

PHIL-252

CONTEMPORARY MORAL

PROBLEMS

INSTRUCTOR:

Dario Vaccaro [IPA: darjo vak'karo, but don't worry if you can't pronounce it]

Office Hours:

Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11-12, McClung Tower, 8th Floor, 801A

MEETING TIME/PLACE:

Time: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 12:55-2:10 pm.

Our first meeting will be on August 20th; our last meeting will be on December 3rd.

Place: Perkins Hall - Room 212

OVERVIEW OF THE COURSE:

In this course, we will explore major disputed issues in contemporary applied ethics and some of the underlying ethical frameworks at play in the philosophical arguments we will read about. The moral problems we will deal with will be selected by the students during the first week of class among the following options:

Sex, Freedom of Speech, Drugs, Racism, The Ethics of Immigration, Euthanasia, Abortion, Emerging Technology, Guns, The Death Penalty, War and Terrorism, Global Poverty, The Ethical Treatment of Animals, Climate Change.

Along the way, we will refine our argumentative skills, we will learn to write philosophically, and, hopefully, we will find some clarity - if not some answers - for these difficult matters.

We will have 28 meetings, with each class being 1 hour and 15 minutes long. Each class will broadly look as follows:

- I will introduce the topic of the day.
- We will discuss the matter together.
- Any remaining time will be devoted to helping you prepare for your take-home assignments, when present.

TEXTBOOK:

All the materials will be available on the required textbook, available to you through Inclusive Access. This semester, I have adopted the following text:

Disputed Moral Issues - A Reader

M. Timmons & J. Glasgow

Sixth Edition (2024)¹

Oxford University Press

This selection seems to me to excellently encompass some of the most important debates in ethics and, importantly, helps students notice the theoretical assumptions behind (at least some of) the arguments we will engage with. We will not read the entire book, but we will read extensive sections of it and *all* the material for the course (including your writing prompts) will be found within it.

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADES:

PHIL-252 is a writing-centered course. The minimum requirement for all PHIL-252 courses is a total of 5000 written words per student. We will roughly stick to the minimum requirement. For this reason, you will write a *very short* (approximately 250 words each) piece every time we read a full article for class. I will give you some time to complete the writing piece *in class*, after my introduction and our discussion. The idea is that you will be able to use the notions you learned and the comments people made during discussion to formulate in writing your answers. I will provide some prompts for you to answer, which you will also be able to find at the end of each reading on our textbook, *Disputed Moral Issues* (6th Edition).

The written piece is graded along three main dimensions:

- **UNDERSTANDING:** Did the student understand the philosophical argument we read about?

¹ This is *very* important, as the readings and prompts vary depending on the edition.

- ACCURACY: Did the student make true factual claims? This can include empirical claims (“More than 50% of Americans make use of drugs”) and philosophical claims (“Utilitarianism claims that we ought to maximize overall happiness”).
- LOGIC: When the student provides their own argument/opinion, do they commit *glaring*² logical fallacies?

Your daily written text will be due by 11:59 pm of the same day, in case you want to continue working on it after class. As I already mentioned, this should not be necessary, as we will spend ample time in class working on it. I will normally have your writings graded by our next meeting, so that you can regularly track how you are doing throughout the course.

The average grade of your writings will constitute 50% of your overall grade.

I will drop at least two of the worst grades you get on your writings at the end of the course.

Additionally, you will receive a grade on your active participation in class. While it is blatantly false that there are no bad contributions to a philosophical conversation, do feel free to ask any clarifying questions, including seemingly “basic” ones, and do feel free to oppose *any* views you deem incorrect, even when you may fear you will sound like a “bad person” for saying what your peers disagree with. We are here to reflect on what “good” and “bad” are, not to judge anyone for having opinions different than our own. Since I said that there *are* bad ways to contribute, here are some examples of both kinds.

GOOD PARTICIPATION:

“Wait, I don’t understand what the point of this discussion even is!”

“I think/don’t think this topic is important *because*...”

“Are there any philosophers who claim that...?”

