

Philosophy 341: Contemporary Moral Issues

Spring 2017

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<u>Class Times</u>	Monday – Thursday	11:00am-11:50am	5193 Helen C. White
<u>Office Hours</u>	Tuesday and Wednesday	12:00pm-1:00pm	5174 Helen C. White

Course Description and Objectives

Consider the following questions:

- What duties, if any, do we have to other animals?
- Is it ever permissible to impose the death penalty on a person?
- Should we try to make smarter, healthier babies with technology?

What you believe about these issues affects not only many of your everyday decisions, but also the kinds of policies or proposals you would be willing to support. With these considerations in mind, this course has a few aims. The first is to help you develop a set of skills that will allow you to become a more nuanced and careful thinker. The second is to familiarize you with various philosophical positions on a range of moral issues. The third is to give you an opportunity to form well-reasoned beliefs about these issues. At the end of the course, you should understand your reasons for holding the beliefs that you do, as well as better appreciate the reasons that others have for holding perhaps contrary beliefs.

Contact Information

Please email me at the address listed above. I check my email regularly and will do my best to respond within 24 hours. One caveat: don't ask for difficult philosophical help through email. Rather, come to office hours. Email isn't well suited for philosophical discussion. If you have a conflict with my office hours, email me and we can set up an appointment for an alternate meeting time. I'm happy to accommodate!

Readings

There is no assigned textbook for this class. All class readings can be found on Learn@UW. Any materials handed out in class, including this syllabus, will be posted there.

Grade Composition

Pre-/Post-Reflections	6% (3% each)
Critical Reflections	15% (3% each)
Critical Assessments	36% (9% each)
Final Paper	18%
Presentation	10%
Presentation Commentary	5%
Participation	10%

Grading Scale

A	92.5% - 100%
AB	87.5% - 92.5%
B	82.5% - 87.5%
BC	77.5% - 82.5%
C	70% - 77.5%
D	60% - 70%
F	0% - 60%

There will be no opportunity for extra credit. I also will not impose a curve on any individual assignment, or your final grades. However, I do not want one bad grade on an assignment to destroy an otherwise strong performance, and I also place value in demonstrated progress over the course of a semester. I am happy to take these sorts of things into account on a case by case basis at the end of the semester.

Course Requirements

The following is a breakdown of the various requirements which determine your grade for the course. **All assignments besides the presentation will be submitted via learn@UW. Critical Reflections, Critical Assessments and Reading Questions are to be submitted *before* class on the day that they are due.**

Pre-Reflection

Think about the topics we will cover in this course (and see the relevant questions in the below course calendar). Record your honest views about these issues. What beliefs about these matters are you coming into this course with? Can you formulate your *reasons* for holding these beliefs? Are there any issues that you haven't thought at all about? **Length: 500-750 Words**

Critical Reflections (CR)

You will have five of these writing assignments throughout the semester. These should be short, thoughtful responses to the syllabus questions for each course topic. If you are able, you should attempt to answer the questions by discussing the conditions that are necessary and/or sufficient for the property under question, and then say whether those conditions obtain or not. **Length: 300-700 Words**

Critical Assessments (CA)

You will be required to hand in four CAs throughout the semester. These are short, focused papers in which you will critically engage with an argument. They are an opportunity for you practice a number of skills we will focus on developing throughout this course, including careful and critical reading, argument reconstruction and argument evaluation. Though short, successful CAs will require a larger investment of time than the length might suggest to you. For this reason, the requirements for a CA will build and develop over the course of the semester. With each new CA, you will be asked to incorporate a new skill you have learned. CA prompts will be posted on learn@UW. **Length: Variable (1-3 pages)**

Final Paper

For this paper you will get to put the skills you've acquired throughout the semester to work by writing a longer paper evaluating arguments *from material that we did not discuss in class* about a contemporary moral issue. You will be required to find at least two philosophical and informative articles on your topic, and then reconstruct their arguments and critically assess them. You'll also be required to formulate and defend your own position in light of the arguments that you've critically assessed. I will discuss these requirements in more detail as the due date approaches. **Due Date: May 9th at 9:00pm.**

Before starting on the paper, I must approve your proposed topic and sources. I am happy to help you with this task, but you must do some work before meeting with me. To that end, there will be a **Library Day on Thursday, March 30th**, during which the library staff will give you tips on researching your topic and finding relevant articles. **You will be required to submit a draft of your paper, both to me and your commentator, five days before your class presentation.** **Length: 1800-2200 Words**

Paper Presentation

During the final few weeks of the semester, you will have the opportunity to give a ten minute presentation of the ideas you developed in your final paper. Those students not presenting will be expected to participate in a ten minute question and answer period following each presentation. **You will be required to submit an outline of the presentation, both to me and your commentator, five days before your class presentation.** I'll provide more information on the presentation requirements and schedule later in the semester.

Presentation Commentary

Each student will be required give a short five minute response to a classmate's presentation. You will not be required to do any additional research for this assignment, beyond reading an outline of the presentation and a draft of the presenter's paper. I will provide more information on this later.

