What Is Belief?
REL 106 | Fall 2015

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Approaches and Aspirations
Beliefs shape us and our lives. They inform who we are and how we live. For example, a belief in social justice mobilizes my political engagements. A belief in exercise’s benefits motivates me to go for a run, especially on days when I need motivating. A belief in technology’s ability to upgrade my everyday life drives my desire for the latest i-gadget. A belief in the wonder of love keeps me dating. These beliefs intersect with many others to organize my day, my self, and my life.

None of these beliefs is explicitly “religious”: none is rooted in a recognizable religious tradition. So our examination of belief requires many investigative tools. We will use psychological, biological, philosophical, historical, artistic, and religious resources to consider what belief is, how it works, what it does, and why it matters. Considering the forms, effects, and stakes of belief will lead us to that query at the heart of the humanities: what does it mean to be human?

Along the way, we will ponder other questions. Is belief necessary? Is it beneficial? Are there different kinds of belief? Is religious belief different from other kinds of belief? What happens when a belief conflicts with scientific evidence, or with personal experience, or with another belief? We will consider these and related questions as our course unfolds, according to 4 questions of belief and 4 cases of belief. Our course materials, discussions, and activities work together in the service of our course’s learning objectives:
(1) to understand better how belief works, what belief does, and why belief matters in individual and collective, past and present contexts;
(2) to think more deeply and critically about beliefs, their forms of expression, and their modes of interpretation using a variety of approaches and methods;
(3) to develop your critical and self-critical habits of reading, thinking, and writing;
(4) to ensure that these habits reflect on the humanities’ relevance to contemporary ethical and social issues.

Critical Skills
Critical reading, thinking, and writing skills are probably the most important and most applicable skills you can learn in college. Because they are skills, they are learnable. But like any skill, they require practice. They can be learned, and ultimately mastered, if you are willing to devote time and effort to practicing them. Think of these skills—reading, thinking, and writing critically—as investments that require large initial deposits but that provide substantial returns with interest on those deposits.

Texts
Margaret Edson, *Wit*
Bruce Hood, *The Science of Superstition*
Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*
Plato, *Phaedo*
Svatmarama, *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*
Additional materials are available via Blackboard. Be sure to bring to class whatever text(s) we are discussing that day.

Course Format
At heart, our course is a series of conversations: among our course materials and among ourselves. Our class meetings stage these conversations as live opportunities for interactive learning, with as many conversation partners as possible. Our course is *ours*, not only mine or yours. It is our responsibility to engage in these ongoing conversations with the materials and one another.

Guiding Principles
In our course, we take the following statements as among our guiding principles.
(1) None of us knows everything.
(2) Each of us is here primarily to learn.
(3) Each of us can contribute to our learning—our own and others’.
(4) Learning requires differences. Differences are how we learn.
(5) Questions are usually more illuminating, and more interesting, than answers.
(6) Answers are primarily ways of asking better next questions.

Community and Responsibility
A class is a community, in which any member’s actions affect other members. As members of this community, we share, and commit to, the following communal responsibilities.
Punctual attendance

We will be on time for and attend every class meeting from beginning to end. Attendance is a crucial component of learning, since it gives us opportunities to engage course materials and one another. Each absence after the third will lower your course grade by 20 points. Absences may be excused in documented cases of religious observance or university affairs, so long as you notify us officially in writing by 11 September 2015. Absences may also be excused in documented cases of critical and unforeseeable emergency.

Shared respect

We will be respectful and responsible—particularly in this course, whose charged materials require sensitivity. Being respectful and responsible includes preparing for and attending class, listening to others, appreciating differences, refraining from eating and using electronic devices, and generally abstaining from any activity not productively contributing to our course. Anyone who does not behave respectfully and responsibly may be excused from class for the day.

Academic integrity

We will uphold academic integrity. Because academic integrity forms the foundation of a learning community, it is absolutely imperative that we be honest and honorable members of this community. Cheating, in any form and to any degree, is an affront to this community that will not be tolerated. Cheating includes giving or receiving aid when prohibited, plagiarism, fraud, falsification, collusion, or any related act of deception or dishonesty. Anyone who commits such an act will receive an XF grade for this course and will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity. For more information, see the Academic Integrity Policies and Procedures (http://academicintegrity.syr.edu).

