

PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY IN THE AXIAL AGE

SPRING 2017

INSTRUCTOR

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OFFICE HOURS

Mondays and Wednesdays,
10:00 AM–3:50 PM, and
Tuesdays and Thursdays,
12:00 PM–1:50 PM

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Approximately two and a half millennia ago, a sort of revolution swept across Eurasia—a revolution not of the sword but of the heart. As what had been empires were riven by war, a few sages questioned conventional wisdom: reflecting on the limits of fame and fortune, they came to the conclusion that lasting satisfaction required a sort of conversion—a reordering of oneself so that one was no more a slave to desire and fear. In coming to this conclusion, they relocated the source of authority: salvation would come through devotion not to this or that local god but rather to an order that transcended the particularities of time and place. And in coming to *this* conclusion, they saw that another world could arise—a world wherein all men and women were brothers and sisters, wherein justice mattered more than power and mercy more than justice.

Or so says the Axial Age Thesis. According to this thesis, the wisdom traditions of China, India, and Israel are continuous with that of Greece: born at the same time—and motivated by the same anxieties—they articulate the same insights into the human condition. But for this thesis to be true, the traditional distinction between philosophy and theology must be false: the dissimilarities between Socrates and the Buddha—and, for that matter, between Confucius and Laozi—must be superficial.

This course will explore the Axial Age Thesis by investigating these dissimilarities: we will read texts from six of the relevant wisdom traditions—specifically, from Confucianism, Daoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and what the Greeks called “philosophy.” In doing so, perhaps we will learn whether and how these wisdom traditions can still speak to us.

COURSE GOAL

The six wisdom traditions that we will study in this course—Confucianism, Daoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and what the Greeks called “philosophy”—are rooted in certain conceptions of the human condition. The goal of this course is for you to reflect on your own life in terms of these conceptions—and thereby to come to know yourself.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

This course asks you to do all of these:

- Explain Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and what the Greeks called “philosophy” in your own words. (Reports)

- Apply Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and what the Greeks called “philosophy” to contemporary issues. (Essays)
- Analyze the Axial Age Thesis by exploring what is plausible and what is implausible about it. (Class Participation)
- Evaluate the Axial Age Thesis by arguing for or against it. (Paper)

Note the assessments that map onto the various course objectives.

ASSESSMENTS

Your final grade will be determined by your performance on a report, on three short essays, in class participation, and on a paper:

- A report will determine a quarter of your final grade. Every class with an axial reading assignment will begin with a report on the relevant reading by a student. Note that, while there will be fifteen reports, you need do only one of them.
- Three short essays will determine a quarter of your final grade. You must submit each essay on Moodle. See the relevant assignments for the relevant prompts.
- Class participation will determine a quarter of your final grade.
- A paper will determine a quarter of your final grade. You must submit this paper on Moodle. See the relevant assignment for the relevant prompt.

Note that, to perform competently in these assessments, you must do certain readings.

READINGS

These readings are available at the bookstore:

- Confucius. *The Analects*. Edited and translated by Raymond Dawson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. ISBN: 978-0199540617.
- Laozi. *Daodejing*. Edited and translated by Edmund Ryden. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. ISBN: 978-0199208555.
- *The Bhagavad Gita*. Edited and translated by W. J. Johnson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. ISBN: 978-0199538126.
- *The Dhammapadam: The Sayings of the Buddha*. Edited and translated by John Ross Carter and Mahinda Palihawadana. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. ISBN: 978-0199555130.
- *The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha*. Edited by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. ISBN: 978-0199535941.

- Plato and Aristophanes. *Four Texts on Socrates*. Second edition. Edited and translated by Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998. ISBN: 978-0801485749.
- Plato. *Phaedrus*. Edited and translated by James H. Nichols, Junior. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998. ISBN: 978-0801485329.
- Plato. *Gorgias*. Edited and translated by James H. Nichols, Junior. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998. ISBN: 978-0801485275.

Any other readings will be available on Moodle.