Post-Reflection

Consider the pre-theoretical beliefs you recorded in your pre-reflection from the beginning of the semester. Also, consider your pre-theoretical views about the topic you chose for your final research paper. How, if at all, have your views changed? Try to understand why they've changed or why they haven't. Scrutinize the reasons you hold your views. Are those reasons good? **Length: 800-1000 Words**

Attendance and Participation

Beginning March 27th, and through the end of the semester, all students are permitted three absences with zero penalty. Your fourth absence will earn a five point penalty (-5 points on your final grade). Every second absence thereafter will then continue to earn another 5 point reduction (absence #6, #8, #10, etc.)

Half of your participation grade is made up of a weekly question you will submit for one of the readings under discussion. The question can be as simple as a clarificatory question, but it must demonstrate that you have thoughtfully engaged with the reading. Your questions will be due by 9am on the day the reading is due. The class will be split up into two groups. Group 1 will submit questions for Tuesday readings. Group 2 will submit questions for Wednesday readings. You will not be required to submit questions on any other days. Because I want you to feel comfortable participating for its own sake, without worrying significantly about its effect on your final grade, the remaining participation percentage is small. But do participate. As you'll quickly see, there's no substitute for talking as much as you can about the difficult questions we'll be considering. This ongoing dialogue with me and your fellow classmates will also provide you the opportunity to further reflect on your own beliefs.

With this in mind, a note about classroom etiquette: Disagreeing with others is absolutely fine. And you should feel free to voice your disagreement with your fellow classmates *and* with me. We philosophers thrive on *reasoned* disagreement. In this class, we will often be exploring controversial questions about which many people have strongly held views. It's important to keep in mind that no matter what view you hold, or how strongly you hold it, what we're interested in are the *arguments* for a view, the *reasons* to believe. It is not enough that what you say is true; we are interested in why it is true and why we should also believe it. It can be difficult and frustrating to figure out, articulate, and explain the reasons that support your strongly held views—and it can be difficult to hear objections to them. But it also can be intellectually exciting, and even, sometimes, fun!

Finally, it's crucial that we all treat each other with the highest respect when we disagree. Make sure you listen carefully to what others say, reply respectfully to them, and be willing to accept criticism of what you say. The goal of philosophical argumentation is not to win, but to achieve understanding.

Class Policies

Academic misconduct and plagiarism

Academic misconduct in any form—including plagiarizing from a published source or classmate—will not be tolerated. Penalties for such violations will be adjudicated based on the severity of the offence, and may range from receiving an F on an assignment to failure of the course. For more details on what actions constitute academic misconduct, how to avoid them and the UW policies for dealing with misconduct, please visit <http://students.wisc.edu/doso/students.html>.

Comm B Course Requirements

This course fulfills the Communication B requirement and therefore must meet several requirements laid out by the university. You can find these requirements at <http://www.ls.wisc.edu/gened/documents/CommBCriteria.pdf>.

Special Accommodations

The policy of the Board of Regents of the UW System is to ensure that no qualified person shall, solely by reason of disability, be denied access to, participation in, or the benefits of, any program or activity operated in the UW System. If you have a disability and would like to make special arrangements for receiving class materials or completing assignments, please let me know and I will work with you and the McBurney Center, if appropriate, to develop an alternative for you.

Late Work Policy

Late assignments will not be accepted, though exceptions will be made in unusual circumstances. If you know in advance that you will not be able to submit an assignment on time, please speak with me.

Class Etiquette

The use of cell phones and laptops will not be allowed in this class. This means no texting, tweeting, facebooking, instagramming, receiving a telegraph, sending smoke signals, etc. For those of you used to using laptops, I'm sorry. See here though: <http://tinyurl.com/laptopsarebad>

Course Calendar and other miscellaneous remarks

You will find the course calendar on the next page.

You will notice a column for both "assigned readings" and for "suggestions." These suggestions are truly optional. They often contain extra readings, though sometimes I will suggest podcasts or videos. These suggestions are always relevant to your assigned reading in one way or another, either by containing a response to its content, a different explanation of its content or a further exploration of the ideas brought up by its content. I have them on the syllabus for your benefit, but, I emphasize, do them only if you are particularly interested and engaged by the material for that day or for that topic. Your grade will not suffer if you choose to ignore them.