Activities and Assessment

We will engage in the following activities that give you opportunities to deepen and to assess your learning.

Participation

Participation depends on preparation. Before class, spend time carefully reading each text, marking important passages, jotting down questions, and engaging the text and its author as conversation partners. Then in class, comment on the passages you marked, ask the questions you jotted down (and others that arise), and engage other class members as conversation partners. Simply showing up is not enough. Come to class ready to interact with texts and with each another in a learning environment of inquiry and exploration. Then extend our discussion beyond the classroom—onto Twitter, for example, using the course hashtag, #whatisbelief.

Making a case

Our course considers 4 questions about specific beliefs. You will have an opportunity to make a case for a specific response to 1 of them. Working with a partner, you will develop and then present, in 5 minutes, a compelling, oral argument that makes your case (i.e., explains your view). Your presentation’s aim is
to persuade your classmates to agree with your argument. Making a case combines critical reading, thinking, and writing skills with your insights and viewpoint and your ability to articulate them.

Belief project
The belief project adds to our course’s 4 questions. Working in groups of 4, you will develop a similar question about a specific belief. Then you will interview at least 6 current Syracuse University students not enrolled in our course. You will pose your question, along with follow-up questions to elicit why your interviewees believe what they believe. You will edit these interviews, along with your commentary, into a 5-minute video, which you will post on YouTube with the course hashtag, #whatisbelief. You will also submit via email a collective, written analysis (1000–1200 words) of your interviewee’s responses that articulates what they teach us about belief and that draws on our course readings and discussions.

Learning log
The learning log presents you with 5 specific occasions to think and write critically about your learning at different moments in our course. It allows you to think, to think about your thinking, and to write about both in relation to our course texts and topics. In doing so, the learning log links course content, critical skills, and learning observations. For each learning log, you will submit a response (300–400 words) to a particular, proposed prompt. Each learning log should respond thoroughly to the prompt, support its claims and conclusions, integrate course readings and discussions, and show thoughtfulness, reflection, and insight.

Learning self-assessment
The learning self-assessment offers an opportunity to reflect on your learning in our course: what and how you have learned and how you have taken responsibility for your learning. For your learning self-assessment, you will submit a report (600–800 words) recounting and evaluating your learning—and your role in it—in our course. Use our course’s learning goals to assess your learning performance. Be sure to mention specific skills and knowledges in relation to specific course goals, materials, and activities. Your self-assessment should include the number of points (out of 40) that you judge best represents your learning performance in our course.

Examinations
The 4 examinations (3 individual, 1 group) are occasions to practice and improve your critical reading, thinking, and writing abilities. They draw together your learning and your skills of interpretation, comparison, application, and evaluation. Examinations are opportunities to demonstrate your understandings of and uses of texts, concepts, cases, and questions that our course considers. Essay questions selected from pre-distributed lists will comprise the individual examinations.

Final examination
The final examination is the capstone of our course. It provides you with a significant, double opportunity to demonstrate, integrate, and use your cumulative learning from our readings, discussions, and investigations of belief. Essay
questions selected from a pre-distributed list will comprise one part of the final examination. The final examination is comprehensive and may not be rescheduled. Your assessed opportunities for learning and achievement (i.e., assignments) will constitute your course grade based on the following point values.

- Participation: 130
- Making a case: 40
- Belief project: 50
- Learning log: 50
- Learning self-assessment: 40
- Examination #: 90
- Examination #: 110
- Examination #: 130
- Group examination: 50
- Final examination: 210

Total: 900 points

The final examination is mandatory. You choose which other learning activities you will do. You may do as many or as few as you choose. (If you choose participation, you must notify us via email by 11:40 a.m. on 14 September 2015.) We will calculate your course grade based on the number of points you earn, according to the following scale.

- B+ = 678–692
- C+ = 601–615
- D = 462–538
- A = 708–900
- B = 631–677
- C = 554–600
- A- = 693–707
- B- = 616–630
- C- = 539–553
- F = 0–461

Learning activities (except for examinations) are due by 11:40 a.m. on the designated dates. Because you have choices about the learning activities you do, we will not accept a learning activity once its due date has passed. Exceptions may be granted in cases of critical and unforeseeable emergency. No extra credit will be given. Staying enrolled in this course will indicate your understanding of and agreement to its goals, principles, policies, and requirements.

