

# Group Video Assignment

**1. Assignment:** Each group will produce a short video about one of 8 major Medieval philosophers that we will be studying over the course of this semester. The video should be created with a general audience in mind such that, if posted publicly, it would successfully introduce the major philosophical and historical themes of each given philosopher to anyone who is curious (and, ideally, in a way that is clear, engaging, and fun). To this end, your video should have the following three features:

- **Biographical Information:** Tell us about the life of your philosopher, including any events or biographical information that the viewer might find interesting.
- **Philosophical Contribution:** Provide a brief overview of some of the major philosophical themes and ideas that are unique to your philosopher.\*
- **Historical Context:** Situate your philosopher within the time and place that they were living. Consider this video to also be a brief lesson in history more generally. (What was going on during this period in history?) Ultimately, the viewer should get some sense not only of your philosopher's ideas, but also how those ideas were shaped by—and how they should be understood in light of—the historical context in which they were formed.

**Video Length:** For groups of four: 6-8 minutes. For groups of five: 8-10 minutes.

*\*But don't make this (the philosophical contributions) your sole focus! Basically, I've created this assignment so that I don't have to talk about historical or biographical stuff. I'm a philosopher, not a historian, and my lectures will be devoted exclusively to presenting the philosophical ideas. So consider this assignment as you doing your part to help me out by covering all the important stuff that is beyond my area of expertise.*

**2. Grading Rubric:** When grading, I will look for the following (roughly, in order of importance):

- *Follows instructions* (listed above)  
Your video must adequately cover all three aspects listed above (historical, biographical, philosophical), and also meet the time length requirement.
- *Clear & Informative*  
Your video should be created with a general audience in mind, such that the layperson would be able to easily understand and learn from it.
- *Creativity*  
Avoid projecting walls of text onto a screen, or delivering long monotone monologues, elementary school book-report style. Be creative with your approach! If some of your team members are actors, perhaps include a skit. If there are artists, perhaps a short cartoon or illustration. You get the idea. Most of all, try to have fun with it.
- *Quality* (of the video itself)  
The quality of the video and audio should at least be clear enough to watch and hear. But, videos with superior production value are certainly welcome, and encouraged.

Note: Your grade will also take into consideration peer assessments of your performance, submitted by your teammates. So, please do your best to contribute your fair share to your group's success.

**3. Submitting Your Work:** Your video should be posted online, and a link emailed to me at least half an hour before class time on the day that it is due. Late work will not be accepted.

The easiest way to post your work will be to upload it to YouTube, and then email me the link. (Note: Your team may wish to set the video to 'Unlisted' on YouTube when you upload it, unless you prefer that it be public.) If you prefer not to use YouTube (or some similar service), you may also elect to email me the video file, and I'll upload it myself to my W&M YouTube account, unlisted. However, in this case, you must email me the video at least 24 hours in advance of class time, so that I'll have sufficient time to do this before class.

We will then watch your video together in class on the due date.

**4. Technology:** Virtually all phones and laptops these days are equipped with video-making capabilities, as well as video-editing software. However, if this is an issue for your team, and you require access to additional equipment and/or assistance, you may wish to make use of Swem Library's [Media Services](#), which are free to all students.

**5. Samples:** You may find it helpful to view some sample videos that students have completed for me in the past. Here are two good examples – one on [A.I.'s making morally significant decisions](#), and another on [genetically resurrecting extinct species](#). These should give you some sense of what excellent 'A' work from W&M philosophy students looks like.

**6. How to Begin:** Begin by reading up on your assigned philosopher, as well as their historical period. A great place to start would be the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#), as well as the [Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#). And of course, you are encouraged to come see me during office hours.

After you've done some preliminary research on your own, you should then arrange to meet up with your teammates to discuss and share your thoughts with one another. From there, you can do some further brainstorming as a group, and decide what direction you'd like to go with your project (philosophically and historically, as well as artistically), and how best to divide up the work, and so on.

**7. Specific Topics:** Some brief details about each of the eight assigned philosophers can be found on the pages below. (I've also included one clickbait-y, sensationalist detail for each philosopher.)

### **Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430 AD) – Monday, 1/27 (group of 5)**

The last great ancient philosopher, or the first great medieval philosopher, Augustine lived during the beginning of the fall of the Roman Empire (Rome was sacked in 410 AD). Converting to Christianity at age 33 after a sin-filled youth (detailed in his *Confessions*), he eventually became a bishop of Hippo in Northern Africa (present-day Algeria). He was largely responsible for the merger of Christian theology with Greek philosophy. We will study Augustine's writings on free will, truth, God, sin, evil, time, and eternity.

*Sensational detail: That one time when Augustine, at age 30, broke things off with his concubine to get engaged to a 10 year old girl – at the request of his very religious mother, who was trying to get him to shape up.*

### **Anselm of Canterbury (1033 – 1109 AD) – Wednesday, 2/12 (group of 4)**

Born in present-day Italy on the border of France, the noble-born and highly educated Anselm sought to join a monastery against his father's wishes. He became a Benedictine monk at age 27, and later (reluctantly) the archbishop of Canterbury in England. Fiesty Anselm repeatedly clashed with the English monarchy, and was exiled *twice* over it. He is most famous for his Ontological Argument—in which Anselm argues that we can prove that God exists merely from the very *concept* of His existence. We will study that proof as well as his writings on truth, sin, and free will.