Week	Date	Content	Due	Assigned Readings	Suggestions
1	January 17 th	Course Preliminaries: Logic and Methodology <i>"How do I think clearly about difficult problems?"</i>		No Reading , Illusions and Rationality	
	January 18 th			No Reading , Analyzing Arguments	
	January 19 th		Pre-R	No Reading , Necessary and Sufficient Conditions	
	January 23 rd		Course Preliminaries: Relativism and Objectivity <i>"Are there objective answers to ethical questions?"</i>		Collingwood , "Philosophy as Lit"
January 24 th		Rachels , "The Challenge of Cultural Relativism"			
January 25 th		Nagel , "The Objective Basis of Morality"		Rachels , "Must God's Commands..."	
January 26 th	CA1	No Reading , Theory Building			
3	January 30 th	Course Preliminaries: Intro to Ethical Theories <i>"How do I determine the right thing to do?"</i>	CR1	Reflections Discussion	
	January 31 st			Shafer-Landau , "Consequentialism: Its Nature and Attractions"	Wi-Phi , "Ethics: Utilitarianism, Parts 1-3"
	February 1 st			Singer , "Utilitarianism and Vegetarianism"	Harris & Galvin , "Pass the Cocoamone, Please"
	February 2 nd			No Reading , Validity and Soundness	
4	February 6 th	Moral Status: Duties to Non-Human Animals <i>"When, if at all, is eating meat morally permissible?"</i> <i>"Do animals have rights?"</i>		Shafer-Landau , "The Kantian Perspective: Fairness and Justice" & "Autonomy and Respect"	
	February 7 th			Kant , "We Have No Duties to Animals"; Cohen , "Do Animals Have Rights?"	NYT Essay Contest : The ethical case for eating meat
	February 8 th			Nussbaum , "Non-Relative Virtues"	
	February 9 th			No Reading , Reconstructing and Assessing Arguments	
5	February 13 th	Moral Status: Duties to Distant Humans <i>"Do we have any duty to help strangers?"</i>	CA2	Norcross , "Puppies, Pigs and People"	DF Wallace , "Consider the Lobster"
	February 14 th			Singer , "Famine, Affluence, and Morality"	
	February 15 th			Arthur , "...The Case Against Singer"	
	February 16 th			No Reading , Buffer Day	

6	February 20 th	<p>Justice: Punishment and Responsibility</p> <p><i>"When, if ever, is the death penalty morally permissible?"</i></p> <p><i>"What justifies punishment?"</i></p> <p><i>"Under what conditions is a person morally responsible for their actions?"</i></p>	CR2	Reflections Discussion	
	February 21 st			Primoratz , "Justifying Legal Punishment"	
	February 22 nd			Nathanson , "An Eye for an Eye?"	Film: Herzog , "Into the Abyss"
	February 23 rd		CA3	Rachels , "Punishment and Desert"	
7	February 27 th		Corwin , "Robert Harris"; Strawson , "Luck Swallows Everything"	Philosophy Bites , Gregg Caruso on Free Will and Punishment	
	February 28 th		Wolf , "Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility"		
	March 1 st		Radiolab , Forget about Blame?	UW Philosophers Tackle: Sarah Paul , "Thought Crimes"	
	March 2 nd		No Reading , Buffer Day		
8	March 6 th	<p>Justice: Moral Desert and Luck</p> <p><i>"What, if anything, is wrong with economic inequality?"</i></p> <p><i>"Do I morally deserve the fruits of my labor?"</i></p>	CR3	Reflections Discussion	
	March 7 th			Norton and Ariely , "Building a Better America"; Wilkinson , "Thinking Clearly about..."	
	March 8 th			Hausman and McPherson , "...Libertarianism"; Nozick , "Distributive Justice"	McBrayer , "This Land is Your Land. Or is it?"
	March 9 th			Srinivasan , "Questions for Free-Market Moralists"	Sandel , "What Isn't for Sale?"
9	March 13 th		Anderson , "How Not to Complain about Taxes"; Singal , "Why Americans Ignore..."	Frank , "Why Luck Matters More than You Might Think"	
	March 14 th	CA4	Rawls , "A Theory of Justice"		
	March 15 th		Mankiw , "Defending the One Percent"		
	March 16 th		No Reading , Buffer Day		
10	March 20 th	Spring Break			
	March 21 st				
	March 22 nd				
	March 23 rd				

11	March 27 th	Biological Enhancement <i>"Should we be free to select for, and modify, our biological traits?"</i>	CR4	Reflections Discussion	
	March 28 th			Savulescu , "Genetic interventions and the ethics of enhancement..."	Philosophy Bites , "Allen Buchanan on Enhancement"
	March 29 th			Sparrow , "A not so new eugenics"	Philosophy Bites , "Sandel on ... Enhancement in Sport"
	March 30 th			Library Day	
12	April 3 rd	Family Ethics <i>"Is it permissible to require that people obtain licenses to have children?"</i> <i>"Do grown children owe obligations to their parents?"</i>	CR5	Reflections Discussion	
	April 4 th			LaFollette , "Licensing Parents"	
	April 5 th			English , "What do Grown Children Owe Their Parents?"	
	April 6 th			Card , "Against Marriage and Motherhood"	
13	April 10 th	TBD			
	April 11 th				
	April 12 th				
	April 13 th				
14	April 17 th	Paper Presentations			
	April 18 th				
	April 19 th				
	April 20 th				
15	April 24 th				
	April 25 th				
	April 26 th				
	April 27 th				
16	May 1 st				
	May 2 nd				
	May 3 rd		Buffer Zone		
	May 4 th				
	May 5 th		Post-Reflection, due @9pm		