

**Contemporary Moral Issues  
Philosophy 2306  
Online Writing Enhanced  
Sam Houston State University  
Fall 2017**

**Instructor:**

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**Course Description:**

Philosophy 2306W: Contemporary Moral Issues, is a course in which students analyze current moral dilemmas through the lenses of various moral theories and moral principles. How to explain and justify moral decisions in response to the issues, in particular when those issues involve law and public policy, is the primary normative question driving this course. This course devotes time to the question of whether moral values are objective or whether they are culturally determined, thereby looking at differences in moral beliefs across various cultures.

**Course Objectives:**

Objective 1: This course explores ideas that foster intellectual creation in order to understand the human condition. Students will be engaging in a variety of writing assignments. Some of these may include assignments in which they will be asked to discuss and/or apply moral theories to contemporary moral dilemmas. These assignments fulfill this component objective, as students will think through the relevance of moral values to humanity resulting in variety of written projects.

Objective 2: Courses in this category of the Core Curriculum focus on how ideas, values, beliefs, and other aspects of culture express and affect human experience. Students will be introduced to the different moral perspectives of different cultures on a variety of moral issues (such as euthanasia and animal ethics). Students will be required to express in written form what are the implications of the pluralistic variety of moral beliefs for the treatment of particular issues.

Objective 3: Students will be introduced to the various ways in which moral issues affect and are affected by law and public policy and as a result have a variety of social implications. Students

will be required to demonstrate awareness of these implications by developing responses to items in the news that pose moral issues.

### **Skill Objectives:**

**Critical thinking:** Students will be introduced to basic logic in the context of constructing and evaluating philosophical arguments. Their own philosophical arguments will be evaluated in short writing assignments in the course. Students will be asked to identify contemporary moral dilemmas in news outlets and apply moral theories from the course to resolve the dilemma. Some writing assignments for the course will require the students to analyze philosophical arguments presented in the course text, prior to discussion of these arguments to foster a student's ability to think critically about what they have read prior to explicit instruction.

**Communication skills:** This is a writing enhanced course which means at least 50% of a student's grade must come from writing assignments over course material. There are a variety of writing assignments in PHIL 2306W, and assignments are evaluated on clarity and the quality of their reasoning. Clear writing will be writing that effectively communicates what the student intends to convey to her audience. Class discussions are designed to foster a community of inquiry through careful and critical statement of positions and through interaction with fellow students in a way that is caring and helps to clarify the positions of others.

**Personal responsibility:** Students will be required to write papers and contribute to discussions in which they develop arguments in favor of their moral perspectives. Being able to do this successfully will require students to think through the ethical implications of their moral beliefs and actions.

**Social responsibility:** Students will be asked to evaluate the morality of practices that have political and social dimensions (such as, for example, gun control and capital punishment). Students will be introduced to various cultural perspectives on different moral issues and will be asked to discuss the differences in these perspectives in the context of class discussion.

### **Required Textbook:**

Vaughn L. (2012) Contemporary Moral Arguments: Readings in Ethical Issues, Second Edition, New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN: 0199922268

Other reading selections will be made available through our course page.

### **Office Hours and Appointments:**

It is important that students feel comfortable to meet with me outside of class time about any issue pertaining to the course. The easiest way to arrange a meeting is to let me know that you are coming by is sending an email. You may, of course, just stop by my office hours. I will be logged on and available for Virtual Office Hours at the same time as my scheduled face-to-face office hours. This is often the best way to resolve a complicated issue because we can talk through it in real time. Should students choose to contact me by e-mail or through the Virtual Office Hours, they are asked to remember to use appropriate etiquette. If my posted office hours conflict with your availability we can always arrange to meet at a time that works for you. I occasionally have will hold virtual office hours later in the evening, particularly if there is a request to do so. Having a phone conversation is often the easiest to schedule a conversation for

hours outside of the posted office hours. If you would like to schedule a phone call please send me a number where you can be reached and times when you will be available to take my call. I check my email only once a day and do not check the course page outside of business hours, on the weekends, or during holidays.

