

PY4659

Why Does the World Exist?

This course explores what is perhaps the most 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. By the end of the course, students should expect to have a decisive answer.

DRAFT SYLLABUS

WEEK 1 – CLARIFYING THE QUESTION

- (1) 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.
- (2) Andrew Brenner, “What do we mean when we ask ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’” in *Erkenntnis* (2016), 81: 1305–1322.

WEEK 2 – WHY EXPECT NOTHINGNESS?

- (1) Peter Van Inwagen, “Why is There Anything at All?” in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (1996), 70: 95-110.
- (2) E.J. Lowe, “Why is There Anything at All?” in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (1996), 70: 111-120.

Supplementary Reading

- (a) Henri Bergson, “The Idea of ‘Nothing’” in *Creative Evolution* (Mineola: Dover, 1998), pp. 272-298.

WEEK 3 – IS NOTHINGNESS EVEN POSSIBLE?

- (1) Thomas Baldwin, “There Might be Nothing” in *Analysis* (1996), Vol. 56, No. 4, pp. 231-238.

- (2) Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra, “There Might be Nothing: The Subtraction Argument Improved” in *Analysis* (1997), Vol. 57, No. 3, pp. 159-166.
- (3) E.J. Lowe, “Metaphysical Nihilism and the Subtraction Argument” in *Analysis* (2002), Vol. 62, pp. 62-73.

Supplementary Reading

- (a) Efrid, D. and Stoneham, T. “Is Metaphysical Nihilism Interesting?” in *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* (2009), 90(2): 210–231.
- (b) 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.

WEEK 4 – PARMENIDES

- (1) Parmenides, “On Nature” in *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), eds. Kirk, Raven, and Schofield, pp. 239-263.
- (2) Alexander Nehemas, “On Parmenides’ Three Ways of Inquiry” in *Deucalion* (1981), Vols. 33-34, pp. 97-111.

WEEK 5 - TAOISM

- (1) Chen, Ellen Marie, “Nothingness and the mother principle in early Chinese Taoism”, *International Philosophical Quarterly* (1969), 9: 391–405.

Supplementary Reading

- (a) Heidegger, Martin, 1959, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Trans. R. Manheim. New Haven: Yale University Press (SELECTIONS) [Says something oddly similar?]

WEEK 6 – PARFIT

- (1) Derek Parfit, “The Puzzle of Reality: Why Does the Universe Exist?” in *Metaphysics: The Big Questions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), eds. P van Inwagen and D. W. Zimmerman, pp. 418-427.
- (2) Jim Holt, “The Last Word from All Souls” in *Why Does the World Exist? An Existential Detective Story* (New York: Liveright, 2012), Ch. 12, pp. 221-242.

WEEK 7 - NOZICK

- (1) Robert Nozick, “Why is There Something Rather than Nothing” in *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), Ch. 2, pp. 115-167.

WEEK 8 – WHAT, IF ANYTHING, CAN SCIENCE TELL US?

- (1) Jim Holt, “The Ultimate Free Lunch?” and “Waiting for the Final Theory” in *Why Does the World Exist? An Existential Detective Story* (New York: Liveright, 2012), Ch. 8 & 9, pp. 138-170.

WEEK 9 – MUST THE WORLD HAVE A CREATOR?

- (1) Adolf Grunbaum, “The Pseudo-Problem of Creation in Physical Cosmology” in *Philosophy of Science* (1989), Vol. 56, No. 3, pp. 373-394.
- (2) Jim Holt, *Why Does the World Exist? An Existential Detective Story* (New York: Liveright, 2012), Ch. 4, pp. 63-80.

WEEK 10 – THE ANTHROPIC PRINCIPLE

- (1) 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.
- (2) Richard Dawkins, “The Anthropic Principle: Cosmological Version” in *The God Delusion* (Black Swan, 2010), pp. 169-189.

Supplementary Reading

- (a) Brian Carter, “Large Number Coincidences and the Anthropic Principle in Cosmology” in *Confrontation of Cosmological Theories with Observational Data: Proceedings of the Symposium* (1973), pp. 291-298.

WEEK 11 – THE MEANING OF LIFE

- (1) Thomas Nagel, “The Absurd” in *The Journal of Philosophy* (1971), Vol. 68, No. 20, pp. 716-727.
- (2) Joel Feinberg, “Absurd Self-Fulfillment” in *The Meaning of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. TBD

Supplementary Reading

- (a) Susan Wolf, “Meaning in Life” in *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), Ch. 1, pp. 1-34.
- (b) Jim Holt, “Return to Nothingness” in *Why Does the World Exist? An Existential Detective Story* (New York: Liveright, 2012), Ch. 15, pp. 266-275.