

CONTEMPORARY MORAL PROBLEMS

PHILOSOPHY 252

Fall 2018

TR, 12:40-1:55p, G-003 Ayres Hall

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Office Hours: TR, 2-3p @ Ayres Hall Study Commons

Canvas: utk.instructure.com

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Complex and contested moral problems are ubiquitous in our society and daily lives. These often confront us with decisions to make and actions to take which may not only affect our lives and interests, but those of others around us. This course will serve as an introduction to various problems and questions that confront us as citizens of a contemporary democracy. Is abortion permissible? How should our society rise to the moral and political challenges presented by a changing climate? How should a decent people handle oppression and social turmoil which track social differences—in class, gender, sexuality, and race? These questions and more will be our focus for the semester.

We'll begin by engaging with thinkers both classical and contemporary to build a conceptual toolkit of sorts for moral reasoning. In addition to some fundamental methodologies, we'll briefly study three primary traditions in the history of moral philosophy—consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics. Once we've established a strong groundwork with these skills and theories, we'll shift our focus toward some important and timely applied issues. First, we'll take up questions about human moral status in some cases where it may seem most marginal. Here, we'll consider the ethics of abortion and the moral costs of climate change, to be incurred by both currently existing and future people. From there, we'll take up larger conceptual questions about justice, and what kinds of values a decent society ought to strive for and promote. Finally, we'll turn to some issues which potentially threaten a just social and political order—asking questions about constructed identities, oppression, and how we all treat each other.

This course is appropriate for all undergraduate students, and fulfills the Communication in Writing (WC) portion of the University of Tennessee's General Education Requirements. There are no prerequisites for this course, and it presumes no prior or special disciplinary knowledge in philosophy. The course meets twice each week for 75 minutes. In terms of format, there will be some brief explanatory lecture on most days. However, since philosophy is a discipline best learned in practice, much of the course will be discussion-based, and will consist heavily of various in-class and out-of class activities done individually, in small groups, and with the entire class.

If you participate actively in class and approach readings, discussions, and assignments with attention and care, I suspect that you will grow as a thinker. If you take the knowledge you acquire in this course with you and apply it to your own life and projects, I hope you will flourish as a human being.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Over the course of the semester, you will develop and be evaluated on five specific skills. Thus, as a result of taking this course, you should better be able to:

- formulate and ask philosophical questions of moral and political interest.
- analyze and evaluate moral and political arguments concerning important and sometimes contentious issues.
- read and understand dense and sometimes difficult texts, both historical and contemporary.
- critically reflect upon and contextualize your own ideas, beliefs, value judgments, and actions.
- clarify, communicate, and defend your ideas effectively, both in writing and in conversation and collaboration with others.

MATERIALS

There is no textbook required for purchase. All reading assignments for class will be made available in accessible formats (typically PDF). These and any supplementary materials (news clips, videos, podcasts, etc.) will be accessible via [Canvas](#).

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

In order to be successful in this course, you should do **all** of the following:

- **Read this syllabus in its entirety.** All students are responsible for a working knowledge of all information and policies contained in this document.
- **Read all assigned materials in accordance with the course schedule (see below).** You should complete your reading before class on the day materials are assigned, and bring texts with you to class each day. Typically, assigned readings will not exceed 50 pages per week, but do note that philosophy can often be dense, and reading it difficult—so be sure to leave yourself some time to read carefully and critically (and perhaps, sometimes, to read twice).
- **Attend class regularly and participate in class meetings.** You should do their best to attend every class, and to come prepared to contribute to daily discussions (by having read and thought about the assigned material, completed relevant homework assignments, etc.)
- **Complete all class assignments by their designated due dates (see below).** Late assignments will not be accepted, except in the most serious of circumstances. Any late assignment submissions ought to be arranged in advance where possible.
- **Check UT email and Canvas regularly for course announcements.** Communications will often be made this way in order to keep you informed about class happenings during the semester. Enabling push notifications or using the Canvas app is a good idea, to this end.