### **Grading Policy:**

It is also important that you feel comfortable asking questions about the grades I assign to your work. You should feel free to discuss with me any issues you have about graded materials, but are encouraged to first take a close look at the details of the assignment, the comments I have provided, and reread what you wrote. If you would like to discuss your grade you are encouraged to arrange a meeting with me to do so, either virtually, in person, or telephonically.

### **Grading:**

Exam #1: 20%

Exam #2: 20%

Short Critical Reflection Paper: 15%

Long Critical Reflection Paper: 25%

Discussion Board Research and Participation: 20%

### **Grading Scale:**

A 90-100%

B 80-89%

C 70-79%

D 60-69%

F Below 60%

### **Writing Enhanced:**

This is a “W” course, which means that a minimum of 50 percent of your course grade must derive from writing activities designed to help you master course objectives. This class meets this requirement as the Discussion Board and the two Critical Reflection Papers account for 60 percent of the grade and there is also writing required for the short answer and essay portions of the exams. Some writing activities will require you to draft and revise your work, with or without instructor feedback. You should approach writing in this course as a tool to use as part of your learning as well as a tool your instructor will use to assess your level of learning. This course satisfies the requirements for being listed as “writing enhanced” by providing all students with the opportunity to receive feedback on drafts of the Critical Reflection papers, and because the Discussion boards allow students an ongoing place to practice clarifying and making good written arguments as well as to receive low-stakes feedback from their peers - to which they may respond. The writing skills that are developed on the Discussion Board, along with the opportunity to incorporate feedback from the instructor and from fellow students, are then deployed in the creation of the two Critical Reflection Papers for the course.

### **Academic Integrity:**

I am passionate about the prevention of cheating on all assignments, and it is a point of emphasis for online educators in particular. I have many procedures and techniques in place to ensure that it is more profitable to spend the time learning the material than it is to spend time trying to beat

the system. For the Critical Response papers we will be using the Turnitin software. I have several other methods that identify disingenuous effort. If you play by the rules you will not even notice that these things are there. Be assured that the best way to get a good grade is to do the work: complete the readings, watch the lectures, spend time in discussion with your fellow classmates, and work on the study guide until the material falls out of your memory on prompting. I am confident that if you do these things you will find this course intellectually stimulating and that you will be satisfied with the rewards of your effort. If you cheat however, I highly doubt you will enjoy the course and you can expect an F in the course if you submit a plagiarized assignment. It is also worth noting that Blackboard tracks everything you do in the course, including the amount of time you spend watching lectures and how often you log in. I sincerely want you to succeed in this course and am not without sympathy or understanding. If you feel that you have run out of time or for some other reason feel compelled to submit plagiarized work - DONT. Contact me and we will work something out.

### ***Explanation of Assignments***

#### **Exams:**

There are two exams. Their content will be derived from both the lectures and the assigned readings. Most of the questions will be in multiple-choice format. There will also be some short answer and essay at the end. The potential topics of the essay questions will be distributed along with a general study guide a few days before the exam. Study groups are encouraged and online collaboration events will be organized. The exams will be administered within the date-range specified in the "Course Schedule". (20% of final grade for each)

#### **Critical Reflection Papers:**

Students will write two critical reflection papers, one short paper (750-1000 words, about 3-4 pages) and one longer (1250-1500 words, about 5-7 pages). More information will be provided on these essays on the course website. These essays exemplify the objectives of the course by requiring both understanding of ethical theory and application to a specific contemporary moral issue. The choice of the issue and the relevant ethical theories is left to the discretion of the student. A good Critical Reflection Paper demonstrates that you have considered many objections and alternatives to the position that you are putting forth, and that you have tried to address potential criticisms. The crafting of the paper as well as the gathering of the research will be an ongoing project and should be seen as a culmination of your work in the course and a chance to do serious academic research on a topic of great interest to you. I will gladly look at drafts at any time along the process up until 3 days before the assignment is due. The due dates for these assignments are listed on the course schedule. Papers will be uploaded to turnitin.com. (Short paper is 15% of final grade and the Long paper is worth is 25%)

#### **Discussion Board Research and Participation:**

You must make two posts on the discussion board for each of the 12 sessions of the course. 20% of your final grade comes from these posts. Your two lowest scoring sessions will be dropped leaving 10 sessions worth 2pts apiece and adding up to 20pts. The 20 points equal the 20% of the final grade that comes from the Discussion Board.

