

# Contemporary Moral Problems

PHL 304: Fall 2019 Syllabus  
MWF 12:00-12:50, Waggener Hall 201

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## Course description

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This class serves as an introduction to ethics by way of critically investigating some of the moral issues we encounter in the world today. The philosophers whose work we will be reading are attempting to provide answers to such questions as, “Is abortion morally permissible?”, “Is it wrong to have children?”, and “Can we hold mentally ill people responsible for their actions?”

Many of the moral problems we will discuss will already be familiar to you, but the methods through which we will engage with them will likely be unfamiliar. Philosophers approach moral problems by providing careful arguments for and against various conclusions, which differs from how politicians, theologians, and pundits might approach the same issues. Our job will be to engage in philosophical discourse with the philosophers whose work we will read, and we will do this by evaluating the strengths of their arguments.

As your instructor, I will not be in the business of trying to convince you of any particular stance on a given issue. Rather, I will be providing you with the tools and the conceptual framework to leave this class with a greater capacity to think critically and systematically about moral issues for yourself.

## Content warning

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Both the assigned readings and the classroom discussions for this course will engage with ideas and topics that are of a mature nature. The moral issues covered may be personal and political, and certain positions we will discuss may be in conflict with some of your most fervently held beliefs. Reading about and discussing these topics may be emotionally challenging for you, and may provoke feelings of discomfort, anxiety, confusion, or even anger. You may have some such emotional response to the readings, or to your classmates’ responses to the readings. We are ALL responsible to do our part in creating a space that is both intellectually rigorous and respectful. It is imperative that we remain respectful to everyone in the class, EVEN and ESPECIALLY when you strongly disagree with what someone is saying.

## Ethics flag

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This course carries the Ethics flag. Ethics courses are designed to equip you with skills that are necessary for making ethical decisions in your adult and professional life. You should therefore expect a substantial portion

of your grade to come from assignments involving ethical issues and the process of applying ethical reasoning to real-life situations.

### **Instructor's email policy**

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Before emailing either myself or the reader, please check both the syllabus and the course's Canvas site to see if the information you are looking for has been provided there. I will usually respond to emails by the next business day, which means that I will not usually reply on the weekends. Please also note that I will rarely respond to student emails late at night, which includes the night before an exam. If you have questions or need to contact me about something, it is important to get in contact with me well ahead of time.

### **Course requirements and grading**

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The graded components for this course are as follows:

Weekly in-class reading quizzes.....	25%
In-class midterm exam on <b>10/9</b> .....	35%
Final exam on <b>12/12</b> .....	40%

- Both the midterm and the final exam will require blue books. They will consist of short answer questions and essay prompts.

### **Grade scale policy**

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A	94-100%	C	73-76%
A-	90-93%	C-	70-72%
B+	87-89%	D+	67-69%
B	83-86%	D	63-66%
B-	80-82%	D-	60-62%
C+	77-79%	F	0-59%

### **Weekly reading quizzes**

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Unless otherwise indicated on the syllabus, there will be a brief reading quiz given AT THE BEGINNING OF CLASS on MONDAYS. The purpose of these quizzes is to ensure that students have completed the assigned reading for that week. The quizzes will be very short, usually 2-3 questions, and will typically involve either fill-in-the blank answers or some similar format. If you have done the weekly reading, these quizzes should be relatively easy to answer, and can serve to provide a “buffer” for your final grade. However, if you do not do the reading, or miss multiple quizzes due to lateness or absence, this will hurt your final grade.

### **Policy on make up quizzes and exams**

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Students will not be allowed to make up quizzes or exams except in cases where the student has provided a substantial excuse and has requisite documentation (such as a doctor's note) of said

excuse. Arriving late to class on a Monday when there is a reading quiz will result in a 0 for that quiz. HOWEVER, I will drop ONE quiz grade for each student at the end of the semester, to allow for up to one unexcused absence.

Since the midterm and the final exams are to be taken either in class or during the scheduled exam period for this course, students should not have other class conflicts with the exam times. This means that the ONLY instances in which a make-up exam will be offered is in cases of a serious, documented medical absence OR for other extenuating circumstances (e.g. family bereavement). In these rare instances, you must contact me ahead of time and provide sufficient documentation.

Please note that travel plans do NOT count as excused absences for either of the exams or for reading quizzes. By continuing to be enrolled in this course, you are agreeing to be present during the times that the class is held and during the scheduled final exam time, and to complete the course requirements in class on the days indicated.

### **Attendance and participation**

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Due to the large class size, I will not be taking attendance, and I will not be keeping track of participation for the purposes of grading. However, the weekly reading quizzes will serve partially as a means to incentivize good attendance. Students with poor attendance patterns invariably end with lower final grades at the end of the semester, so it is in your best interest to come to class.

As for participation, the readings and the ideas we will be grappling with in class will be both thought-provoking and complex. You will do better in this course if you take advantage of our class time together by participating and asking questions, and by talking through and challenging the ideas and questions raised by your peers.

### **Required texts and reading expectations**

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You will not need to purchase a textbook for this course, as I will provide all of the readings for you on the course Canvas site in either PDF or hyperlink form. Each reading listed on the syllabus is required reading. You will be expected to have read the readings listed for a given week BY MONDAY OF THAT WEEK, which is when you will be given a short reading quiz on that week's material.

If you do not keep up with the reading for this course, you will not be able to satisfactorily complete the weekly reading quizzes, and you will struggle a great deal on the midterm and final exams. During class time, I will NOT be focused on summarizing the readings, since I will expect you to have read them. Instead, I will be primarily concerned with helping students engage with the content and ideas from the literature on a deeper level. It is this deep level of engagement with the course content that you will be expected to demonstrate competency with on the midterm and final exams. This means that taking notes, paying attention, and participating in class will be vital for success in the course.