ASSIGNMENTS

“Truth or Dare” Homework (20%): Throughout the term, you will have many opportunities to complete various tasks for homework. By the last day of class, you should have submitted 10 homework assignments (there are 20 opportunities). For each homework assignment, you should complete a task of your choice, unless otherwise specified (some assignments will have more limited

options than others). Homework tasks will be divided into two categories: (1) Philosophical “Truths,” which will involve “unlocking” some or another philosophical conclusion about a reading assignment, for instance, by annotating the primary philosophical content of a text, by evaluating a central argument, by making a personal connection between key ideas and your own life, or by applying an argument or line of reasoning to a new issue or area of inquiry; and (2) Philosophical “Dares,” which will involve applying key ideas from course material in your own lives in novel ways, and submitting evidence of and reflection on such applications (typically in writing). Please note that *at least 3* of your homework submissions *must* be written argument evaluations, and you *must* undertake *at least one dare* during the course of the semester. A special award will go to the class’s “Most Daring Philosopher(s),” who complete 5 or more philosophical dares during the semester. All those who receive this award are entitled to +5 extra credit points.

Papers (x2, 30% total): During the term, you will write two short papers of 800 and 1,000 words, respectively. Paper 1 should summarize an argument from the course material, raise an objection to that argument, and then “repair” the argument by responding to the objection on the author’s behalf (800 words, due November 1, 10% of grade). Paper 2 should make an original contribution to the philosophical literature on a moral or political issue of your choice. Topics for this paper can be selected from a list I will provide in advance, but students are welcome to develop their own paper topics in consultation with me (1,000 words, due November 29, 20% of grade). More information about each paper (and some potential topics for Paper 2) will be provided in advance of its due date.

Pre-Writing Workshops (x2, 10% total): For each paper assignment, there will be a corresponding day on our schedule for a tailored pre-writing activity. These in-class workshops are designed to prepare you for the writing process by allowing you to brainstorm ideas and arguments in a targeted fashion with classmates who share similar interests. The pre-writing workshops are each worth 5% of your grade, for a total of 10%. Your performance in each workshop will be evaluated based on your participation in the activity, namely, your good-faith engagement with other students, with a particular eye toward helping them improve their written projects for the course.

Final Exam (20%): At the end of the semester, during the scheduled finals period, you’ll take an in-class written exam. This will be a comprehensive test consisting of short and long essay questions drawn from readings, lectures, and class discussion during the course. The test will be completable in a normal class meeting’s time (75 minutes). The final exam for Fall 2018 is scheduled for Friday, December 7, from 12:30-1:45p, and will be held in our usual classroom location.

Engaged Participation (20%+): Philosophical learning occurs best in collaboration and connection with others. For this reason, you *must* attend class regularly, having sufficiently prepared for discussion of any assigned readings or supplementary materials, and ready to participate in collaboration with your classmates. Regular physical attendance, while usually necessary for a good participation grade, is *not* sufficient on its own (see below for policy on class attendance). Thus, your participation will be evaluated based on the quality of your overall contribution to class discussions, small group activities, and the course as a whole. This being said, different students participate in different ways (e.g., speaking in class, responding to others’ thoughts, small group work, visiting office hours, asking questions one on one, etc.), and all of these methods will be taken into account. Additionally, I reserve the right to raise grades in borderline cases where a student has an exemplary participation record, though this is by no means a guarantee that grades will be rounded up as a matter of policy.

ASSIGNMENT SUBMISSION AND GRADING

All of your assignments should be turned in via Canvas by their designated due dates, and will be checked for originality upon their submission (see below for policy on academic integrity). Microsoft Word (.docx) or PDF format is preferred for ease of grading and feedback. Citations, if needed, can be in any recognized format, so long as they are legible. Late assignments will not be accepted, except in extenuating or extreme circumstances, which should be discussed with me well in advance wherever possible.