There are two kinds of posts. The first are called *Research* posts, and the second are called *Participation* posts. One of each is required for each session and both have unique

requirements. Research posts provide a link to an article about a contemporary moral issue and an explanation and critical assessment of the article. These are often from academic journals, newspapers and magazines. Participation posts require you to respond to a Research post you find interesting and to connect the post to an ethical theory from the assigned readings and lectures. High quality and respectful discourse is expected in order to receive full credit. Each post is worth up to one point. Partial credit will be given (.5 points for example) and not every post will receive a grade (for instance, if you are not advancing the discussion or if you are disrespectful). 20% of the course's final grade comes from the 20 possible points for the Discussion Board. Successful participation on the Discussion Board is necessary for overall success in the class. Points accumulated over the possible 20 points are Extra Credit and are applied to test grades. A detailed explanation is below, but if you still have questions check out the "Explanations of Assignments" section of our course page.

#### *Research Posts:*

Identify, explain and critically assess an article on one of the available contemporary moral issues. Provide a paragraph summarizing the article, and a paragraph providing commentary on the article that includes an argument where you take a side on the issue and provide reasons to support it. The subject of the articles may be on any of the assigned discussion topics for the course, as well as any of the approved discussion topics. (See list of topics in the schedule)

a. If you use a news story as your source, you can use any legitimate and unbiased source of news. This includes newspapers, magazine articles, online videos, or anything that is reporting on specific facts and events. This does not include personal blogs, or stories about stories. If you find something that you would like to discuss from a non-traditional news source that is ok, just track down the original report or news story that the blog or whatever is discussing and use that as your source.

b. If you use an academic journal article as your source you can use any in the field of philosophy, ethics, law or medicine – or any article that has a philosophical argument. Articles from academic journals will be looked on more favorably as they are often more complex and take more work to read and summarize.

c. What to avoid - Research posts are where you present hard evidence for consideration. Consequently, try and avoid citing other people's opinions as though they were hard data. It is more than ok to cite someone's opinion, particularly if that opinion comes with an argument to back up the opinion, but if there are facts being discussed try and track down the source where those facts were presented and use that as the primary basis for your post. You can add in links to the opinion piece within your discussion of the issue. I recommend avoiding blogs with an agenda and clearly biased websites, as the source of the information they are reporting is often tough to track down. If you do want to use a politically motivated source then make sure that you find the citation for the information that they are using. This is one of the reasons academic articles are the safest avenues for acquiring your research as they often provide detailed citations.

#### *Participation Posts:*

This is where you engage with your fellow classmates in philosophical inquiry and conversation. You can agree, disagree, clarify, take further, expand upon, or in some way comment on the position that another classmate has made. The Research Posts serve as the starting point for discussions, and the Participation Posts are where the actual philosophical conversation happens. This is also where the readings and lecture material intersect with the discussion board. The

readings and lectures serve as the reference point for the discussions and must be incorporated into your Participation posts to receive full credit for them. There are two components of what makes a good participation post. The first is connecting it to the course material, and the second is advancing the argument in some way.

a. The main requirement is that you connect your commentary to Ethical Theory from the readings and lectures in some way. As the course starts you will likely only have a few ethical theories in your arsenal, but the further we go the more you will have to pull from. Other than connecting your response to ethical theory there are many different shapes your response can take. For instance, you can criticize or praise a specific virtue of their argument, identify unquestioned assumptions or biases, or provide critical commentary on the issue that has yet to be touched on.

