

Philosophy of Crime and Justice

PHIL 4380/CRIJ 4377

Instructor: Dr. Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin

Time: MWF 10:00am-10:50am

Location: CJ A201

Office hours: W 11:00am-1:00pm, and by appointment

Office: CHSS 356

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Course description: This course will focus on philosophical questions about the justification of punishment and the nature of the US criminal justice system. We don't think that the state is justified in locking up people who don't break the law. So why do we accept that the state is justified in locking up people who do break the law? What, if any, moral principles justify this difference in treatment? And are we willing to apply these moral principles more generally to issues of right and wrong? Does the criminal justice system, in practice, conform to the principles that purportedly justify it? What has guided the design and implementation of the criminal justice system in our country? Are these principles and practices morally justifiable? Are there different principles and practices that should guide the system going forward?

Our task is to think critically about various issues related to crime and justice in our society and arrive at informed opinions about them. This can take the form of arriving at a better understanding of why you hold the views that you do, or it can take the form of changing your mind and adopting new views. Either way, the goal is to be able to better articulate and defend your opinions on these matters. Our course readings, discussions, and assignments are all designed to facilitate critical reflection towards this end.

Course objectives

1. Develop and improve our ability to analyze and critically evaluate philosophical arguments in support of and/or against positions on issues related to the justification of punishment and the design and implementation of the US criminal justice system.
2. Develop and improve our skills of oral and written expression.
3. Familiarize ourselves with some prominent moral theories.

Texts: There are two **required** books for the course:

1. Boonin, David. *The Problem of Punishment*. Cambridge University Press, 2008. 978-0521709613

2. Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow*. The New Press, 2012 (2nd Ed). 978-1595586438

These books are available for purchase at the SHSU bookstore, and they are available for purchase online.

Other assigned readings will be posted to the Blackboard site for the course (under the Course Readings tab) or distributed in class.

You **must** have a copy of each book and assigned reading, and you **must** bring it with you to class on the relevant days (per the *Schedule*, below).

Policies

Class time is for discussion of course material. Our discussion will take several formats, including but not limited to: lecture, informal class discussion, and small group work.

Some of the topics covered in the readings and in class discussion may be sensitive and some of the positions controversial. Our discussion of these issues will always reflect an awareness of the diversity of viewpoints that merit serious and respectful consideration by all. Anyone who repeatedly fails to adhere to norms of respectful discussion and debate between peers will be asked to leave class, with the absence marked as unexcused.

Attendance is essential and required in order to do well in the course. *If you miss class for any reason, please make sure to ask your fellow classmates or the instructor for notes for the day(s) you missed.* If you plan on missing a significant portion of the class meetings, then this course is not for you.

Please keep all cell phones in your bags or pockets. Anyone using a phone during class will be asked to put it away. Repeated failure to keep your phone out of sight and not in use will result in being asked to leave class, with the absence marked as unexcused.

Laptops or tablets may be used *for note taking and reference to reading assignments only*. Repeated misuse of computers or other devices in class will result in being asked to leave class, with the absence marked as unexcused.

I will not accept late assignments. To repeat: *No late assignments will be accepted in this course.* Once again: **You cannot receive credit for late work.** If you plan on missing class on a day an assignment is due, please turn it in early. *I will always accept assignments prior to the due date, provided we have already begun covering the relevant material in class.* If you plan on being sick around the time an assignment is due, complete it and turn it in early. If you plan on going on vacation around the time an assignment is due, complete it and turn it in early. If you plan on visiting your family around the time an

assignment is due, complete it and turn it in early. If you plan on sleeping in on a day an assignment is due, complete it and turn it in early. If you plan on caring for a sick friend on a day an assignment is due, complete it and turn it in early. ... You get the idea. **NO LATE ASSIGNMENTS WILL BE ACCEPTED.**

Academic integrity is a serious matter and will be taken seriously in this course. I am committed to helping you learn how to do your own quality work, and I am happy to answer any and all questions regarding issues including, but not limited to, citation norms, research best practices, and plagiarism. *Plagiarism in any form will not be permitted and will result in a zero for the plagiarized assignment.* Especially egregious cases may be forwarded to the Dean of Students for possible university sanctions.

For further information about university policies regarding academic integrity, absences for religious holidays, disability accommodations and visitors, please see: <http://www.shsu.edu/syllabus/>. This course will follow all applicable university policy on these matters.

Assignments and grades

The *reading for the course is mandatory* and should be completed by the beginning of class on the assigned day. The reading assignments for each day of class are listed on the *Schedule*, below. If you plan on skipping the assigned readings, this course is not for you.

