

Phil 341: Contemporary Moral Issues

(Current as of 11/29/2023)

Class Time: MTWR 9:55-10:45

Location: Helen C. White 4275

Canvas Page:

<https://canvas.wisc.edu/courses/370781>

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Office Hours: MTWR 11-12 and by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION	1
Learning Outcomes	2
Required Texts	2
Credit Hour Explanation (4 credits)	2
CLASSROOM DISCUSSION NORMS	2
ASSIGNMENTS	3
Assignment Groups	3
Discussion Questions (9 x 1 pt = 9 pts)	3
Critical Response Papers (3 x 3 pts = 9 pts)	3
Research Paper (9 pts)	4
Attendance & Participation (9 pts)	5
GRADES	6
COURSE SCHEDULE	6
ACCOMMODATIONS	10
ACADEMIC STATEMENTS & POLICIES	10

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Should you vote in the next election? Is abortion permissible? Can anyone be held responsible for the effects of climate change? What is racism and who perpetuates it? How can we even attempt to answer these questions? These are some of the questions we'll be examining in this class on moral problems. We will be developing the skills to answer these questions through discussions with your peers and through writing assignments.

This course may be different from other courses you've taken. We will not be learning "content" in the usual sense. Rather, we'll be investigating reasons for the various answers to questions covered in this course. This course is not aimed at changing your mind or filling it up with facts and you will never be graded on what you believe. You should, however, come away with a better understanding of what you do believe, why you believe it, and how to discuss it with and communicate your reasons to others.

Learning Outcomes

- Ability to think critically about arguments.
- Ability to interpret complex texts accurately and analyze them logically.
- Ability to communicate precisely and concisely in both writing and speech.
- Ability to exchange reasons about controversial matters respectfully and with the aim of uncovering the truth.
- Interpretative charity and intellectual honesty, which includes appropriate attribution to others of their ideas, and recognition and frankness about the limitations of one's own ideas

Required Texts

All required texts will be available via either the [library](#) or the course [Canvas](#) site.

Credit Hour Explanation (4 credits)

This class meets for a total of 4 class period hours each week over the Fall semester and carries the expectation that students will work on course learning activities (reading, writing, studying, etc.) for about 2 hours outside of the classroom for every class period.

There are no prerequisite courses, but sophomore status is required.

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION NORMS

In this class we will:

- Aim to include everyone in discussions. This means:
 - Do not interrupt or talk over someone who is speaking.
 - Questions will often be addressed to everyone, not just the person who raised the point or the instructor.
 - We will sometimes spend time in small group discussion.
 - While everyone is encouraged to talk when they have something to share, there is no pressure to talk to the whole group otherwise.
- Aim for mutual respect. This means:

- Disagree with the position or argument, not the person presenting it.
- Give reasons, don't simply assert.
- Discussion is not a competition. We are not trying to impress others or "win," we are here to learn from one another.
- Be open minded and charitable. This means that as much as possible we try to understand the reasons someone gives and understand them in the spirit intended.
- Recognize that everyone in the room has different experiences that inform their views. These experiences may be very different from yours.
- Provided the above norms are met (reasons-giving and recognition of different experiences in particular), all *serious and on-topic* views and arguments are on the table for discussion. Trolling, the idle advancing of views for the purpose of disruption, is not permitted.
- The instructor (Matt) may request that we table a discussion that is off-topic or does not meet the norms above.

ASSIGNMENTS

Assignment Groups

For the purposes of some assignments the class will be broken into three groups. Different groups will have different assignments due each week. Please refer to the course schedule for specifics.

Discussion Questions (9 x 1 pt = 9 pts)

For readings assigned to your group you will write a question for discussion with the class. While low stakes, these assignments are likely to be one of the most valuable components of the class. They will guide discussion and help all of us to probe more deeply into the moral issues we take on this semester.