b. Whatever form your commentary takes it is imperative that you explain the reasons for your stance, and show how those reasons are supported by ethical theory. Learning to propose, defend, or revise an argument using critical thinking and ethical theory is a major component of the intention of the course's design. The Discussion Boards are small scale practice sessions for this skill, and the Critical Response Papers are where you do a larger scale demonstration of your ability to make a connection between moral debates and ethical theory. Remember to always use philosophical justifications and responsible discourse. Thoughtful and reasoned questions and comments are crucial to the evolving ongoing discussions and philosophical inquiry that will occur in this course. Despite its virtual status, this is a seminar-like class where the discussion among the students is important to the value of the class itself.

The work done on the discussion board is meant to serve as the foundation for your Critical Reflection Papers. They are a place to try out an argument and to see if others have criticisms or ways to look at the situation that you have not yet thought of. All articles and their discussion threads will be left open throughout the semester for you to read and continue to engage in discussion. **Extra Credit** can be earned by providing extra discussion posts other than the two posts required per section. Extra credit points will be applied to the grades on the midterm and final exams. The max number of points that you can earn in any one particular discussion board topic (for instance genetic engineering or capital punishment) over the course of the semester is 5. Up to 10 extra credits points are possible to be applied to each exam.

### ***Tentative Schedule***

All of the readings are from the textbook unless it is indicated otherwise. In those cases supplementary readings will be posted through Blackboard. Please keep in mind this is not a final reading schedule; changes may be incorporated during the semester and will be announced on the course page. Most sessions are one week long, but a few are two weeks long if there is a holiday. Sessions end on Sunday night and new sessions become available after midnight. It is incumbent on you to keep abreast of any changes to the syllabus that might occur as we go along.

**Session One:** *August 23rd – September 3rd*

Lecture Topics:

What is Moral Philosophy?

Why be Moral?

Readings:

Moral Reasoning – pp 1-9

Plato – *Ring of Gyges* pp 26-30

James Rachels – *Can Ethics Provide Answers* pp 44-60

New Discussion Topics Available:

Performance Enhancing Drugs in Sports

Same-Sex Marriage, LGBTQ issues, Sex and Love

Gun Control

**Session Two: September 4th -10th**

Lecture Topics:

Utilitarianism

Ethical Relativism

Readings:

John Stuart Mill – *Utilitarianism* pp 81-84

Louis Pojman – *The Case Against Moral Relativism* pp 31-43

New Discussion Topics Available:

Environmental Ethics

Animal Ethics

Right of Free Speech, Right of Assembly, Free Exercise of Religion

**Session Three: September 11th -17th**

Lecture Topics:

Virtue Ethics

Epicureanism and Stoicism

Readings:

Aristotle - *Nicomachean Ethics* pp 94-101

Epicurus - *Epicurean Ethics* (available on blackboard)

New Discussion Topics Available:

Education

Labor Ethics

Business Ethics

**Session Four: September 18th -24th**

Lecture Topics:

Kantian Ethics

Rawlsian Ethics

Readings:

Immanuel Kant – *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals* pp 85-93

John Rawls – *A Theory of Justice* pp 102-107

New Discussion Topics Available:

Immigration  
The Prison System  
Racial Injustice

**Session Five: September 25th – October 1st**

Lecture Topics:

Liberty and Libertarianism

Readings:

John Hospers – *What Libertarianism Is* pp 252-261  
John Stuart Mill – *On Liberty* pp 474-478

New Discussion Topics Available:

Privacy Rights vs National Security

**Midterm Exam**

**Available Thursday, September 28th at noon**

**Due Friday September 29th at 10:00pm**

**Session Six: October 2nd – 8th**

Lecture Topics:

Legalization of Drugs  
Pragmatic Ethics

Readings:

James Q. Wilson – *Against the Legalization of Drugs*, pp 224-232  
Douglas N. Husak - *A Moral Right to Use Drugs*, pp 233-240  
Richard Rorty – “*An Ethics for Today*” (available on Blackboard)

