

Phil 223: African Philosophy

Lecture, Spring 2023

Details

When/Where: Tuesdays and Thursdays 6:30-7:45pm, location TBD

Instructor: Prof. Carmen De Schryver

Email: carmen.deschryver@trincoll.edu

Office: McCook 326

Office Hours: TBD

Course Description

This course provides an introduction to some of the major debates and themes in modern African philosophy. The first part of the course contextualizes modern African philosophy, considering the impact of colonialism and briefly exploring the history of African philosophy. We then go on to engage with key meta-philosophical debates. Some of the topics we will look at in this portion of the course include: the nature of philosophy; the connection between philosophy and place; the difference between oral and written traditions; the relationship between philosophy, myth, and religion; and the possibility of collective, as opposed to individual, philosophical practice. The final part of the course provides a survey of some major themes in modern African philosophy such as divination, the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, human rights, gender, race and universality. Our discussion of these questions will take place through a close reading of a range of figures, including Henry Odera Oruka, Paulin Hountondji, Fabien Eboussi-Boulaga, Kwasi Wiredu, Nkiru Nzegwu and Nadia Yala Kisukidi.

Learning Outcomes

- Develop skills in closely reading and evaluating technical philosophical material
- Identify various philosophers' views on the nature of African philosophy and describe their relative strengths and weaknesses
- Learn to read texts from different historical and geographical contexts and cultivate skills in comparative analysis
- Develop an understanding of key themes in modern African philosophy
- Learn how to write a philosophy paper and construct original philosophical arguments

Course Assessment

Grades for this course are based on:

- Participation (25%):

- (i) Initial one-on-one meeting with me to discuss your interests and familiarity with the course content. A sign-up sheet will be circulated during the first week of class. This is a low-stakes encounter – you will not be assessed on what you say. The point is for me to get to know you early on in the semester. You just need to show up!
- (ii) Reading. *All the reading for this class is required.*
 - **You'll submit question about the reading, or respond to the posted question about the reading, in advance of the class meeting on the discussion board on Moodle. These will be due at 7pm the evening before our class meeting.**
- (iii) Attendance in both weekly sessions will be expected of you. If you cannot make it to class for some reason, you should message me *before class* to determine some way to make this up. Please do not come to class if you have or suspect you might have COVID – we will determine some alternative way for you to participate. If you miss more than two classes without providing an explanation, your participation grade will drop a letter grade.
- (iv) In-class engagement and participation.
 - Please arrive on time. If you consistently arrive more than 5 minutes late, your participation grade will drop a letter grade.
 - You should be prepared to positively contribute to some combination of lecture/seminar/office hours. A positive contribution can take on a variety of forms: asking a clarificatory question, raising a discussion point, weighing in on an interpretation, offering an opinion, pointing us back to the reading, etc. *At minimum, it requires that you be a respectful and engaged listener not just to what I say but to what your peers say.*
 - Speaking up in larger group settings will be more comfortable for some than for others. I encourage you to meet with me during office hours to determine alternative modes of engagement if speaking up in larger group settings is uncomfortable for you. If you tend to be more talkative, an important component of your contributing to a lively discussion will be making space for others to speak.
- In-Class Presentation (12.5%)
 - For our first meeting, you should come prepared to select a week in which you would like to present.
 - The presentation should be about **10 minutes** and set up the discussion by highlighting the key themes and arguments in that week's readings, as well as formulating **two discussion questions**. (These questions should be formulated so as to conduce to in-depth philosophical discussion. If you are unsure whether your questions are suitable, don't hesitate to contact me.)
- Reflection Papers (12.5%)

- **Three** submissions of a short (two paragraph) reflection on that week's reading *in advance* of the class meeting.
- This can consist in a reconstruction of the views expressed in that week's readings, a comparison between that week's readings and some of the material encountered previously in the course, a personal reflection on the readings, a development of your own position vis-à-vis the arguments made in the readings... and so on. The key requirement is that you engage substantively with the readings.
- Two term papers of no more than 5 pages, double-spaced (17.5% each)
 - Prompts and a guide to writing philosophy papers will be circulated online. We will also devote a class session to a philosophy paper writing workshop.
- Final paper of no more than 7 pages, double-spaced (30%).
 - Final papers may be devoted to a topic of your own choosing (to be discussed with me during office hours). I will also provide prompts to those who prefer them. These papers should draw on the book presentations by utilizing a literary example to make your philosophical point.