“What does this word mean in this context?”

“What could be an objection to this view?”

“I think this is right/wrong *because*...”

BAD PARTICIPATION:

- Repeating someone else’s comment just to get the participation done with

² Everyone (including professional philosophers) commits logical fallacies sometimes. Sometimes, it is even a contentious matter whether a logical move is fallacious or not. Therefore, I will only penalize obvious logical fallacies.

- Attacking someone personally (the so-called “*ad hominem*”³)
- Making fun of others’ views

You will normally receive a grade for participation right after our class is over.

The **grade for participation** follows this structure:

0/100: The student was not in class, was more than 15 minutes late, left before class was over without permission

60/100: The student was in class but did not actively participate

80/100: The student made one meaningful contribution to the discussion

100/100: The student made multiple meaningful contributions to the discussion

Everyone will get a chance to achieve a 100/100, because I will give precedence to people who have not contributed yet over people who already fulfilled their requirement.

I reserve the right to grade students in a more fine-grained fashion in certain circumstances: for instance, I tend to give a 50/100 to someone who is in class, but is clearly not listening; or a 90/100 to someone who made only one contribution, but it was a long and especially sophisticated one.

The average grade of your participation will constitute the other 50% of the final grade.

I will drop at least two of your worst participation grades at the end of the course.

GRADE SCALE⁴:

A [93-100]

A- [90-92.99]

B+ [87-89.99]

B [83-86.99]

B- [80-82.99]

C+ [77-79.99]

C [73-76.99]

C- [70-72.99]

³ Not all *ad hominem* are equally bad, and some may not be bad at all. There is a complicated discussion about this in the literature, but it should be sufficiently clear what kind of behavior I am pointing at in this context.

⁴ This applies to all individual grades and to final grades.

D+ [67-69.99]

D [63-66.99]

D- [60-62.99]

F [<60]

EXCUSES:

Students are allowed as many excused absences as they need. If you are excused from a class/assignment, that grade does not count in any way towards your final grade.

In order to be granted, however, ALL excused absences require *solid* evidence of the extenuating circumstance that does not allow the student to be in class or to upload their written piece in time.

Paradigmatic cases of evidence that would excuse you:

- A classic doctor's note stating that, in the professional's opinion, you are not reasonably able to attend class;
- A document or picture that is evidence of unusual extenuating circumstances: a flat tire, a blackout, etc. Importantly, I must be able to tell that it really is *your* flat tire, blackout, etc;
- Some document, e-mail or statement by a reliable source of a death in the family/circle of friends.

Cases of evidence that would NOT excuse you:

- The student giving me their word (it's not necessarily that I don't trust you individually, but if I start trusting everybody, someone will most likely take advantage of that);
- A doctor's note only stating that you visited their office;
- Evidence showing that you are missing class because of parties, football games, trips, or any other fun-based activity.

ACADEMIC DISHONESTY:

Plagiarism is obviously forbidden and results in a 0 and a report to the university. As you may know, instructors have access to tools that verify the uniqueness of the student's uploaded material and automatically compares it with every source on the internet and every submission by students from other classes (including classes from other universities).

Use of Chat GPT, Gemini, and all other LLMs is also forbidden and also results in a 0. The tools provided by UT to identify AI-generated text are not reliable enough, so I will schedule a meeting with whomever writes a text I am highly suspicious of. In those situations, I will discuss the content of the writing with the student to make sure they understand what they wrote. Remember that I am a digital native like most of you, and by now I am very familiar with the usual red flags associated with AI-generated text, so it should not be worth it for anyone to even try it.

READINGS SCHEDULE:

All readings are provided on the required textbook, *Disputed Moral Issues (Sixth Edition)*. Henceforth, I will refer to it as DMI.

CALENDAR:

08/20: What Is a Moral Theory?