Written assignments will typically be graded based on a combination of their accuracy and clarity with respect to the view they are engaging with, their argumentative rigor (if applicable), and the quality of your writing (composition, organization, etc.). Grading rubrics and detailed written feedback will be provided for each assignment. I will make every effort to return graded assignments to you within two weeks of their submission date. Often, grade turnaround will be quicker, but sometimes it may take a few days longer—if this is the case, you'll be notified in class.

Communications about grading, wherever possible, should be done in person, rather than via email. To understand your grades, consult any relevant assignment details, rubrics, etc. from Canvas, as well as my comments on your graded paper. If questions arise, come by during office hours or set up an appointment, and we can discuss your grade.

I am also happy to speak with you about any grade complaints or appeals you might have. If you have such a complaint, you should follow a two-step process. First, you must wait at least 24 hours from the time the assignment is returned to you. While you wait, look over your work and the comments I have provided and identify any discrepancies you wish to discuss. Second, you should submit a short, written statement, detailing the discrepancies between the work you have submitted and the grade you have received. These should be submitted and discussed with me *within 7 days* of getting your initial grade. Grade changes will not be considered without a written appeal, and grades are incontestable after 7 days.

This course will be graded on a 100-point scale, using the weights indicated above. For final grades, I will use a university standard +/- letter grading scale and standard conventions with respect to their meaning. Point gradations are defined as follows:

A 100-94	B 84-86	C 76-74	D 66-64
A- 93-90	B- 83-80	C- 73-70	D- 63-60
B+ 89-87	C+ 79-77	D+ 69-67	F < 60

CLASS POLICIES

Class Attendance: Student attendance is crucial to success in any course, but it is of particular importance in a class which depends heavily on the participation of its members. Attendance records will be taken promptly at the beginning of each class meeting—so, please make sure you arrive on time. Each student is allowed 3 unexcused absences with no questions asked. For each additional unexcused absence past the third, 3% will be deducted from the student's final grade. Additionally, participation grades may be adversely affected by poor attendance. Of course,

important reasons to miss class do occasionally arise, so excused absences (which will not count adversely) will be granted in serious circumstances (university business, religious holidays, significant illnesses, family emergencies, etc.). These ought to be discussed with me in advance when possible. In order for an absence to be excused, you may be asked to provide documentation of your absence in order to make up missed assignments.

Academic Integrity: All assignments for this course will be checked for originality upon their submission. At Tennessee, plagiarism is defined as "using the intellectual property of someone else without giving proper credit," whether intentional or otherwise. Any student found in violation of university policy will immediately receive a failing grade for the course, and may be subject to further disciplinary action at the institutional level. Please refer to the university honor statement and other accompanying [resources](#) to further familiarize yourself with UT's academic integrity policies.

Classroom Technology: The responsible use of laptops, tablets, and in some cases, smartphones for note-taking, class assignments, and research tasks is welcome in class. However, I do reserve the right to ask students to see their notes or work, and to discontinue their usage should it not be consistent with classroom purposes. Participation grades can and will be affected by violations of this policy, and repeated violations may result in being asked to leave class. Relatedly, student photography, as well as audio and video recording of lectures and class discussions is prohibited without prior and explicit permission of all parties involved (this includes Instagram and Snapchat).

Classroom and Discussion Climate: Reasonable disagreement and critical discussion on a variety of issues is a key hallmark of modern democratic society. Thus, a free exchange of ideas and perspectives is absolutely crucial in the university classroom as well. I fully expect and welcome vigorous disagreements in this class, especially given the somewhat sensitive subject matter we'll often engage with. With that being said, please be mindful of some important constraints on our discussions: Be thoughtful and courteous. Respect your classmates by listening to what they have to say, and make an effort to respond to issues raised by those who spoke before you rather than simply waiting your turn to give your opinion and consider your obligations for the day fulfilled. Please also be conscious of the relative balance of contributions in class—if you've spoken a lot, make an effort to cede the floor to less vocal classmates who might be waiting to enter the conversation. I will make every possible effort to maintain a collaborative atmosphere for inquiry and learning—I only ask that you do the same with respect to your classmates. To this end, I consider my classroom and office inclusive spaces for all students. No one should feel unwelcome, undervalued, or unsafe on the bases of their race, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, cultural background, religious belief, age, wealth, or physical/mental ability. I take this policy very seriously, and strive to provide a class environment that is based on full recognition and mutual respect for all who enter. Student compliance with this policy is expected, and harassing speech or action will not be tolerated. For more information, see UT's policy on [Civility and Community](#).