### **Students with disabilities**

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Please notify your instructor of any modification/adaptation you may require to accommodate a

disability-related need. You may find out more information on the Services for Students with Disabilities website: <http://diversity.utexas.edu/disability/> and/or <http://diversity.utexas.edu/disability/how-to-register-with-ssd/>.

### **Policy on scholastic dishonesty**

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This course has a zero-tolerance policy for any form of plagiarism or academic dishonesty. Students who violate University rules on scholastic dishonesty are subject to disciplinary penalties, including the possibility of failure in the course and/or dismissal from the University. If caught engaging in either plagiarism or some other form of academic dishonesty, the HIGHEST possible final grade a student can receive in this class is a C. Since such dishonesty harms the individual, all students and the integrity of the University, policies on scholastic dishonesty will be strictly enforced. For further information, please visit the Office of Student Conduct and Academic Integrity website at <http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/conduct/>.

## **Course Schedule**

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**Week 1 (8/28-8/30):** Introductory discussion and syllabus overview

- No in-class reading quiz this week

***Reading:***

-Shelly Kagan, “Why Study Philosophy?”

**Week 2 (9/4-9/6):** Tools of the trade (no class on Monday, 9/2, for Labor Day)

- In-class reading quiz 1 on 9/4 (since no class on Monday)

***Reading:***

- David Concepcion, modified by Tim Loughrist, “How to read philosophy”

- Joel Feinberg, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau, “A Logic Lesson”

### **Unit 1: Moral issues in society**

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**Week 3 (9/9-9/13):** Ethical subjectivism and cultural relativism

- In-class reading quiz 2 on 9/9

***Reading:***

-Russ Shafer-Landau, “Ethical Subjectivism”

-James Rachels, “The Challenge of Cultural Relativism”

**Week 4 (9/16-9/20):** Introduction to applied ethics; charity and affluence

- In-class reading quiz 3 on 9/16

***Reading:***

-Joel Dittmer, “Applied Ethics” (Introduction and Section 1), from IEP

<https://www.iep.utm.edu/ap-ethic/>

-Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence and Morality”

-Travis Timmerman, “Sometimes there is nothing wrong with letting a child drown”

**Week 5 (9/23-9/27):** The death penalty

- In-class reading quiz 4 on 9/23

***Reading:***

-Louis Pojman, “The Case for the Death Penalty”

-Stephen Nathanson, “Why We Should Put the Death Penalty to Rest”

**Week 6 (9/30-10/4):** Antinatalism

- In-class reading quiz 5 on 9/30

***Reading:***

-David Benetar, “Why it is better never to come into existence”

-Elizabeth Harman, “Critical Study” of David Benetar, *Better Never To Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*

**Week 7 (10/7-10/11):** Review, midterm exam; introduction to bioethics

- No in-class reading quiz this week

-10/7 Review

-10/9 **MIDTERM EXAM IN CLASS**

-10/11 Introduction to bioethics

## Unit 2: Bioethics

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### Week 8 (10/14-10/18): Euthanasia

- In-class reading quiz 6 on 10/14

**Reading:**

- James Rachels, "Active and Passive Euthanasia"
- Susan Wolf, "Confronting Physician-Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia: *My Father's Death*"

### Week 9 (10/21-10/25): Abortion

- In-class reading quiz 7 on 10/21

**Reading:**

- Mary Anne Warren, "On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion"
- Don Marquis, "Why Abortion is Immoral"

### Week 10 (10/28-11/1): Abortion cont.

- In-class reading quiz 8 on 10/28

**Reading:**

- Finish discussion of Marquis (if necessary)
- Judith Jarvis Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion"

### Neuroethics subunit: philosophical issues concerning mental illness

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### Week 11 (11/4-11/8): What is the nature of mental illness?

- In-class reading quiz 9 on 11/4

**Reading:**

- Nomy Arpaly, "How It Is Not 'Just like Diabetes': Mental Disorders and the Moral Psychologist"

- Hanna Pickard, "Why do we need a diagnosis to see mental disorders as real?"

<https://iai.tv/articles/why-do-we-need-a-diagnosis-to-see-mental-disorders-as-real-auid-1067>

### Week 12 (11/11-11/15): Mental illness and moral responsibility

- In-class reading quiz 10 on 11/11

***Reading:***

-Matt King and Joshua May, “Moral responsibility and Mental Illness: A Call for Nuance”

-Hanna Pickard, “Responsibility without blame: thinking about unwise choices in mental health”

<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/philosopherszone/thinking-about-unwise-choices-in-mental-health/6837682>

**Week 13 (11/18-11/22):** Addiction

- In-class reading quiz 11 on 11/18

***Reading:***

-Hanna Pickard, “The Outsider”

<https://aeon.co/essays/is-the-addict-a-depraved-criminal-or-a-suffering-soul>

-Hanna Pickard, “Hanna Pickard on Berridge and Wakefield” from *Neuroethics Symposium*

<http://philosophyofbrains.com/2017/03/30/neuroethics-symposium-special-issue-on-the-biology-of-desire-by-marc-lewis.aspx>

**Week 14 (11/25-11/29):** CLASS CANCELLED on 11/25, followed by Thanksgiving Break (no class or office hours held this week)

**Week 15 (12/2-12/6):** Class choice for final topic, final exam review

- No in-class reading quiz this week
- 12/2-12/4 Reading TBD—to be chosen by the class
- 12/6 Final discussion and first review day

**Week 16 (12/9-12/12):** Review and final exam

-12/9 Second review day

-12/12 **FINAL EXAM** on 12/12 at 9am (location TBD)