

PHILOSOPHY 402: UNDERGRADUATE SEMINAR IN PHILOSOPHY
CAUSATION, RESPONSIBILITY, AND THE FORCE OF LANGUAGE IN *THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV*

Wednesdays 10:10–12:00, in MLB B113

CONTACT INFORMATION

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Office hours: Tuesdays 5–6, Wednesdays 12–1, and by appointment

FOCUS OF THE COURSE

The Brothers Karamazov is both a squalid tale of murder, depravity, and betrayal, and a heartfelt attempt to reconcile the evil in the world with the existence of an omnipotent, benevolent God. And yet it manages to be one of the greatest novels of all time—a huge influence on figures as diverse as Nietzsche, Freud, Joyce, and Woolf. One reason why *The Brothers Karamazov* is so influential is that it brims with philosophy. We will take an unusual approach in this class, reading the novel alongside work in contemporary analytic philosophy that refines and tries to address the philosophical questions it raises. This approach will enrich both our understanding of the novel and our understanding of a wide range of philosophical issues, including judgment and punishment, moral luck, the distinction between doing and allowing, special obligations (especially those to family), the nature of testimony, the relationships between intention, causation, and culpability, and the force of our words and actions on others.

This is a capstone seminar for junior and senior concentrators in philosophy, and it satisfies the Upper-Level Writing Requirement. In class we will discuss drafts of papers submitted in advance by individual students and read in advance by the class, with an eye toward helping each student improve the revision of their own writing.

COURSE WEB SITE

<http://ctools.umich.edu>

BOOKS

Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, translated by Pevear and Volokhonsky
Rowe (ed.), *God and the Problem of Evil*
Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*
Optional: Martinich, *Philosophical Writing: An Introduction*

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS

The entire class will choose paper topics by January 12. From then through March 30, the class will read and discuss drafts by two to three students per session. Those drafts are due on CTools on the Sunday before the relevant session at 5 pm, without exception, so that the entire class can read them and prepare to discuss them. I will meet with you after your draft is discussed in class, and the final version of your paper is due one week after we meet.

The final eight to ten page paper must be a significantly revised and expanded version of one of your shorter papers. As papers are revised my grading standards go up: the standard for the final version of a four to five page paper is higher than the standard for the draft, and the standard for the final eight to ten page paper is still higher.

The distribution of credit is as follows:

- In-class discussion: 20%
- Two four to five page papers: 25% each, with half of that grade from the draft and half from the final version.
- One eight to ten page paper, significantly improving on and expanding on one of your earlier papers: 30%, with half of that grade from the draft and half from the final version. The class will read and discuss drafts in the last two meetings of the semester (4/6 and 4/13). The final draft is due by 5 pm on 4/25.

Because the class needs to prepare to discuss each draft, I cannot give extensions on drafts. If you think you might need an extension on the final version of a paper, please ask early. All assignments must be typed, double-spaced, in a legible font, and emailed to me as a .pdf file. I encourage you to discuss the material with your classmates, but all work you turn in must be your own: see <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/academicintegrity>. Any student who may need an accommodation for any sort of disability should talk with me during office hours.

SCHEDULE

Readings not in the required books are available via CTools.

1/5	Introduction
1/12	Mikhail Bakhtin, "Dostoevsky's Polyphonic Novel and Its Treatment in Critical Literature" "From the Author" and Book One of <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i>
1/19	George Mavrodes, "Religion and the Queerness of Morality" Book Two of <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i> Paper Topic: Mavrodes writes that "an 'evolutionary' approach ... cannot serve to explain the existence of moral obligations" (219). Explain his argument for this conclusion. Why might Ivan Karamazov say that "There is no virtue if there is no immortality" (70)? Would immortality reassure Mavrodes that a world with moral obligations is not absurd? Why or why not?