Accessibility: We all learn and work in different ways, and accordingly, I strive to make my courses as widely accessible as possible. Any student who may need special classroom or assignment accommodations based on the impact of a disability, chronic illness, mental health concern, etc. is encouraged to meet with me to discuss their specific needs. Additionally, students seeking disability accommodations may contact Student Disability Services ([SDS](#)) at (865) 974-6087 or sds@utk.edu to document their eligibility for institutional accommodation services.

RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS

Communications and Office Hours: The best way to get ahold of me in a pinch is via email, and many brief questions or concerns are ideally addressed this way. I'll typically respond to student emails within 24 hours (holidays excepted). To ensure a prompt reply, please include "PHIL 252" in the subject line of your email. For any and all more substantive concerns and questions pertaining to the course, students are encouraged to visit my weekly office hours. In addition to regularly scheduled times on days we have class, I am available to meet with students via appointment (either in person or virtually via Google Hangouts). To request an appointment, send me an email, and we will find a time that accommodates all parties involved. I am happy to provide whatever assistance I can to make sure you are successful in class, be it discussing your assignments and grades with you in detail (as above, I prefer not to discuss grades via email except in extreme cases), working through assignments and arguments with you one-on-one, etc. I am here to help. All this being said, please remember that I am indeed a human with as many competing priorities as any other, and that I require some advance notice for appointment requests.

Philosophy Department Resources: The UT Philosophy Department's [website](#) offers a variety of resources helpful to those studying philosophy, as well as information about our degree programs and other opportunities for undergraduates—including our annual scholarship awards, essay contest, and the UT Philosophy Club (all of which are open to non-majors). You are, of course, encouraged to check out these opportunities and consider taking advantage of them! Also, check out the Philosophy Department's profiles on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#) for more information about departmental programming, events, and opportunities!

UT Student Success Center: The Student Success Center is a valuable resource for UT students, providing academic coaching on matters like time management and study tips, as well as general student support at any time in the semester. From the center's [website](#): "Through academic support programs such as tutoring, supplemental instruction, academic coaching, and other educational enhancement programs, as well as our website and referral to the university's other excellent curricular and co-curricular resources, the staff promotes undergraduate student excellence and persistence to graduation."

UT Writing Center: In addition to using class resources and my office hours to your advantage, the Writing Center can provide extra individualized help with written assignments. From the center's [website](#): "The writing center serves student writers in all disciplines of the UT academic community by offering free and individualized help throughout the writing process. Thousands of students visit the Writing Center each year from all types of courses on campus. Trained tutors (graduate students and lecturers) read and discuss student writing in one-to-one conversations and offer constructive feedback. We teach students how to think about their written work from the brainstorming stage to final revisions. We work with writers on a walk-in, first-come, first-served basis."

COURSE SCHEDULE AT A GLANCE¹

1. Thinking Like a Moral Philosopher

Thursday, 08/23/18: Introductions; What is Philosophy?

- Course Syllabus

Tuesday, 08/28/18: Reading Like a Philosopher

- Alex Richardson, "Learning to Argue Well" ([Interactive](#))

Thursday, 08/30/18: Moral Argumentation

- Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality"

Tuesday, 09/04/18: Is Morality "Real?"

