

Contemporary Moral Issues

Phil 2306-02

Instructor: Dr. Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin

Time: MWF 1:00-1:50pm

Location: CHSS 220

Office hours: W 2:00-4:00pm, and by appointment

Office: CHSS 356

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Course description

This course offers an introduction to several prominent moral theories and the opportunity to examine several thorny, contemporary moral issues in light of them. We will learn about three views of what makes an action right or wrong: utilitarianism, contractualism and virtue theory. Then we will consider whether it is right or wrong to (1) pursue life extension, (2) incarcerate criminals and (3) seek or deny reparations for African Americans. Throughout the term, each student will have the opportunity to share independent research, write a position paper and participate in a debate.

Course objectives

1. Develop and improve our ability to analyze and critically evaluate arguments in support of ethically significant positions of contemporary interest.
2. Develop and improve our skills of oral and written expression.
3. Develop and improve our research skills.

Texts: There are *no books to purchase* for the course. Core course readings are already posted on Blackboard, and supplementary readings will be distributed throughout the term.

All reading assignments are detailed on the course schedule, below. *You must have the texts with you in class on the day for which the reading is assigned.*

Policies

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

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.

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.

No late assignments will be accepted. ALL ASSIGNMENTS MUST BE TURNED IN BY THE DUE DATE/TIME LISTED ON THE COURSE SCHEDULE, BELOW.

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

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.

There are four kinds of graded assignments for the course.

1. *Quiz*: This will be a check-up, early in the term, to make sure that everyone has a basic grounding in moral theories and course procedures. The quiz date is on the schedule, below.
2. *In-class writing assignments*: These will be assigned periodically throughout the term. They will range from brainstorming exercises to get the juices flowing to short answer responses to essay and debate 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).

3. *Supplementary reading write-ups*: You will find *two* outside readings and provide a one-paragraph write-up to the class for each one. These write-ups are due by the beginning of class on the due date in the schedule, below, and you must provide typed copies of your write-ups for each member of the class, including the instructor.
4. *Debate participation*: You will participate in a 50-minute in-class debate on one of the course topics. Participation may take the form of verbal discussion, background research, team debate preparation, and more.
5. *Position paper*: You will write a 4-5 page paper arguing for a specific thesis related to one of the topics covered in the three units in the course. This paper will make use of core and supplementary course readings, and no other sources, to advance a position related to one of the debates. The paper will be turned in electronically to the Turnitin dropbox on the course site by the beginning of class on the due date.

The class will be split into *three teams*: Team A, Team B and Team C. For each of the three units in the course, one team will be assigned to supplementary readings, one to the debate and one to produce position papers. We will determine these teams and the schedule around the time of the quiz. Team-specific assignments are on the schedule, below. *All assignments are due by the beginning of class on the day for which they are listed. No late assignments will be accepted.*

Course grades are based on the following percentages.

- 10% Quiz
- 20% In-class writing assignments
- 20% Supplementary reading write-ups
- 20% Debate participation
- 30% Position paper

This course satisfies the requirements for being listed as “writing enhanced” by providing you with the opportunity to write as a means to thinking critically about the material and to receive regular feedback on your writing. There will be three types of writing assignment: in-class writing assignments, supplementary reading write-ups and position papers. The in-class writing assignments will provide opportunities for various means of low-stakes writing to learn; the write-ups will provide opportunities to practice the specific skill of writing to summarize and synthesize your research. In addition to your grade, you will receive substantive feedback from the instructor on your position papers. We will also hold in-class paper workshops prior to the due dates for the papers, allowing you to incorporate feedback from the instructor and your classmates when completing them. Evaluation of your written work will account for 70% of your final grade.

Schedule

Unit 1: Three Moral Theories

Wed., Jan. 17: Course introduction

Fri., Jan. 19: What is a moral theory? (no assigned reading)

Mon., Jan. 22: Mill, “What Utilitarianism Is”

Wed., Jan. 24: Mill, “What Utilitarianism Is”

Fri., Jan. 26: Southwood, “Moral Contractualism”

Mon., Jan. 29: Southwood, “Moral Contractualism”

Wed., Jan. 31: Hursthouse, “Virtue theory”

(Thurs., Feb. 1: 12th class day; last day for drop with 100% refund and no “Q” grade)

Fri., Feb. 2: Hursthouse, “Virtue theory”

Mon., Feb. 5: **Quiz**

Unit 2: Life Extension

Wed., Feb. 7: Weiner, Ch. 2 from *Long for this World*

Fri., Feb. 9: Aubrey de Grey, “Demystifying Aging”

Mon., Feb. 12: Kass, [“L’Chaim and Its Limits: Why Not Immortality?”](#)

Wed., Feb. 14: Kass, [“L’Chaim and Its Limits: Why Not Immortality?”](#)

Fri., Feb. 16: Fischer, “Why Immortality Is Not So Bad”

Mon., Feb. 19: Davis, “Collective Suttie”

Wed., Feb. 21: *Discuss supplementary readings*

Team A supplementary reading write-ups due

Fri., Feb. 23: *Discuss supplementary readings*

Mon., Feb. 26: *Discuss supplementary readings*

Wed., Feb. 28: *Debate prep/Paper workshop*

Fri., Mar. 2: *First Debate*

Team B position papers due

Team C Debate

Unit 2: Punishment

Mon., Mar. 5: Boonin, Selection 1

Wed., Mar. 7: Boonin, Selection 2

Fri., Mar. 9: Boonin, Selection 3

Mon., Mar. 12: **No class**

Wed., Mar. 14: **No class**

Fri., Mar. 16: **No class**

Mon., Mar. 19: Short film (no assigned reading)

Wed., Mar. 21: Schoeman, “On Incapacitating the Dangerous”

Fri., Mar. 23: Black, “What’s Wrong with the Right People?”

Mon., Mar. 26: *Discuss supplementary readings*

Team B supplementary reading write-ups due

Wed., Mar. 28: *Discuss supplementary readings*

Fri., Mar. 30: **No class**

Mon., Apr. 2: *Discuss supplementary readings*

Wed., Apr. 4: *Debate prep/Paper workshop*

Fri., Apr. 6: *Second Debate*

Team C position papers due

Team A Debate

(Last day to “Q” drop)

Unit 3: Reparations

Mon., Apr. 9: Fields, “Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America”

Wed., Apr. 11: Fields, “Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America”

Fri., Apr. 13: Baldwin, [“Fifth Avenue, Uptown”](#)

Mon., Apr. 16: Coates, ["The Case for Reparations"](#)

Wed., Apr. 18: Coates, ["The Case for Reparations"](#)

Fri., Apr. 20: Frum, ["The Impossibility of Reparations"](#)

Mon., Apr. 23: Williamson, ["The Case Against Reparations"](#)

Wed., Apr. 25: *Discuss supplementary readings*

Team C supplementary reading write-ups due

Fri., Apr. 27: *Discuss supplementary readings*

Mon., Apr. 30: *Discuss supplementary readings*

Wed., May 2: *Debate prep/Paper workshop*

Fri., May 4: *Third Debate*

Team A position papers due

Team B Debate