

Spring 2021 Affordable Learning Implementation Grant Report

Dr. Christopher Hauser (Assistant Professor, Philosophy Department)

A. Summary of the Project

I received an Affordable Learning Implementation Grant for my PHIL 120 (Introduction to Philosophy) course. I taught two sections of this course, in which a total of 70 students (35 per section) were enrolled. I wanted to design this course around a particular set of topics and questions handpicked to fit the mission and vision for this GE course. In particular, I designed the course around the following three sets of questions:

Unit 1: The Reasonableness of Belief in God: Science, Theism, and Naturalism

Are there good grounds for believing that our world is the creation of a loving, personal god? Is belief in God consistent with taking the results and methods of contemporary science, especially contemporary cosmology and evolutionary biology, seriously?

Unit 2: Our Place in the Universe: Human Free Will and Moral Responsibility

Are we human beings possessed of free will, that is, creatures whose choices and characters are up to us? Are we responsible for our choices and characters, capable of meriting praise, reward, blame, or punishment for the decisions that we make and the characters we possess? What does it take for our choices and characters to be “up to us” and something for which we are responsible? Can the belief that we have such control over who we are, what we do, and who we become be reconciled with the results of contemporary science, especially contemporary social psychology and neuroscience?

Unit 3: Our Place in the Universe: Minds, Bodies, Souls, and Selves

What does of our having a mind, i.e., an inner life of thought, experience, deliberation, and decision, reveal about ourselves? Could minds, and consequently ourselves, somehow originate from the interactions of wholly physical (i.e., non-mental) entities? Is it reasonable and consistent with contemporary science to believe that we have souls? Given the kind of being that we are, could we survive the death of our bodies and enjoy a disembodied existence (in heaven)?

This Affordable Learning Implementation Grant provided me with an opportunity to not only create a more affordable learning experience for my students but also gather together a set of readings and videos handpicked to match the particular topics and questions with which I wanted my students to grapple. In particular, spurred on by this grant, I used the following OER and appropriately licensed materials:

1. Excerpts from a variety of historical texts (including texts by Plato, Aristotle, Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, David Hume, John Locke, G.W. Leibniz, and William Paley) –available through a variety of OER web sources, including www.earlymoderntexts.com and <https://aquinas.cc/>
2. Excerpts from *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will* – library-owned ebook
3. Excerpts from Alfred Mele’s *Free: Why Science Hasn’t Disproved Free Will* – library-owned ebook
4. Excerpts from Alvin Plantinga’s *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* – library-owned ebook
5. Excerpts from Stephen Davis’ *Christian Philosophical Theology* – library-owned ebook

6. Excerpts from Galen Strawson's *Real Materialism and Other Essays* – library-owned ebook
7. Excerpts from J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig's *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* – library-owned ebook
8. Journal articles by contemporary philosophers, including T. Ryan Byerly, Harry Frankfurt, Gary Watson, and Susan Wolf – available through the library's online journal subscriptions
9. A variety of short YouTube videos on topics such as Anselm's Ontological Argument, The Leibnizian Cosmological Argument, Paley's Design Argument, The Kalam Cosmological Argument, the Fine-Tuning Argument, Free Will and Determinism, Free Will and Neuroscience, the Libet Experiment, the Milgram Experiment, the Stanford Prison Experiment, Searle's famous Chinese Room Argument, and Jackson's Knowledge Argument – publishers included reasonablefaith.org, the PBS series "Closer to the Truth," and TED-Ed.
10. Excerpts from several library-owned print books, put on e-reserve for students to easily access.

B. Additional Resources Discovered

When putting together the course syllabus, I searched for and found several OER and library-licensed materials beyond those originally mentioned in my grant proposal. I ended up using many of these newly discovered resources in my class. Examples include many of the short video clips I used in the course, a short journal article by T. Ryan Byerly on cosmological arguments for the existence of God, and excerpts from Stephen Davis' *Christian Philosophical Theology*.

C. Perceived Student-Engagement with the OER Materials

C1. At the end of the course, I asked students to complete a survey about their experience in the course. One question asked students to rate how much they valued not having to spend money on books. They were given three possible answers: I greatly valued this, I somewhat valued this, or it didn't matter much to me. Of the 40 respondents, 38 answered that *they greatly valued this*, 1 answered that they *somewhat valued this*, and 1 answered that *it didn't matter much to them*. I take this to be strong evidence that, overall, the students greatly appreciated the fact that they didn't have to spend money on books for this course.

C2. Another survey question listed the 27 particular topics covered in the course and asked the students to rate which topics they "especially appreciated and would recommend for inclusion in future versions of this course." 26 out of these 27 topics were rated by more than 50% of the survey respondents as topics that they "especially appreciated and would recommend for inclusion in future version of this course." This statistical evidence provides fairly strong evidence that, in general, the students valued covering the particular topics I chose to cover in the course. This matches my anecdotal evidence as well: I received several emails from and participated in many conversations with individual students in which the students expressed a great deal of appreciation for and interest in the particular topics we covered in the course. I highlight this here (in my report for this grant) because it was my use of OER materials (rather than a standard textbook or reader) that made it possible for me to cover the particular collection of topics I chose to cover in the course.

C3. A third survey question asked students to respond to the following statement: “The readings, powerpoints, video clips, and other course materials used in this class were effective and appropriate for furthering my understanding of the course's content.” Students could give one of five responses: Strongly Agree, Somewhat Agree, Neutral, Somewhat Disagree, or Strongly Disagree. 27 out of the 40 respondents answered that they *Strongly Agreed* with this statement, and another 9 answered that they *Somewhat Agreed* with this statement. Respondents were also invited to comment in response to the question “What did you most value or appreciate about the readings, powerpoints, video clips, etc. used in this course?” In their written responses to this question, many respondents indicated that they especially appreciated the video clips I used and the way that I paired video clips, powerpoints, and recorded lectures with short readings.

C4. In both a survey administered halfway through the semester and in the student course evaluations completed at the end of the semester, a significant number of students indicated that they found the readings to be difficult and, in some cases, too long. This matches my impression based on some of the in-class interactions I had with students throughout the semester. In light of this feedback, I plan to make some revisions to the course in which I eliminate, shorten, or replace certain readings.

D. Future Plans for Use of OER Materials

I typically teach two sections of this course per year. In future versions of this course, I plan to continue to use most of the materials that I used this time around. At the same time, I plan to make some modifications in response to both the survey feedback noted under “C4” above and other survey feedback about the topics which the students most/least valued covering. These modifications will include my eliminating certain readings and my adding certain further readings. In making these modifications, I plan to continue to make the course affordable by only using other OER and library-licensed resources as replacements, thereby keeping this course’s status as one which exclusively uses OER and library-licensed resources.

E. General Feedback Regarding My Use of OER Materials

In general, my experience designing and teaching a course exclusively using OER and library-licensed materials was very positive. In fact, while preparing this course, I discovered a variety of OER and library-licensed materials that I expect to use in my other courses. Going forward, I hope to frequently use OER and library-licensed materials in my courses, both as a way to make these courses more affordable for my students and as a way of handpicking readings to match the particular topics and questions I want to cover rather than being limited to the particular sets of readings found in standard textbooks.