There are four kinds of graded assignment for the course.

1. *In-class writing assignments*: These will be assigned periodically throughout the term and graded on a credit/no credit basis. They will range from brainstorming exercises to get the juices flowing to short answer responses to essay preparation exercises. One function of these assignments is to take attendance; there will be no make-ups. (Absences may be excused with proper documentation only, and in this case your final grade will reflect your scores on assignments due on days when you did not have an excused absence.)
2. *Reading write-ups*: You will write 12 one-page write-ups on the course readings throughout the term (see the *Schedule* for specific due dates). These will be graded for both content and presentation. You will receive detailed assignment and grading rubrics, as well as a template prior to the first assigned write-up. Your write-up *must* adhere to the template, or else it will not be accepted. Your two lowest scores will be dropped from your overall course grade. (A missed assignment will count as a zero, and thus be one of your lowest scores.)
3. *Final essay*: You will write a 7-10 page paper arguing for a specific thesis related to one of the two units covered in the course: (a) the justification of punishment or (b) the design and implementation of the criminal justice system. Your essay will defend a specific claim, consider at least one

objection to your position, and offer at least one response to the objection(s). You will receive detailed assignment and grading rubrics before the final week of the term. This paper will be turned in electronically to the Turnitin dropbox on the course site by the due date on the *Schedule*.

Course grades will be based on the following percentages.

20% In-class writing assignments
50% Reading write-ups
30% Final essay

Schedule

Week 1

Wed., Aug. 23: Course introduction

Fri., Aug. 25: Crime and Punishment (readings distributed in class)

Week 2

Mon., Aug. 28: In-class debate

Wed., Aug. 30: Boonin, pp. 1-6 and 23-28

Fri., Sept. 1: Boonin, pp. 28-29 and 34-36

Week 3

Mon., Sept. 4: **Holiday**

Wed., Sept. 6: Boonin, pp. 37-62
Reading write-up 1 due

Fri., Sept. 8: Boonin, pp. 37-62
12th Class Day

Week 4

Mon., Sept. 11: Boonin, pp. 62-77

Wed., Sept. 13: Boonin, pp. 62-77
Reading write-up 2 due

Fri., Sept. 15: Boonin, pp. 77-84

Week 5

Mon., Sept. 18: Boonin, pp. 85-103

Wed., Sept. 20: Boonin, pp. 85-103
Reading write-up 3 due

Fri., Sept. 22: No new reading

Week 6

Mon., Sept. 25: Boonin, pp. 103-119

Wed., Sept. 27: Boonin, pp. 103-119
Reading write-up 4 due

Fri., Sept. 29: Boonin, pp. 119-143

Week 7

Mon., Oct. 2: Boonin, pp. 119-143

Wed., Oct. 4: Boonin, pp. 143-154
Reading write-up 5 due

Fri. Oct. 6: Boonin, pp. 213-224

Week 8

Mon., Oct. 9: Boonin, pp. 269-275

Wed., Oct. 11: Black, “What’s Wrong with the Right People” (on Blackboard)
Reading write-up 6 due

Fri., Oct. 13: Alexander, Introduction

Week 9

Mon., Oct. 16: Alexander, Ch. 1

Wed., Oct. 18: Alexander, Ch. 1
Reading write-up 7 due

Fri., Oct. 20: Alexander, Ch. 1

Week 10

Mon., Oct. 23: Alexander, Ch. 2

Wed., Oct. 25: Alexander, Ch. 2
Reading write-up 8 due

Fri., Oct. 27: Alexander, Ch. 2

Week 11

Mon., Oct. 30: Alexander, Ch. 3

Wed., Nov. 1: Alexander, Ch. 3
Reading write-up 9 due

Fri., Nov. 3: Alexander, Ch. 3

Week 12

Mon., Nov. 6: Alexander, Ch. 4

Wed., Nov. 8: Alexander, Ch. 4
Reading write-up 10 due

Fri., Nov. 10: Alexander, Ch. 4
“Q” drop deadline

Week 13

Mon., Nov. 13: Alexander, Ch. 5

Wed., Nov. 15: Alexander, Ch. 5
Reading write-up 11 due

Fri., Nov. 17: Alexander, Ch. 5

Week 14

Mon., Nov. 20: Alexander, Ch. 6

Wed., Nov. 22: **Holiday**

Fri., Nov. 24: **Holiday**

Week 15

Mon., Nov. 27: Alexander, Ch. 6
Reading write-up 12 due

Wed., Nov. 29: Alexander, Ch. 6

Fri., Dec. 1: Final Essay Workshop

Final Essay Due: Mon., Dec. 4 (by 10:30am)