- **Questions must be submitted by [email](#) by 8 am** on the day we are to discuss the reading. No late submissions will be accepted.
- **Come prepared to talk** about your question with the class. We are depending on you to help guide discussion and if you aren't there, we all lose out.
- **Discussion questions demonstrate an effort at understanding** the assigned reading and engage with the text in some significant way. They are more than a generic one-line question. Good discussion questions will be about 100 words in length and explain why the question is relevant in some detail. Some possible question types are:
 - What does the text say (be specific about what you don't understand)?
 - How does the author argue for their conclusion?
 - Draw out some consequences of the text and raise a worry.

- Present a problem for the author's argument or conclusion.
- Many other question types are possible!
- **Discussion questions are graded for completeness only.** Don't worry if we don't get to yours in class! So long as I judge that you have made a sincere effort at understanding the paper and contributing to discussion you will receive full credit.

Critical Response Papers (3 x 3 pts = 9 pts)

For weeks assigned to your group you will write a journal entry that engages in a critical reflection on the week's material (due the following Monday). A critical reflection takes as its starting point some idea we studied or passage from a reading, and your thoughts about it. These entries are not a stream of conscious expression of your feelings about the material, neither are they a summary of what we read or discussed in class. These responses provide you with an opportunity to explore what matters to you in some depth and on a consistent basis.

- **The entries are due Mondays** (by 11:59 pm) and must be submitted on Canvas. Assignments submitted by Friday in that same week will receive a one point penalty and a two point penalty after that time.
- **They should be approximately 600 words.** You may find it easier to think of these a short response papers rather than journals
- **Journals will be graded out of 3 points.** The basis for grading is whether they exhibit clarity, depth of critical reflection, relevance to the ideas we study. Grades will be given as follows:
 - Clearly adequate (full credit) = 3
 - Neither clearly adequate nor clearly inadequate (partial credit) = 2
 - Clearly inadequate (minimal credit) = 1

Sample Kinds of Critical Response Paper:

- **Argument** – A careful examination of the reasons why one agrees or disagrees with an idea discussed in class. A good argument will explain the reasons offered in favor of the idea as discussed in class/reading. Next, it will offer necessary supplements, or counter arguments. If you are thinking about majoring in philosophy, you should get comfortable writing this kind of paper.
- **Relation** – A careful explanation of how some idea that we studied relates to an idea studied in another class, or that you have encountered elsewhere. A strong relation response will carefully explain both ideas, and the relationship between those concepts.
- **Application** – An application of a concept to a problem or event in one's life, in the world more broadly, or what happens in a book or movie. This requires a careful explanation of the concept, an account of how the concept applies to the problem, and why it has the implication that it does.

- **Reflection** – An exploration of how one and why one thinks about the concepts, with a particular emphasis on how and why your thinking has changed, developed (or not) in light of what we study. This again requires a clear explanation of the idea we studied, your thoughts about it, and a careful explanation of how and why you think as you do.

Research Paper (9 pts)

This is a medium length 7-10 page paper, wherein you argue for a thesis of your own creation. The thesis may engage with the materials covered in lecture, but this is a chance to apply the skills you have learned in the course to a novel issue. You are encouraged to write a paper which relates to an ethical issue that you care about or which relates to your field of study.

- This assignment has several parts all of which are required to pass the assignment, however only the final draft will receive a grade.
 - **Abstract** – A 200 word abstract detailing the thesis and argument the student plans to make is due by 11:59 pm Wednesday, 11/22 and will be submitted on Canvas. The abstract must receive approval in order to move on to the draft stage. I will make approval decisions and give comments by Monday, 11/27.
 - **First Draft** – a full draft of the paper is due *before the tutorial* on Canvas. The paper must effectively use at least three references, at least one of which we have not read for class.
 - **Tutorial** – students will meet in pairs during class time on the week of 12/4. Two students will meet at a time with me to read and discuss drafts.
 - **Final Draft** – a final draft which takes into account the feedback from tutorials is due 12/13 at 11:59 pm on Canvas. Late papers will be accepted with no penalty until 12/20 at 11:59 pm
- **Final essays will be graded on three components:**
 1. Full and correct explication of the issue discussed (3 pts)
 2. Compelling argument free from logical fallacies (3pts)
 3. Clear prose and structure, including thesis and citations (3pts)
- **Each component will be graded out of 3 points:**
 - Clearly adequate (full credit) = 3
 - Neither clearly adequate nor clearly inadequate (partial credit) = 2
 - Clearly inadequate (minimal credit) = 1

Some topics that past students have written on:

- Should student-athletes be paid?
- Are the Minions in *Minions* (2015) oppressed?
- What is fast fashion and why is it a moral problem?