- James Rachels, "The Challenge of Cultural Relativism"

Thursday, 09/06/18: Some Moral Intuitions—Trolley Problems and Autonomous Cars

- "Driverless Dilemma" ([RadioLab Podcast](#))

Tuesday, 09/11/18: Making Use of Moral Theory—Happiness and Well-Being

- John Stuart Mill, "What Utilitarianism Is," from *Utilitarianism*

Thursday, 09/13/18: Making Use of Moral Theory—Rationality and Respect (1)

- Immanuel Kant, selections from *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*

Tuesday, 09/18/18: Making Use of Moral Theory—Rationality and Respect (2)

- Immanuel Kant, selections from *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*

Thursday, 09/20/18: Making Use of Moral Theory—Virtue and the Good Life

- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II

Tuesday, 09/25/18: Ethics Bowl Workshop

- [2018-2019 NHSEB Regional Case Packet](#)

2. Ethics at the Margins of Humanity

Thursday, 09/27/18: Abortion and Bodily Autonomy

- Judith Jarvis Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion"

Tuesday, 10/02/18: Abortion and the Value of Life

- Don Marquis, "Why Abortion Is Immoral"

Thursday-Friday, 10/04/18-10/05/18: Fall Break

¹ Materials listed in this section are required unless noted as optional, and assignment due dates are indicated in bold. I reserve the right to make changes to the reading and assignment schedule as needed. In the case of any changes, you'll be notified in advance in class and on Canvas, where an updated version of the schedule will always be posted.

Tuesday, 10/09/18: The Moral Costs of Climate Change

- Stephen Gardiner, "A Perfect Moral Storm: Climate Change, Intergenerational Justice, and the Problem of Moral Corruption"

Thursday, 10/11/18: Climate Change and Future Harms

- John Nolt, "Greenhouse Gas Emission and the Domination of Posterity"

Tuesday, 10/16/18: Climate Change Wrap-Up; Pre-Writing Workshop for Paper 1

- Catriona McKinnon, "Should We Tolerate Climate Change Denial?"
- Alex Richardson, "Do's and Don'ts for Writing a Philosophy Paper"

3. Toward a Just Society For All

Thursday, 10/18/18: An Ideal of Justice—Rawlsian Egalitarianism

- John Rawls, "Fundamental Ideas" from *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, pp. 1-24

Tuesday, 10/23/18: An Ideal of Justice—Rawlsian Egalitarianism

- John Rawls, "Fundamental Ideas" from *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, pp. 25-38

Thursday, 10/25/18: Minimal Social Justice—The Capabilities Approach

- Martha Nussbaum, "The Central Capabilities" from *Creating Capabilities*

Tuesday, 10/30/18: Social Groups and Constructed Identities

- Iris Marion Young, "Five Faces of Oppression," pp. 39-48
- Optional: Kimberlé Crenshaw @ TED, "The Urgency of Intersectionality" ([YouTube](#))

Thursday, 11/01/18: CLASS CANCELED (**Paper 1 Due**)

Tuesday, 11/06/18: The Concept of Oppression

- Iris Marion Young, "Five Faces of Oppression" pp. 49-65

4. Justice and Identity: Gender, Sexual Orientation, and Race

Thursday, 11/08/18: Tuesday, 11/06/18: Gendered Oppression in Physical Space

- Iris Marion Young, "Throwing Like a Girl"

Tuesday, 11/13/18: Objectification, Commodification, and the #MeToo Movement

- Martha Nussbaum, "Objectification," pp. 249-265

Thursday, 11/15/18: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity/Expression

- Talia Mae Bettcher, "Trans Identities and First Person Authority"

Tuesday, 11/20/18: Pre-Writing Workshop for Paper 2

Thursday-Friday, 11/22/18-11/23/18: Thanksgiving Break

Tuesday, 11/27/18: Institutional Racism and the Myth of Criminality

- Tommie Shelby, "Justice, Deviance, and the Dark Ghetto"

Thursday, 11/29/18: The Problem of Mass Incarceration

- Michelle Alexander, "The Color of Justice," from *The New Jim Crow*

Tuesday, 12/04/18: Epistemologies of Ignorance/Moving Racial Justice Forward (**Paper 2 Due**)

- Charles Mills, "White Ignorance"
- OPTIONAL: Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," from *The Atlantic*

Friday, 12/07/18: Final Exam, 12:30-1:45p