*Sensational detail: That one time when Anselm physically resisted as they forced him to become an archbishop – a position with lots of lame responsibilities that was way less fun than being a quiet, contemplative abbot.*

### **Peter Abelard (1079 – 1142 AD) – Wednesday, 2/26 (group of 4)**

French theologian Peter Abelard is perhaps best known for his secret love affair with Heloise, which led to his castration. Shamed and increasingly depressed, he became a hermit within a few years, only to be sought out by crowds of students who set up tents near his hut, demanding to be taught by him. Philosophically, Abelard is best known for his work in logic, the metaphysics of universals, and ethics. We will read his work on the ethics of intentions, as well as an excerpt on God's power and freedom.

*Sensational detail: That one time when Abelard impregnated his young student Heloise out of wedlock, and her uncle found out, and hired some thugs to sneak into Abelard's room and castrate him.*

### **Avicenna (980 – 1037 AD) – Monday, 3/17 (group of 5)**

Born in present-day Uzbekistan, Ibn Sīnā (Latinized, 'Avicenna') is the greatest of the Islamic philosophers, living during the Islamic Golden Age, which saw advancements in science, math (including the invention of algebra), philosophy, art, & architecture. Avicenna and his commentators are largely responsible for the merger of the views of ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle with Islamic theology (a merger which would, in turn, cause a similar merger in both Jewish and Christian theology). We will study Avicenna's theory of the human soul and his proof of the existence of a necessary being.

*Sensational detail: That one time when Avicenna was imprisoned after a dispute with the local political ruler, but later escaped disguised as a Sufi mystic.*

### **Al-Ghazālī (1056 – 1111 AD) – Friday, 3/21 (group of 4)**

Born in present-day Iran, during the later part of the Islamic Golden Age, Al-Ghazali rose to prominence as the greatest thinker since Avicenna, and was elevated to the most prestigious academic position in the Islamic world, in Baghdad. There, he devoted his career to criticizing and tearing down the project of philosophy in his *Incoherence of the Philosophers* – a work that inadvertently became the greatest philosophical work of that era. Yet, in 1095, Ghazali experienced a profound spiritual crisis that led him to permanently abandon his academic post. We will study Ghazali's argument against eternity, as well as the problems that he identified for causation and inductive inference.

*Sensational detail: That one time when Ghazali's spiritual crisis led him to drop everything, abandoning his career, and his wealth, and live out much of the rest of his life abroad as an ascetic Sufi mystic.*

### **Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274 AD) – Friday, 3/28 (group of 5)**

The most famous of all medieval philosophers, Aquinas was a prolific Italian friar, said to have run away from home after being imprisoned there for a year in order to join the Dominican order against his family's wishes. He is the author of the massive and extremely influential *Summa Theologiae*, the pinnacle of medieval Scholasticism, a movement which prioritized reason (in addition to faith), and merged Aristotle's philosophy into Christian theology. Though best known for his "Five Ways" of proving the existence of God, Aquinas wrote extensively in all areas of philosophy. In addition to his proofs for God, we will read his work on the human soul, happiness, morality, and the divine nature.

*Sensational detail: That one time when Thomas's family wanted SO badly to dissuade him from joining the priesthood, that they locked him in a tower with a naked prostitute, to steal his virginity, and he fended her off with a torch.*

### **John Duns Scotus (1266 – 1308 AD) – Friday, 4/4 (group of 4)**

One of the two great philosophers during the height of Scholasticism, when the modern university began to flourish, Duns Scotus was born in Scotland, studied at Oxford, and taught at the University of Paris. He was briefly exiled by the king of France however, for claiming that the king ought not tax the church to fund his wars. Largely following in the tradition of Aquinas, Scotus was called "The Subtle Doctor" due to the exceedingly brilliant, subtle, and complex nature of his writings, on nearly every major area of philosophy. We will read his work on universals, morality, and divine freedom.

*Sensational detail: That one time when, finding Scotus's work so convoluted and difficult to engage with, we started making intellectually-challenged children sit in corners wearing a "dunce cap" at school – as a mockery of the "Dunses," or followers of Duns Scotus – a practice that we continued into the 1960's.*

### **William of Ockham (1285 – 1347 AD) – Monday, 4/7 (group of 4)**

The other of the two great philosophers at the height of Scholasticism, Ockham was born in England, and studied briefly at Oxford but never fully graduated. He was a member of the Franciscan order (who were against owning property), and famously clashed with the pope over this issue. Ockham's life and work bridged the transition between the late medieval era and the Renaissance, and he likely died of the bubonic plague which broke out in 1347. He is perhaps best known for "Ockham's Razor" (the scientific-philosophical principle that the simplest hypothesis is always best), though he wrote on nearly every major philosophical topic. We will read his work on universals, morality, and free will.

*Sensational detail: That one time when Ockham called the pope a heretic, and he got excommunicated, and had to flee England to spend the rest of his life in Germany in exile.*