Attendance & Participation (9 pts)

Because this class is largely discussion based, attendance is expected and required. Everyone begins this class with a full 9 points. You may miss up to three classes without penalty. After three absences, however, you may receive a 1 point penalty for each additional absence. Absences may be made up by meeting with me during office hours (one per week only). Should you require an extended absence, please [let me know](#) and we will arrange an alternative method of participation.

We will have several writing and online activities during class throughout the semester. **Please bring a laptop** or tablet with you to class so that you can participate. If you cannot access a laptop or tablet (temporarily or long term), let me know and we will make other arrangements for you to participate.

GRADES

Grade	A	AB	B	BC	C	D	F
%	100-93%	92-88%	87-83%	82-78%	77-70%	69-60%	Below 60
Points	36-34	33-32	31-30	29-28	27-26	25-22	21-0

With this grading scheme and assignment structure, you must attend class and turn in all assignments to do well. If you find yourself falling behind or getting many 1s on graded assignments please [reach out to me](#) as soon as possible so that we can discuss options for getting you back on track.

COURSE SCHEDULE

(Subject to change. See [Canvas](#) for the latest version.)

Day	Date	Readings	Assignments	Learning Outcomes
Introductions & Discussion Norm Setting				
Wednesday	9/6/2023	Course Syllabus	Survey (in class)	-Understand course objectives and expectations; -Set discussion norms
Duties Towards Others				
Thursday	9/7/2023			-Introduction to philosophical argument; -Know about analogies and

Monday	9/11/2023	Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”	group A discussion questions	counterexamples; -Know what makes a good philosophy paper.
Tuesday	9/12/2023	Hardin, "Lifeboat Ethics"	group B discussion questions	
Wednesday	9/13/2023			
A Crash Course on Ethical Theories				
Thursday	9/14/2023			-Know major moral theories; -Apply moral theories
Monday	9/18/2023	▶ Kant & Categorical Imperativ... ▶ Utilitarianism: Crash Course P...	group B critical response paper due, group C discussion questions	
Tuesday	9/19/2023	▶ Contractarianism: Crash Cour... ▶ Aristotle & Virtue Theory: Cra...	group A discussion questions	
Wednesday	9/20/2023			
A Duty to Obey the Law				
Thursday	9/21/2023			-Know some possible relationships between morality and law; -Distinguish legal and moral arguments
Monday	9/25/2023	Plato, "Crito"	group A critical response paper due, group B discussion questions	
Tuesday	9/26/2023	MLK, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail	group C discussion questions	
Wednesday	9/27/2023			
The Ethics of Democracy				
Thursday	9/28/2023			-Know major justifications for democracy and challenges to those justifications
Monday	10/2/2023	Ackerman & Fishkin "Deliberation Day"	group C critical response paper due, group A discussion questions	
Tuesday	10/3/2023	Brennan, <i>Against Democracy</i> , Chapter 1	group B discussion questions	
Wednesday	10/4/2023			
Climate Change				
Thursday	10/5/2023			-Understand causal inefficacy arguments; -Distinguish moral

