**PHIL-252**

**CONTEMPORARY MORAL PROBLEMS**

**INSTRUCTOR:**

Dario Vaccaro [IPA: darjo vakˈkaro, 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, 4:05-5:20pm.

Our first meeting will be on January 21st, 2025; our last meeting will be on May 6th, 2025.

**Place**: Bailey Education Complex - Room 424

**OVERVIEW OF THE COURSE:**

In this course, we will explore central theoretical and applied issues in moral philosophy.

We will first explore some “big picture” questions about morality and value, such as whether moral facts are even real, whether they are objective, subjective, or relative to different cultures, and what is ultimately valuable in life. This area of moral philosophy is commonly discussed under the labels of *meta-ethics* and *value theory*.

Then, we will take an extended look at the most important ethical theories philosophers have developed over the centuries to explain how morality works: Is morality concerned with respecting others? Is it concerned with bringing about the best possible outcomes? With being virtuous? Or something else? This area of moral philosophy is commonly known as *normative ethics*.

Finally, and most prominently, as the title of the course suggests, we will apply our discoveries in these theoretical realms to concrete, contemporary moral problems that we all inevitably end up dealing with in our lives. Should we allow the practice of abortion? What about euthanasia? Should we kill and eat animals? What are the right limitations to free speech? Why is racism wrong? These, and many others, are questions that philosophers try to answer as part of *applied ethics*.

I strongly encourage students to engage with this course as not merely a source of course credit, but most importantly as an opportunity to seriously consider at length, if only once in their lives, what their beliefs about these topics should be. Whatever you decide to do with your lives, you will inevitably act on the basis of countless philosophical assumptions: it would, then, be great to select your philosophical views as carefully as possible, and this is your chance to do just that.

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.

**TEXTBOOK:**

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

*Living Ethics – An introduction with readings*

Russ Shafer-Landau

Third Edition (2025)

Oxford University Press

This selection seems to me to excellently encompass some of the most important debates in ethics and is written in a simple, clear way by one of the most prominent moral philosophers alive. We will read all the introductory content written by Shafer-Landau, plus a few original works from other past and present philosophers. *All* the material for the course (including your writing prompts) will be found within our textbook.

**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* (minimum 250 words each) piece every time we read a section of the book for class.

In this course you will alternate, each class, between the roles of Author and that of Peer Reviewer. These roles are roughly equivalent to the roles philosophers play in the process of publishing their works on academic journals and books: authors present their claims, and peer reviewers assess the quality of the work, provide feedback and present potential objections the author should consider.

Authors will be tasked with answering one of the prompts available for the day. Authors must submit their text to Canvas and send it to their Peer Reviewer within the 24 hours after our class. Peer Reviewers must submit their feedback to Canvas and send it to the Author within 48 hours after the same class. **For a passing grade, Peer Reviewers are required to show understanding of the Author’s point of view, provide at least one reason for praise, and present one piece of criticism to their assigned Author.**

Each student will alternate between answering the prompts from our textbook and writing a peer-reviewing comment to another student’s submission. I will randomly create the pairings every two classes.

**If, for whatever reason, an Author fails to provide a Peer Reviewer with their submission, it is the Peer Reviewer’s responsibility to contact me immediately and I will provide them with an Author response to critique.**

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 the Authors to answer, which you will also be able to find at the end of each reading on our textbook, *Living Ethics* (3rd Edition). Authors and their Peer Reviewers are encouraged (though not required) to work together at this stage as well, and Peer Reviewers are allowed to add, as part of their report, the comments they made to Authors that helped them create a better submission in class.

The written submission is graded along three main dimensions:

* UNDERSTANDING: Did the student understand the philosophical concepts, theories and arguments we read about?
* 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* logical fallacies?

**The average grade of your writings will constitute 100% of your overall grade.**

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

Note on participation: there are no attendance or participation grades. Students are, however, strongly encouraged to come to class, because it is a valuable opportunity to discuss their work with their peers and with me (I give full feedback on the assignments before submission if the students ask me to during the workshopping portion of class).