**Office Hours**

Office hours provide you with weekly opportunities to extend class discussions, ask questions, or seek assistance. We (our course's teaching team) strongly encourage you to take advantage of these opportunities, especially if you are having difficulties. You can make an appointment with Professor Robert at https://williamrobert1.youcanbook.me. (You can also drop by without an appointment.) You can email us anytime.

**Learning Accommodations**

If you think you might need accommodations for a learning disability, please contact the Office of Disability Studies (http://disabilityservices.syr.edu) to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations. The Office of Disability Services is responsible for coordinating disability-related accommodations and will, as appropriate, issue accommodation authorization letters to students with documented disabilities. Since accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively,
contact the Office of Disability Services and discuss your situation with us as soon as possible.

**Religious Observances**  
Given the diversity of religious traditions practiced by members of our academic community, Syracuse University protects our rights to observe our respective traditions’ holy days. You may make up any required work missed due to a religious observance provided that you notify us through MySlice by 11 September 2015. For more information, see the Religious Observances Policy (http://supolicies.syr.edu/emp_ben/religious_observance.htm).

**Tips for Success**  
(1) Read our course texts thoroughly, closely, and carefully.  
(2) Read them again.  
(3) Attend and participate in our class meetings.  
(4) Ask questions.  
(5) Reread the texts.  
(6) Talk about our course texts and discussions with class members (including us).  
(7) Ask more questions.  
(8) Reread the texts again.

**Words for Thought**  
“I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.” (Lewis Carroll)  

“We’re dealing with the important things here. Our faith, our health. Who we are and how we live.” (Don DeLillo)
Schedule of Meetings, Readings, and Learning Activities

Question #1: Do you believe in soulmates?
31 August—Introduction
2 September—Plato, Speech of Aristophanes; William James, “The Will to Believe”
4 September—Discussion

Case #1: Belief as human activity
7 September—Labor Day
9 September—Bruce Hood, *The Science of Superstition*, prologue, chapters 1–2
11 September—Discussion; Learning log #1 due

14 September—Bruce Hood, *The Science of Superstition*, chapter 3
16 September—Bruce Hood, *The Science of Superstition*, chapters 9–10
18 September—Examination #1

Question #2: Do you believe in immortality?
21 September—Michel de Certeau, “What We Do When We Believe”
23 September—Immortality materials on Blackboard
25 September—Discussion; Making a case #1

Case #2: Belief as meaningful orientation
28 September—Plato, *Phaedo*, 57a–77a
30 September—Plato, *Phaedo*, 77a–91c, 100b–e
2 October—Discussion; Learning log #2 due

5 October—Plato, *Phaedo*, 105c–115a
7 October—Plato, *Phaedo*, 115a–118
9 October—Examination #2; Group examination, 2:15–3:15 p.m.

Question #3: Do you believe in miracles?
14 October—John Dufresne, “The Freezer Jesus”
16 October—Discussion; Making a case #2

Case #3: Belief as radical commitment
19 October—Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, “Preface” and “Attunement”
21 October—Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, “In Praise of Abraham”
23 October—Discussion; Learning log #3 due

26 October—Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, “Preamble from the Heart”
28 October—Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, “Problem 1” and “Epilogue”
30 October—Examination #3
Case #4: Belief as embodied practice
4 November—Svatmarama, *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, “Pranayama”
6 November—Discussion; Learning log #4 due

9 November—Svatmarama, *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, “Mudras”
11 November—Svatmarama, *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, “Samadhi”
13 November—Discussion

16 November—*Enlighten Up!*
18 November—*Enlighten Up!*
20 November—Belief project due

23–25 November—Thanksgiving break

Question #4: Do you believe in the meaning of life?
30 November—Blaise Pascal, “Discourse on the Machine”
2 December—Margaret Edson, *Wit*
4 December—Discussion; Making a case #3; Learning log #5 due

7 December—Margaret Edson, *Wit*
9 December—Conclusion; Learning self-assessment due
11 December—Final examination, part 1

17 December—Final examination, part 2, 12:45–2:45 p.m.