ATTENDANCE

Because discussion plays a significant role in this course, it is crucial that you not only attend class but also listen attentively and contribute seriously to that discussion—not just occasionally but every time that we meet. You should, in other words, be present at and participating in every class—unless, of course, you provide an official university excuse.

Were you to miss class without an official university excuse, you would receive a zero on the relevant report. Worse, though, you would remain in the dark about the human condition: you would not know who you were, and so would not know who you ought to be. And this would be a shame.

For what it is worth, I intend this course to be one in which you are excited to attend class.

TECHNOLOGY

Though laptops, tablets, and smartphones are profoundly useful, they are also profoundly distracting. I write this as one too often gripped by such distraction. Anyway, you may not use laptops, tablets, and smartphones in class unless, at your request, I have given you permission to do so.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

It should go without saying that academic dishonesty of any kind is wrong. Worse than that, though, academic dishonesty reveals a deep confusion regarding the very reasons that one is in a course in philosophy—or, for that matter, at a university—in the first place. Such dishonesty is occasion for as much pity as anger.

Academic dishonesty is presenting the work of another as your own. Whenever you copy the words of another, you must place those words within quotation marks and clearly cite their source. This goes not only for complete sentences but also for phrases.

As a deterrent, let me promise that I will prosecute every instance of academic dishonesty. But do not misinterpret this promise: if you feel that you do not understand something well enough to explain it in your own words—whether in this course or in any other—come to me for help. We will work together to overcome whatever difficulty stands in your way.

DISABILITY ACCOMMODATIONS

Qualified students needing testing or classroom accommodations based on a disability are encouraged to make their requests to me at the beginning of the quarter either during office hours or by appointment. Note that, prior to receiving disability accommodations, verification of eligibility from the Testing and Disability Services Office is needed. Disability information is confidential. Information for Testing and Disability Services may be obtained in 318 Wyle Tower or at <http://www.latech.edu/ods/index.shtml>.

EMERGENCY NOTIFICATION SYSTEM

All Louisiana Tech students are strongly encouraged to enroll and update their contact information in the Emergency Notification System. It takes just a few seconds to ensure that you're able to receive important text and voice alerts in the event of a campus emergency. For more information on the Emergency Notification System, please visit <http://www.latech.edu/administration/ens.php>.

ACADEMIC HONOR CODE

Being a student of higher standards, I pledge to embody the principles of academic integrity.

WEEK	DAY	DATE	TOPIC	READING	ASSIGNMENT
1	Tuesday	7 March	No Class		
	Thursday	9 March	Introduction		
2	Tuesday	14 March	No Class		
	Thursday	16 March	Confucianism	<i>Analects</i>	Report 1
3	Tuesday	21 March	Confucianism	<i>Analects</i>	Report 2
	Thursday	23 March	Daoism	<i>Daodejing</i>	Report 3
4	Tuesday	28 March	Daoism	<i>Daodejing</i>	Report 4
	Thursday	30 March	Hinduism	<i>Gita</i>	Report 5
5	Tuesday	4 April	Hinduism	<i>Gita</i>	Report 6
	Thursday	6 April	Buddhism	<i>Dhammapada</i>	Report 7
6	Tuesday	11 April	Buddhism	<i>Dhammapada</i>	Report 8
	Thursday	13 April	Judaism	<i>Isaiah</i>	Report 9
7	Tuesday	18 April	Judaism	<i>Isaiah</i>	Report 10
	Thursday	20 April	Philosophy	<i>Euthyphro</i>	Report 11
8	Tuesday	25 April	Philosophy	<i>Phaedrus</i>	Report 12
	Thursday	27 April	Philosophy	<i>Phaedrus</i>	Report 13
9	Tuesday	2 May	Philosophy	<i>Gorgias</i>	Report 14
	Thursday	4 May	Philosophy	<i>Gorgias</i>	Report 15
10	Tuesday	9 May	Reflection	Jaspers, Eisenstadt	Essay 1
	Thursday	11 May	Reflection	Arnason, Assmann	Essay 2
11	Tuesday	16 May	Reflection	Bellah, Taylor	Essay 3
	Thursday	18 May	Conclusion		Paper