PHIL-252 CONTEMPORARY MORAL PROBLEMS

INSTRUCTOR:

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

MEETING TIME/PLACE:

Time: Monday to Friday, 2-3.40 pm EDT
The course starts on a *Wednesday* (07/10) and ends on a *Thursday* (08/08).

Place: The course is synchronous online. I will circulate a link to our virtual classroom shortly before the course starts.

OVERVIEW OF THE COURSE:

In this course, we will explore major debates in ethics, through the works of some of the most important contemporary philosophers in the field. The questions we will engage with include:

Is it moral to eat animals?
Should we give (most of? some of?) our money to charity?
Is it morally permissible to have an abortion?

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 22 meetings, with each class being 1 hour and 40 minutes long. Each class will broadly look as follows:

- I will introduce the topic of the day (a euphemism for "lecture") for around 30 minutes.
- We will discuss the matter together for another 30 minutes.
- The remaining time will be devoted to writing your daily short piece (see the next section for details).

TEXTBOOK

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

The Ethical Life
Russ Shafer-Landau
Sixth Edition (2024)[1]
Oxford University Press

Russ Shafer-Landau is a major figure in contemporary moral philosophy, and his selection seems to me to excellently encompass some of the most important debates in ethics. We will not read the entire book, as we will start directly with "applied" moral problems, which still constitute the bulk of the text. It goes without saying that you are more than welcome to read the previous sections if you want some background on more theoretical questions in moral philosophy like "Is morality objective?", "What is well-being?", "What is the right general rules to live an ethical life?".

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* (circa 250 words) piece every time we meet for class. I will give you plenty of 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 own view of things. 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, *The Ethical Life* (2024 Edition).

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

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

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 the two 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
- Attacking someone personally (the so-called "*ad hominem*"[2])
- Making fun of others' views

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

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

You are allowed two unexcused absences from class. If you don't use them, I will drop up to two of your worst participation grades at the end of the course.

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[2] 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.

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]

GENERATIVE AI POLICY:

Use of Chat GPT, Gemini, and all other LLMs is forbidden and 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.

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.

SCHEDULE:

Before you check out our topics and readings list, please be aware that ***you are not expected to read everything***. The readings listed here are the works we will engage with in class, but you are only expected to read one of them per day, and not necessarily in full, if it seems too daunting. I will always start class by explaining the readings and we will have plenty of time to discuss them together. You will only have to write your daily short piece on one of the readings of the day, and the prompts will be extremely varied in nature, so I leave it to you to decide what your best strategy to produce a good writing will be. That said, I do recommend that you read one of the pieces of the day in full.

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[3] This applies to all individual grades and to final grades.

All readings are provided on the required textbook, *The Ethical Life (Sixth Edition)*.

CALENDAR:

07/10
READINGS:
- "What Will Future Generations Condemn Us For?" (2010) by K.A. Appiah
- "The Singer Solution to World Poverty" (1999) by P. Singer

07/11
READINGS:
- Excerpt from "A Kantian Approach to Famine Relief" (1986) by O. O'Neill

07/12
READINGS:
- "International Aid: Not the Cure You're Hoping For" (2019) by J. Brennan
- Excerpt from "Euthanasia" (1986) by J. Rachels
- "The Survival Lottery" (1975) by J. Harris

07/15
READINGS:
- "Refugees and the Right to Control Immigration" (2021) by C.H. Wellman

07/16
READINGS:
- "Open Borders" (2024) by J. Hidalgo

07/17
READINGS:
- "Our Moral Duty to Eat Meat" (2021) by N. Zangwill

07/18
READINGS:
- "Puppies, Pigs and People: Eating Meat and Marginal Cases" (2004) by A. Norcross

07/19
READINGS:
- "The Public and Private Morality of Climate Change" (2013) by J. Broome

07/22
READINGS:
- "Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments" (1983) by T. Hill, Jr.

07/23
READINGS:
- "A Defense of Abortion" (1971) by J.J. Thomson

07/24
READINGS:
- "Why Abortion is Immoral" (1989) by D. Marquis
- "The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect" (1967) by P. Foot

07/25
READINGS:
- Excerpts from *Justifying Legal Punishment* (1989) by I. Primoratz

07/26
READINGS:
- "An Eye for an Eye?" (1987) by S. Nathanson
- "Why Gun 'Control' Is Not Enough" (2012) by J. McMahan

07/29
READINGS:
- Excerpts from "Is There a Right to Own a Gun?" (2003) by M. Huemer
- "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" (1963) by M.L. King, Jr.

07/30
READINGS:
- "Affirmative Action: Bad Arguments and Some Good Ones" (2014) by D.M. Hausman

07/31
READINGS:
- "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (1989) by P. McIntosh

08/01
READINGS:
- "Who? Whom? Reparations and the Problem of Agency" (2006) by C. Kukathas
- "In Favor of Drug Decriminalization" (2014) by D. Husak

08/02

READINGS:

- "America's Unjust Drug War" (2004) by M. Huemer

08/05

READINGS:

- "Against the Legalization of Drugs" (2013) by P. De Marneffe

08/06

READINGS:

- "The Case Against Perfection" (2004) by M.J. Sandel

08/07

READINGS:

- "Genetic Engineering and the Ethics of Enhancement of Human Beings" (2007) by J. Savulescu
- "Don't Let the Doctor Do This to Your Newborn" (2014) by C.S. Milloy

08/08

READINGS:

- "Ignoring Differences between Men and Women Is the Wrong Way to Address Gender Dysphoria" (2019) by K. Stock
- "How (Not) to Talk about, and to, Trans Women" (2021) by S. Chappell