**GRADE SCALE:**

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]  
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 upload their written piece in time.

Paradigmatic examples of evidence that would excuse you:

* A classic doctor’s note stating that, in the professional’s opinion, you are not reasonably able to work on that day.
* 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., and it must be a problem serious enough for you to be unable to submit work that day.
* Some document, e-mail or statement by a reliable source of a death in the family/circle of friends.

Examples 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 enjoyment-based activity.

**DISABILITY STATEMENT:**

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, is committed to providing an inclusive learning environment for all students. If you anticipate or experience a barrier in this course due to a chronic health condition, a learning, hearing, neurological, mental health, vision, physical, or other kind of disability, or a temporary injury, you are encouraged to contact Student Disability Services (SDS) at 865-974-6087 or sds@utk.edu. An SDS Coordinator will meet with you to develop a plan to ensure you have equitable access to this course. If you are already registered with SDS, please contact your instructor to discuss implementing accommodations included in your course access letter.

**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, *Living Ethics (Third Edition).* Henceforth, I will refer to it as LE. When I write “LE Chapter…” I mean to include only the part written by Shafer-Landau: I do not include the further readings.

**CALENDAR**:

**01/21**: What Is Morality?

Reading: LE Chapter 1.

**01/23**: Moral Reasoning

Reading: LE Chapter 2.

**01/28**: Skepticism about Morality – Part 1

Reading: LE Chapter 3.

**01/30**: Skepticism about Morality – Part 2

Reading: “Cultural Relativism” by D. Jeske (2021) – LE pp. 35-44.

**02/04**: The Good Life – Part 1

Reading: LE Chapter 4.

**02/06**: The Good Life – Part 2

Reading: Excerpt #1 from “Utilitarianism” by J.S. Mill (1863) – LE pp. 51-56.

**02/11**: Consequentialism – Part 1

Reading: LE Chapter 5.

**02/13**: Consequentialism – Part 2

Reading: Excerpt #2 from “Utilitarianism” by J.S. Mill (1863) – LE pp. 68-74.

**02/18**: Kantian Ethics – Part 1

Reading: LE Chapter 6.

**02/20**: Kantian Ethics – Part 2

Reading: Excerpt from “Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals” by I. Kant (1785) – LE pp. 84-91.

**02/25**: Social Contract Theory – Part 1

Reading: LE Chapter 7.

**02/27**: Social Contract Theory – Part 2

Reading: Excerpt from “Leviathan” (1651) by T. Hobbes – LE pp. 99-104.

**03/04**: The Ethic of Prima Facie Duties

Reading: LE Chapter 8.

**03/06**: Virtue Ethics

Reading: LE Chapter 9.

**03/11**: Feminist Ethics and the Ethics of Care

Reading: LE Chapter 10.

**03/13**: Abortion

Reading: LE Chapter 11.

03/18 – Spring Break (NO CLASS)

03/20 – Spring Break (NO CLASS)

**03/25**: Animals

Reading: LE Chapter 12.

**03/27**: The Environment

Reading: LE Chapter 13.

**04/01**: Euthanasia

Reading: LE Chapter 14.

**04/03**: Economic Justice and Economic Inequality

Reading: LE Chapter 15.

**04/08**: Globalization and Immigration

Reading: LE Chapter 16.

**04/10**: The Legacy of Racism

Reading: LE Chapter 17.

**04/15**: Free Speech

Reading: LE Chapter 18.

04/17: Spring Recess (NO CLASS)

**04/22**: The Ethics of Technology

Reading: LE Chapter 19.

**04/24**: The Death Penalty

Reading: LE Chapter 20.

**04/29**: Drugs

Reading: LE Chapter 21.

**05/01**: Genetic Engineering

Reading: LE Chapter 22.

**05/06**: Sex and Gender

Reading: LE Chapter 23.