New Discussion Topics Available:

Legalization of Drugs

**Session Seven: October 9th - 15th**

Lecture Topics:

Economic Justice – Global Obligations  
Emmanuel Levinas and the “ethics of the face”

Readings:

Garrett Hardin – *Living on a Lifeboat*, pp 662-672  
Peter Singer – *Famine Affluence, and Morality*, pp 683-689

New Discussion Topics Available:

Property, Poverty and Wealth Distribution

**Session Eight:** *October 16th -29th*

Lecture Topics:

War, Terrorism and Torture

Thomas Hobbes and Psychological Egoism

Readings:

Douglas P. Lackey – *Pacifism*, pp 406-412

Michael Walzer – *Terrorism: A Critique of Excuses*, pp 440-445

Alan Dershowitz – *The Case for Torturing the Ticking Bomb Terrorist*, pp 458-466

New Discussion Topics Available:

War, Terrorism and Torture

**First Critical Response Paper Due Monday, October 23rd at 10pm**

**Session Nine:** *October 30th – November 5th*

Lecture Topics:

The Death Penalty

Readings:

Immanuel Kant – *The Right of Punishing*, pp 354-355

Igor Primoratz – *A Life for a Life*, pp 356-361

Bryan Stevenson – *Capital Punishment and the Legacy of Racial Bias in America*, pp 377-379

New Discussion Topics Available:

The Death Penalty/Capital Punishment

**Session Ten:** *November 6th – 12th*

Lecture Topics:

Genetic Engineering and Cloning

Existential Ethics

Readings:

Dan W. Brock – *Cloning Human Beings: An Assessment of the Ethical Issues*, pp 335-343

Walter Glannon – *Genetic Enhancement*, pp 329-333

Soren Holm – *A Life in the Shadow*, pp 344-346

Jean Paul Sartre – *Existentialism is a Humanism* (Available on Blackboard)

New Discussion Topics Available:

Cloning and Genetic Modification

**Session Eleven:** *November 13th – 19th*

Lecture Topics:

Economic Justice - Healthcare

Readings:

Normal Daniels – *Is There a Right to Health Care and, if so, What Does It Encompass?*, pp 550-556

Carl Cohen et al – *Alcoholics and Liver Transplantation*, pp 566-570

Allen Buchanan – *The Right to a Decent Minimum of Care*, pp 557-559

New Discussion Topics Available:

Healthcare

**Second Critical Response Paper Due Monday, November 20th at 10:00pm**

**Session Twelve:** *Nov 20th – December 1st*

Lecture Topics:

Euthanasia

William James

Readings:

Ronald Dworkin et al – *The Philosophers' Brief*, pp 270-277

Dan W. Brock – *Voluntary Active Euthanasia*, pp 303-312

William James – *The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life* (available on Blackboard)

New Discussion Topics Available:

Euthanasia

**Final Exam – Available Tuesday, December 5th at noon and closes Wednesday, December 6th at 10pm**

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Institutional policies and requirements regarding Q-drops, dates of religious observance, academic dishonesty, disabilities accommodations, etc., may be found at the following link: <http://www.shsu.edu/syllabus/> Please familiarize yourself with the policies.

STANDARD POLICIES: I have extracted from the full statement a key element as a reminder of the policy in its entirety, but the student must download the posting on SHSU Online to have the full policy statement. Here are the four points of particular note:

(1) NOTICE TO PERSONS WITH A DISABILITY: No accommodation can be made until you register with the Counseling Center. There will be no retroactive accommodations.

(2) ACADEMIC DISHONESTY: Any student found guilty of dishonesty in any phase of academic work will be subject to disciplinary action.

(3) CLASSROOM RULES OF CONDUCT: Students are expected to assist in maintaining a classroom environment that is conducive to learning.

(4) COURSE EVALUATIONS: In accordance with University policy, students will have an opportunity near the end of the semester on a set day and time to complete a course evaluation.