Note on Office Hours

Office hours are a time for us to meet privately to discuss any aspect of your course experience. I encourage you to come to office hours regularly – this is a time that I am just sitting in my office waiting to chat with you! You can come to my office hours with any questions, ideas, or worries that were raised for you during the lectures or discussions; any difficulties that you are experiencing with the material or your own learning process; or additional help and guidance you might need for assignments. Anything pertaining to the course is on the table.

Note on the Readings

In order to get the most out of the course, **it is necessary that you read the assigned texts closely *in advance* of the class meeting on Tuesday.** Often this will mean reading twice. The readings in this course will vary in length and difficulty. Do not be discouraged if you find the readings challenging or even confusing – philosophy is hard! I don't expect you to understand everything that you read, especially on the first try. I do expect you to make a good-faith effort to interpret the text on your own, and to participate in the class discussion on this basis. Both the lecture and the class discussion are designed to (i) collaboratively make sense of the text and (ii) equip you with the skills that you need to fully comprehend and critically interrogate the course material, and ultimately to engage difficult philosophical texts on your own. *Do not hesitate to raise clarificatory questions and be upfront about elements of the reading you found challenging; if you are confused about something, it is likely your peers will be as well, and your questions will be welcomed!*

Required Course Materials

There are three required texts for this course, available via the TC bookshop. All other readings will be made available in PDF form online at least one week prior to class. If you might require financial assistance to obtain the course materials, this is available through the [Student Emergency and Equity Fund](#)

- *A Companion to African Philosophy (CAP)*, ed. Kwasi Wiredu
 - *African Philosophy: Essential Readings (APER)*, ed. Tsenay Serequeberhan
 - *The African Philosophy Reader (TAPR)*, ed. P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J Roux
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Course Schedule

N.B. This is a tentative course schedule. Any changes to the schedule will be announced in class and via email.

Unless otherwise indicated, our Tuesday session will be devoted to a lecture and we will use our Thursday session as a discussion section. Generally, readings should be read before our first class meeting of the week, *i.e.* before Tuesday.

Unit 1: African Philosophy in Context

Week 1: Introduction

January 24: No class

January 26:

- Kwasi Wiredu, “African Philosophy in Our Time”, pp. 1-27 in *CAP*

Week 2: Modern African Philosophy and the Legacy of Colonialism

January 31:

- Eze, “Colonialism and Philosophy” –
- Paulin Hountondji, “Knowledge as a Development Issue”, pp. 529-538 in *CAP*

February 2:

Week 3: The History of African Philosophy

February 7:

- Théophile Obenga, “Egypt: Ancient History of African Philosophy”, pp. 31-50 in *CAP*
- Teodris Kiros, “Zara Yacob and Traditional Ethiopian Philosophy”, pp. 183-191 in *CAP*
- William E. Abraham, “Anton Wilhelm Amo”, pp. 191-200 in *CAP*

February 9:

Unit 2: Meta-Philosophy

Week 4: Meta-Philosophical Debates: On “African” “Philosophy”

February 14:

- Tsenay Serequeberhan, “African Philosophy: The Point in Question”, pp. 3-28 in *APER*

February 16:

- Moya Deacon, “The Status of Father Tempels and Ethnophilosophy in the Discourse of African Philosophy” in Coetzee and Roux (ed.) *The African Philosophy Reader*, pp. 97-111
- Innocent Onyewuenyi, “Is There an African Philosophy”, pp. 29-46 in *APER*

Week 5: Sage Philosophy

February 21:

- Henry Odera Oruka, “Sagacity in African Philosophy”, pp.47-62 in *APER*
- Kibujjo M. Kalumba, “Sage Philosophy”, pp. 274-280 in *APER*

February 23: Trinity Days – No Class Meeting

Week 6: Reclaiming “Philosophy”

February 28:

- Paulin Hountondji, “African Philosophy: Myth and Reality”, pp. 111-131 in *APER*
- Kwasi Wiredu, “On Defining African Philosophy”, pp. 87-110 in *APER*

March 2: Paper Writing Workshop

*****First Paper Due: Friday at 11:59pm*****

Week 7: The Right to/Imperative of Philosophy: Skeptics

March 7:

- Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, *Muntu in Crisis*, pp. TBD
- Oyekan Owomoyela, “Africa and the Imperative of Philosophy: A Skeptical Consideration”, pp. 156-187 in *APER*

March 9:

Week 8: Philosophy and Tradition: Philosophy of Culture

March 14:

- Kwame Gyekye, pp. TBD

March 16:

Unit 3: Topics in African Philosophy

Week 9: Spring Vacation Mar 18.-26 – No Class

March 21: No class meeting

March 23: No class meeting

Week 10: Metaphysics

March 28:

- Léopold Senghor, -- in *I am Because we Are*

March 30:

Week 11: Epistemology

April 4:

- Kwasi Wiredu, “The Concept of Truth in Akan Language” in Coetzee and Roux (ed.) *The African Philosophy Reader*, pp. 239-243

April 6:

- Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò, “Ifá: An Account of a Divination System and Some Concluding Epistemological Questions”, pp. 304-313 in *CAP*

*****Second Paper Due: Friday April 21st at 11:59pm*****

Week 12: Personhood, Community and Human Rights

April 11:

- Ifeanyi Menkiti, “On the Normative Conception of a Person”, pp. 324-331 in *CAP*
- Kwame Gyekye, “Person and Community in African Thought” in Coetzee and Roux (ed.) *The African Philosophy Reader*, pp. 297-312
- Mogobe M. Ramose, “The Philosophy of *Ubuntu* and *Ubuntu* as Philosophy”, in Coetzee and Roux (ed.) *The African Philosophy Reader*, pp. 230-238

April 13:

- Kwasi Wiredu, “An Akan Perspective on Human Rights”, pp. 313-322 Coetzee and Roux (ed.) *The African Philosophy Reader*
- Francis M. Deng, “Human Rights in African Context”, pp. 499-508 in *CAP*

Week 13: Race

April 18:

- Frantz Fanon, “Racism and Culture” in *Towards the African Revolution*, pp. 206-216
- Steve Biko, “Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity”, pp. 79-86 in Coetzee and Roux (ed.) *The African Philosophy Reader*, pp. 297-312

April 20:

Week 14: Gender

April 25:

- Oyérónke Oyéwùmí, *The Invention of Women*, pp. 1-31
- Nkiru Nzegwu, *Family Matters*, pp. 1-23
- Nkiru Nzegwu, “Feminism and Africa: Impact and Limits of the Metaphysics of Gender”, pp.560-570 in *CAP*

April 28:

Week 15: Universality

May 2:

- Paulin Hountondji, “Constructing the Universal: A Trans-Cultural Challenge”, pp. 1-10
- Nadia Yala Kisukidi, “A Black Universalism”, pp. 1-12

May 4:

*****Final Paper Due: May 9th at 11:59pm*****

Course Policies

Norms of Conduct

During the first week of class, I will circulate a document of agreements to set the tone for our mutual engagement over the course of the semester. This document is open-ended: throughout the semester, we will have opportunities to amend and revise these agreements.

Note on Religious Holidays

Trinity College does not observe all religious holidays. If you cannot attend a session because of a religious holiday, please let me know at least a day in advance and we can work out some alternate form of engagement for that week.

Accessibility and Accommodations

Trinity College is committed to creating an inclusive and accessible learning environment consistent with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Like many things, the need for disability accommodations and the process for arranging them may be altered by the COVID-19 changes we are experiencing and the safety protocols currently in place. Students who may need some accommodation in order to fully participate in this class are asked to contact the Student Accessibility Resource Center, as soon as possible, to explore what arrangements need to be made to assure access. Student Accessibility Resources can be reached by emailing SARC@trincoll.edu. If you already have academic accommodations, please reach out to me by the end of week two of classes to let me know. For those students with

accommodations approved after the start of the semester, a minimum of 10 days' notice is required.

Policy on Late Submissions

I expect you to submit your work in a timely fashion. If you think you won't be able to complete the assignment by the deadline, you should contact me **at least one day** before the deadline to discuss your situation and possibly arrange an alternate schedule for completion. If you simply submit an assignment without notifying me 24 hours in advance this will impact your assessment. Depending on the circumstances, late submissions may not receive detailed commentary.

Academic Integrity

Any written work you submit should be your own. This means that you should not copy/paste, paraphrase or borrow ideas from a text or internet source without proper citation (*i.e.* presenting them as though they are your own). Failure to do so amounts to plagiarism, and the college takes violations of plagiarism very seriously. For further information, you should consult the [Student Handbook's](#) policies and procedures regarding academic integrity and plagiarism. If you have any questions about how to use/cite material appropriately, please do not hesitate to ask – it is better to be sure than to risk a violation. You are welcome to use either parenthetical or footnote citations in this course, in either Chicago or MLA format.