

PHI 4930**Selected Topics: C.S. Lewis, Tolkien, and Theology**

Dr. David Johnson and Dr. Meir Soloveichik

3 credits

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Course Description:

A case can be made that C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien are the two most important writers in English in the 20th century, and two of the most important of all time. Close friends, literary and intellectual influences on each other, their own writings were profoundly different from one another. Lewis became known first and foremost for his apologetics—his explication and defense of theism in general, and Christianity in particular. He is also famous for his children's books, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Tolkien, though, like Lewis, a professor at Oxford, and the author of the beloved children's book, *The Hobbit*, ultimately made his impact through his series *The Lord of the Rings*, which has become the best-selling novels of the last 100 years. Through these novels, Tolkien expresses his own views regarding providence and politics, faith and myth, morality and theology.

In this seminar, we will study the views of Lewis and Tolkien on a number of philosophical subjects, and compare and contrast them with texts of Jewish thought. In the process, we will learn how these two men engaged one another, where their views differ from Jewish texts, and how we as Jews (and one Gentile) can learn from these authors whose influence continues many decades after they lived on Earth.

Student Learning Objectives:

- Students will be able to communicate a selection of fundamentally important philosophical arguments, claims, problems, and paradoxes.
- Students will be able to exhibit original and valid arguments for philosophical claims, and to respond in an intellectually serious way to criticisms of the premises of the argument.
- Students will be able to compose philosophy essays that are intellectually rigorous—where intellectual rigor consists in being explicit, precise, and meticulously correct about matters of logic—and (where appropriate) original.

Format of the Course, and Basis for Grade Determination:

Most topics will take around two weeks to cover thoroughly; every two weeks, students will be given a series of texts to prepare in advance for the next week's seminar: selections from

Jewish philosophy, Lewis, and Tolkien. Advance questions will be given, and students will be expected to reply to them with a brief written reflection before the next class. **The readings will be given out on paper and will be studied in the Seminar classroom in hard copy; laptops will not be allowed during the seminar.** A review will be held on the last day of the seminar (with laptops allowed), and a final examination will be given at the conclusion of the semester. A paper will also be expected, the final version of which (having gone through at least two earlier *drafts*) is due at the end of the semester: **several paper topics will be offered during the seminar by the instructors, and students will be expected to choose and write on one of them.** Grades will be assigned in the following manner: 30 percent attendance, participation, and reading responses; 30 percent paper; and 40 percent final.

NOTE: Students are NOT permitted to collaborate on assignments.

Method of Assessing Student Achievement of the Learning Objectives:

The extent to which students have achieved the first Student Learning Objective (SLO) will be assessed by observing the level of *accuracy*, and the level of *thoroughness*, that is exhibited in their essays on the Final examination. The extent to which students have achieved the second SLO will be assessed by observing the level of *precision in argument*, and the level of *awareness of objections*, that is exhibited in their term paper. The extent to which students have achieved the third SLO will be assessed by way of (both) their term paper and their examination: by observing the levels of *explicitness*, of *precision*, and of *logical correctness*, exhibited in their essays on the examination, and in their term paper.

Academic Integrity:

This class abides by Yeshiva University's Academic Integrity Policy: "The submission by a student of any examination, course assignment, or requirement is assumed to guarantee that the thoughts and expressions therein not expressly credited to another are literally the student's own. [Conclusive] evidence to the contrary will result in appropriate penalties as outlined in the university academic integrity policy."

AI Use Policy:

None allowed. This course follows (the most severe version of) Yeshiva University's Academic Integrity Policy on artificial intelligence. The use of generative artificial intelligence or any platform with generative artificial intelligence capabilities is prohibited in this course. The use of assistive artificial intelligence is (also) prohibited. Examples of such prohibited assistive AI include but are not limited to Hemmingway, Quillbot, etc. If you are unsure if a platform is allowed, please inquire directly with the instructors.

Disability Policy:

"Students with disabilities who are enrolled in this course and who will be requesting documented disability-related accommodations should make an appointment with the Office of Disability Services, Belz 412, akelsen@yu.edu during the first week of class. Once you have

been approved for accommodations, please submit your accommodation letter [to the Professor] to ensure the successful implementation of those accommodations.”

Learning Success Center:

Any undergraduate Sy Sims or Yeshiva College student interested in improving his study skills is welcome to visit the Learning Success Center office for academic support. For more information, or to schedule an appointment, email learningsuccesscenter@yu.edu

Writing Center:

The Wilf Campus Writing Center offers individualized tutoring. For more information, or to schedule an appointment, email <https://yu.mywconline.net/>

Libraries:

Need help with your research? The Yeshiva University Libraries offer individualized consultations that will help you locate and cite journal articles, books, and other sources.

Weekly Topics:

Weeks 1-2

An introduction to Lewis and Tolkien; the nature of morality and human moral capacity

Lewis, *Mere Christianity*: “The Law of Human Nature,” and “What Christians Believe”

Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *The Two Towers*, selections

Maimonides, *Laws of Repentance*, Chapters 5-7

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, *On Repentance*, selections

Weeks 3-4: Miracles and Providence

C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*, selections

C. S. Lewis, “Historicism”

Mark Tooley, “Why C.S. Lewis Was Wrong About Providence”

Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, selections

Tolkien, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, selections

Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed* 3:17-18

Dr. David Berger, “Miracles and the Natural Order in Nahmanides”

Weeks 5-6: Judaism and Christianity in Lewis and Tolkien

Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, selections

Lewis, *Miracles*, selections

Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, selections; *Silmarillion*, selections; *Letters*, selections

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, *Fate and Destiny*, selections

Meir Soloveichik, “The Secret Jews of the Hobbit”

Weeks 7-8: The Nature of Prayer

Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, selections

Tolkien, *Letters*, selections

Maimonides, *Laws of Prayer*, selections

Nahmanides on Maimonides' *Book of the Commandments*, selections

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, *Worship of the Heart*, selections

Weeks 9-10: The Problem and Nature of Evil

Book of Job, selected passages and medieval Jewish commentary

Lewis, selections from: *The Problem of Pain*; *A Grief Observed*; *The Screwtape Letters*

Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, selections

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, *Out of the Whirlwind*, selections

Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, *Leaves of Faith*, selections

Weeks 11-12: The First Sin of Man

Lewis, *Perelandra*, selections; *The Magician's Nephew*, selections; *Problem of Pain*, selections

Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, selections

Lewis, "Introduction to *Paradise Lost*"

Maimonides, *Guide* 1:2

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, "The Emergence of Ethical Man"

Week 13: Tolkien, Lewis, and the Meaning of Monarchy

The Return of the King, selections

Maimonides, *Laws of Kings*, selections

Michael Wyschogrod, "A King in Israel"

Meir Soloveichik, "King David"

Week 14: Review