1/26	Gary Watson, "Responsibility and the Limits of Evil" Book Three of <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i> Paper Topic: Is Smerdyakov part of the "moral community" of the other characters, in Strawson's sense? (See the quotation at the bottom of p. 147.) Why or why not? Are the other characters justified in finding fault with Smerdyakov, or in blaming him for things he does? Appeal to Watson's paper, and his description of Harris, to help you make your case.
2/2	John Rawls, "Classical Utilitarianism" Bernard Williams, "Consequentialism and Integrity" Book Four of <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i> Paper Topic: What does Williams mean by 'integrity'? Is Captain Snegirov's refusal of the gift a defense of his integrity? Of his son's? Do you think his refusal of the gift is reasonable? Why or why not?
2/9	David Hume, "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion" (in <i>God and the Problem of Evil</i>) Book Five of <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i> Paper Topic: Consider Philo's contention that "if we consider ... the perfect uniformity and agreement of the parts of the universe, we shall not discover in it any marks of the combat of a malevolent with a benevolent being" (54). Do you think Philo is right about this? Use two examples from <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i>—from Ivan's discussion with Alyosha, or from the plot of the novel itself—to help you defend your view.
2/16	Nelson Pike, "Hume on Evil" John Hick, "Soul Making Theodicy" (in <i>God and the Problem of Evil</i>) Book Six of <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i> Paper Topic: Hick writes that "it would be completely wrong to say that God sends misfortune upon individuals, so that their death, maiming, starvation or ruin is God's will for them" (279). What does this mean? Why is it important to Hick's theodicy that this claim be true? Are you convinced? Support your arguments with examples from the lives of characters in <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i>.
2/23	Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints" G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy" Book Seven of <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i> Paper Topic: Explain Wolf's distinction between "perfectly wonderful" and "perfectly moral" people. Do you agree with Wolf that a person may be <i>perfectly</i> wonderful without being perfectly moral? Use two characters to help defend your answer (and to illustrate Wolf's distinction).
3/9	J. L. Austin, <i>How to Do Things with Words</i>, Lectures I–VI Books Eight and Nine of <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i> Paper Topic: Find and analyze four cases in the novel in which "we must consider the total situation in which [an] utterance is issued—the total speech-act" (Austin, 52) to understand what a character is trying to accomplish by saying something. You may cite one act that is "similar to performative utterances in that [it is] the performance of a conventional action" (69) if you like.

3/16	J. L. Austin, <i>How to Do Things with Words</i>, Lectures VII–XII Book Ten of <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i> Paper Topic: Choose a character besides Ivan who learns about the performative aspect of language in the novel, and explain in detail what they learn and how they learn it.
3/23	David Lewis, “Causation” Carolina Sartorio, “Causation and Ethics” Book Eleven of <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i> Paper Topic: Choose and describe a set of four events in <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i> such that if the first hadn’t occurred, the second wouldn’t have occurred; if the second hadn’t occurred, the third wouldn’t have occurred; and if the third hadn’t occurred, the fourth wouldn’t have occurred. Is the first, intuitively, a cause of the fourth? Why or why not? Does the person responsible for the first intuitively bear some responsibility for the fourth? Why or why not? Pick an interesting example!
3/30	Robert Adams, “Must God Create the Best?” (in <i>God and the Problem of Evil</i>) J. L. Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence” (in <i>God and the Problem of Evil</i>) Book Twelve and the Epilogue of <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i> Paper Topic: Give examples of a character extolling grace and a character exhibiting grace, in Adams’ sense. What role does evil play in the character’s opportunity to exhibit grace? Why does Adams say that “God’s graciousness in creation ... implies that there is nothing in God’s nature or character which would require Him to act on the principle of choosing the best possible creatures to be the object of His creative powers” (30)? (Do your best to make your explanation consistent with Adams’ insistence that grace in creation does not “consist in a preference for imperfection as such” (30).)
4/6	Discussion of final paper drafts
4/13	Discussion of final paper drafts
4/25	Final paper due over email by 5 pm