sedley, 'The Atomists: Democritus' in *Creationism and its Critics in Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), Ch. V.1, pp. 133-139.
- Barbara Sattler, 'Parmenides' System: The Logical Origins of His Monism' in *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), eds. G.M. Gurtler & W. Wians, Vol. 26, pp. 25-70. <https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~bs21/ParmenidesBACAP.pdf>
- Charles H. Kahn, 'The Thesis of Parmenides' in *The Review of Metaphysics* (1969), Vol. 22, No. 4, pp. 700-24. --- [see also the ensuing exchange with Mourelatos and Stein, if you like] – <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20124945>
- Sylvia Berryman, 'Ancient Atomism' in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2016) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/atomism-ancient/>
- John Palmer, 'Parmenides' in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2020). <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/parmenides/>

4. Because it was created: part one

- Siger of Brabant, *Question on Creation Ex Nihilo* – https://academic.mu.edu/taylorr/Aquinas_in_Context_Fall_2015/Siger_of_Brabant_Question_on_Creation_Ex_Nihilo.html
- Richard Swinburne, "How the Existence of God Explains the World and its Order" in *Is There a God?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), Ch. 4, pp. 44-63.
- Adolf Grunbaum, "The Pseudo-Problem of Creation in Physical Cosmology" in *Philosophy of Science* (1989), Vol. 56, No. 3, pp. 373-394.
- Jim Holt, *Why Does the World Exist? An Existential Detective Story* (New York: Liveright, 2012), Ch. 4, pp. 63-80.
- John F. Wippel, "Thomas Aquinas on the Ultimate Why Question: Why Is There Anything at All Rather than Nothing Whatsoever?" – https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.st-andrews.ac.uk/stable/j.ctt2851mv.8#metadata_info_tab_contents

5. Because it is good for it to exist

- David Furley, *The Greek Cosmologists: Volume I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), Ch. 12, pp. 169-177.

- David Sedley, 'Plato' in *Creationism and its Critics in Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), Ch. IV, V, pp. 93-132, 132-167.
- John Leslie, 'The Theory that the World Exists because it Should' – <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20009361>
- Tim Mulgan, 'Beyond Theism and Atheism: Axiarchism and Ananthropocentric Purposivism' – <https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/phc3.12420>

6. Independent Learning Week

7. Because it was created: part two

- Wesley J. Wildman, 'How to Resist Robert Neville's Creatio ex Nihilo Argument' – <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/amerjtheophil.36.1.0056>
- Robert Neville, 'Comments on Wesley Wildman's "How to Resist Robert Neville's Creatio ex Nihilo Argument"' – <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/amerjtheophil.36.1.0065>
- David L. Hall, 'The Culture of Metaphysics: On Saving Neville's Project (From Neville)' – <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27944030>

8. Because something is more probable than nothing

- Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra, 'Why is There Something Rather Than Nothing? A Probabilistic Answer Examined' in *Philosophy* (2018), Vol. 93, No. 4, pp. 505-521 – <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/philosophy/article/why-is-there-something-rather-than-nothing-a-probabilistic-answer-examined/185A281C407601319878C91DD74345A5>
- Henri Bergson, "The Idea of 'Nothing'" in *Creative Evolution* (Mineola: Dover, 1998), pp. 272-298 – https://www.gutenberg.org/files/26163/26163-h/26163-h.htm#Page_272
- Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra, 'There Might be Nothing: The Subtraction Argument Improved' in *Analysis* (1997), Vol. 57, No. 3, pp. 159-166.
- E.J. Lowe, 'Metaphysical Nihilism and the Subtraction Argument' in *Analysis* (2002), Vol. 62, pp. 62-73.
- Efirid, D. and Stoneham, T. 'Is Metaphysical Nihilism Interesting?' in *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* (2009), 90(2): 210–231.
- Jim Holt, 'A Brief History of Nothing' in *Why Does the World Exist? An Existential Detective Story* (New York: Liveright, 2012), Ch. 3, pp. 41-63.

9. Living Without an Answer

- Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

- Joel Feinberg, 'Absurd Self-Fulfillment' in *Freedom and Fulfillment: Philosophical Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 297-331.
- Michael Smith, 'Is That All There is?' in *The Journal of Ethics* (2006), Vol. 10, No. 1/2, pp. 75-106.

10. Because it is necessary

- Jon McGinnis, 'Avicenna on Why God is Absolutely Necessary' – <https://doi-org.ezproxy.st-andrews.ac.uk/10.2307/j.ctt2851mv.7>
- Olga Lizzini, 'Ibn Sina's Metaphysics' in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2020) Sylvania Berryman, 'Ancient Atomism' in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2016) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/atomism-ancient/>

11. It doesn't exist!

- Jan Westerhoff, 'On The Nihilist Interpretation of Madhyamaka' – <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44157309>
- Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy* (Hackett, 2021), ch.8 – <http://library.st-andrews.ac.uk/record=b3224544~S5>
- Jan Westerhoff, *The Non-Existence of the Real World* (OUP, 2020) – <http://library.st-andrews.ac.uk/record=b3064787~S5>