Monday	10/9/2023	Sinnott-Armstrong “It’s not my fault”	group B critical response paper due, group C discussion questions	responsibility, causal responsibility, blame, and related concepts.
Tuesday	10/10/2023	Fahlquist, “Moral Responsibility for Environmental Problems—Individual or Institutional”	group A discussion questions	
Wednesday	10/11/2023			
Abortion				
Thursday	10/12/2023			-Understand two justifications for abortion and challenges to those justifications; -Engage in debate over a difficult topic; -Use philosophical tools to consider views other than your own.
Monday	10/16/2023	Brody, “Opposition to Abortion: A Human Rights Approach”	group A critical response paper due, group B discussion questions	
Tuesday	10/17/2023	Thomson, “A Defense of Abortion”	group C discussion questions	
Wednesday	10/18/2023			
Thursday	10/19/2023			
Monday	10/23/2023	Wolf-Devine, “Welcoming the Unborn: Toward a Politics of Inclusion”	group C critical response paper due, group A discussion questions	
Tuesday	10/24/2023	Sherwin, “Abortion Through a Feminist Ethics Lens”	group B discussion questions	
Wednesday	10/25/2023			
Identity & Oppression				
Thursday	10/26/2023			-Know major theories of racism, sexism, and other -isms; -Distinguish individual and structural accounts; -Know and evaluate major ameliorative strategies.
Monday	10/30/2023	Garcia, "The Heart of Racism"	group B critical response paper due, group C discussion questions	
Tuesday	10/31/2023	Headly, "Philosophical Analysis and the Problem of Defining Racism"	group A discussion questions	
Wednesday	11/1/2023			
Thursday	11/2/2023			
Monday	11/6/2023	Frye, "Oppression"	group A critical response paper due, group B discussion questions	

Tuesday	11/7/2023	Tatum, “What Kind of Friendship is That?”	group C discussion questions	
Wednesday	11/8/2023			
Thursday	11/9/2023			
Monday	11/13/2023	Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex"	group C critical response paper due, group A discussion questions	
Tuesday	11/14/2023	Young, "Justice and the Politics of Difference"	group B discussion questions	
Wednesday	11/15/2023			
Algorithms and Justice				
Thursday	11/16/2023			-Know how algorithms make decisions; -Know challenges to algorithmic decision making. -Know how ethical theories and theories of justice interact.
Monday Online	11/20/2023	O'Neil, <i>Weapons of Math Destruction</i> , Chapter 3	group C discussion questions	
Tuesday Online	11/21/2023	Mittelstadt et al., "Ethics of Algorithms"	group A discussion questions	
Wednesday No Class	11/22/2023	No class	Abstract Due	
Thanksgiving Break				
Ethics of Work				
Monday	11/27/2023			-Know some possible futures of work; -Know some objections to the moral requirement to work.
Tuesday	11/28/2023	Danaher, "Will Life Be Worth Living in a World Without Work?"	group B discussion questions	
Wednesday	11/29/2023	Cholbi, "A duty to work"	group C discussion questions	
Thursday	11/30/2023			
Tutorials				
Monday	12/4/2023	Tutorial sign up will be made available.	Research Paper First Draft Due	-Engage usefully with criticism of your writing; -Improve writing skills through discussion.
Tuesday	12/5/2023			
Wednesday	12/6/2023			
Thursday	12/7/2023			
Does Moral Philosophy Matter?				
Monday	12/11/2023	Johnson, "Unspeakable Conversations"	Exit Survey (in class)	-Know objections to and defenses of philosophical

Tuesday	12/12/2023	Schwitzgebel, " Cheeseburger Ethics "		reasoning in ethics; -Consider how your views have changed over this semester.
Recap & Discussion				
Wednesday	12/13/2023		Research Paper Final Draft "Due"	-Debrief with the rest of the class; -Relax. You're done!

ACCOMMODATIONS

While some discomfort is expected when discussing difficult topics, harm is never a positive outcome. Some of the material in this course may be extremely personal or otherwise distressing to some students. If this is the case for you, please [reach out to me](#) so that we can make adjustments or devise alternatives as necessary.

If you have learning accommodations through the McBurney Center, please [let me know](#) as early in the semester as possible. More information is available at <https://mcburney.wisc.edu/>

ACADEMIC STATEMENTS & POLICIES

Additional statements and policies regarding this course are available at <https://guide.wisc.edu/courses/#syllabustext>