DMI Chapter 1, Introduction and Section 1.1

08/22: “Why I Am Not a Moral Relativist (and Neither Are You)” by M. Timmons

DMI Chapter 2, pp. 41-48

08/27: Read the introduction to “War and Terrorism”

DMI Chapter 13, pp. 623-630

08/29: “War and Moral Consistency” by J. Parry

DMI Chapter 13, pp. 630-644

09/03: “Pacifism” by C. Ryan

DMI Chapter 13, pp. 644-655

RECOMMENDED: “Kantian Moral Theory” (pp. 14-18) and “Virtue Ethics” (pp. 28-30)

09/05: “The Wrongfulness of Terrorism” by S. Uniacke

DMI Chapter 13, pp. 655-668

09/10: “Drones and Robots: On the Changing Practice of Warfare” by D. Statman

DMI Chapter 13, pp. 668-680

09/12: Read the introduction to “Drugs”
DMI Chapter 5, pp. 221-227

09/17: “America’s Unjust Drug War” by M. Huemer
DMI Chapter 5, pp. 227-235

RECOMMENDED: “Consequentialism” (pp. 6-10) and “Rights-Based Moral Theory” (pp. 19-24)

09/19: “Decriminalize, Don’t Legalize” by P. de Marneffe
DMI Chapter 5, pp. 236-245

RECOMMENDED: Review “Kantian Moral Theory” and “Consequentialism”

09/24: “Permissible Paternalism: Saving Smokers from Themselves” by R.E. Goodin
DMI Chapter 5, pp. 246-251

RECOMMENDED: Review “Rights-Based Moral Theory”

09/26: Read the introduction to “Freedom of Speech”
DMI Chapter 4, pp. 161-168

10/01: “On Liberty” by J.S. Mill
DMI Chapter 4, pp. 168-171

RECOMMENDED: Review “Consequentialism”

10/03: “Speech Codes and Expressive Harms” by A. Altman
DMI Chapter 4, pp. 172-181

RECOMMENDED: Review “Kantian Moral Theory”

10/08 - Fall Break, no class

10/10: “The Coddling of the American Mind” by G. Lukianoff & J. Haidt
DMI Chapter 4, pp. 182-192

10/15: “Why I Use Trigger Warnings” by K. Manne
DMI Chapter 4, pp. 193-195

RECOMMENDED: Review “Virtue Ethics”

10/17: “No Platforming” by R.M. Simpson & A. Srinivasan
DMI Chapter 4, pp. 195-213

RECOMMENDED: Review “Rights-Based Moral Theory”

10/22: Read the introduction to “The Death Penalty”
DMI Chapter 12, pp. 571-578

10/24: “Justifying the Death Penalty” by I. Primoratz
DMI Chapter 12, pp. 578-584

RECOMMENDED: Review “Kantian Moral Theory”

10/29: “An Eye for an Eye?” by S. Nathanson
DMI Chapter 12, pp. 584-590

RECOMMENDED: Review “Kantian Moral Theory”

10/31: “A Defense of the Death Penalty” by E. van der Haag
DMI Chapter 12, pp. 590-594

RECOMMENDED: Review “Consequentialism”

11/05 - Election Day, no class

11/07: “Civilization, Safety, and Deterrence” by J. H. Reiman
DMI Chapter 12, pp. 594-598

RECOMMENDED: Review “Consequentialism”

11/12: “Black Lives Matter and the Call for Death Penalty Abolition” by M. Cholbi & A. Madva
DMI Chapter 12, pp. 598-618

11/14: Read the introduction to “Euthanasia”
DMI Chapter 8, pp. 370-376

11/19: “Why Doctors Must Not Kill” by L. R. Kass
DMI Chapter 8, pp. 376-382

RECOMMENDED: Review “Consequentialism” and “Kantian Moral Theory”

11/21: “Voluntary Active Euthanasia” by D. W. Brock
DMI Chapter 8, pp. 382-394

RECOMMENDED: Read “Ethics of Prima Facie Duty” (pp. 24-26)

11/26: “Against the Right to Die” by D. Velleman
DMI Chapter 8, pp. 394-401

RECOMMENDED: Review “Consequentialism”

11/28 - Thanksgiving, no class

12/03: Final Class (Extra Reflection for credit)