

Phil 108: Contemporary Ethical Issues

T, Th 9:30-11am

103 Moffitt

Instructor:

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Catalog Description:

This course will be devoted to in-depth discussion of a variety of problems in moral philosophy raised by real-life questions of individual conduct and social policy. Its contents will vary from occasion to occasion. Possible topics include philosophical problems posed by affirmative action, abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, terrorism, war, poverty, and climate change.

Course Description:

As a thoughtful person, living in this country, at this time, you have at some point asked yourself some of the following questions. Are you allowed to buy yourself an iPod when you could use the money to save people from starving? Should you buy a hybrid, rather than an SUV, when your individual choice is just “a drop in the bucket” and won’t really affect global warming? Is there any difference between terrorism and “collateral damage”? May we kill enemy soldiers or even civilians to protect ourselves? Is abortion wrong? Is it wrong to kill yourself to spare yourself a future of pain and debilitation? Is it wrong for a doctor to help you to do this? What is the point of punishing criminals? *Is there any point in it?* What do we owe to future generations? Is it wrong to bring children into this world?

These questions can be difficult for many different reasons. Self-interest, prejudice, and fear can cloud our judgment. Religious authorities that we accept on faith, such as the Bible, can give unclear or conflicting directions. Finally, it can be hard to be sure of relevant facts: for example, whether the justice system applies the death penalty consistently, or whether burning fossil fuels leads to climate change.

This course, however, is about another set of difficulties, which persist when we set aside our personal feelings, we see how far we can get without relying on faith, and we assume that we know the relevant facts. We may not be able to decide, by our own reflection and reasoning, which answers are correct, and even when we are sure that certain answers are correct, we may not be able to justify them. Our ethical ideas may seem not up to the task. Our aim in this course is to come to terms with these difficulties and to see to what extent they can be overcome.

Prerequisites:

One course in moral philosophy, such as Phil 2 or Phil 104; or two courses in other areas of philosophy.

Readings:

All of the readings are in a course reader. It can be purchased at the Copy Central on 2560 Bancroft Way. A copy will also be available at the reserve desk in the Howison Library in Moses Hall, but only for reading within the library.

However, *most* of the readings—every one that appears as a link—are available online, if you are on the UC Berkeley network, or connected to it via a [VPN](#).

If you have trouble with the link, then try going to the source that appears in the parenthesis. Then visit the [library website](#).

- If the source is “Oxford Scholarship Online,” then click on “Electronic Resources,” and search for “Oxford Scholarship Online.” Follow the link to Oxford Scholarship Online, and then search for the relevant author and title.
- If the source is anything else, then click on “E-Journals A-Z,” and search for the relevant source (e.g., “Philosophy and Public Affairs”). Follow the link to the journal, and search for the relevant author and title.

Requirements:

1. Section participation: 10% of course grade.
2. First paper: 30% of course grade. 5 pages.
3. Second paper: 30% of course grade each. 5 pages.
4. Final exam: 30% of course grade. Open book. Questions on the final exam will be drawn from a longer list that will be distributed beforehand.

Introduction

1. Introduction
Tuesday, January 22

Aiding

2. How much must we do to prevent suffering?

Thursday, January 24
Unger, [Living High and Letting Die](#) Ch. 1, 2 (Oxford Scholarship Online)

Tuesday, January 29
Unger, [Living High and Letting Die](#) Ch. 3 (§7-10 only), 4 (§1 only), 5 (§3–6 only), 6 (Oxford Scholarship Online)

Thursday, January 31
Murphy, "[The Demands of Beneficence](#)" (Philosophy and Public Affairs)

Tuesday, February 5
Cullity, [The Moral Demands of Affluence](#) Ch. 5 and 8 (Oxford Scholarship Online)

Individual or group action?

3. What difference does one person make?

Thursday, February 7
Glover, "[It Makes No Difference Whether Or Not I Do It](#)" (Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplemental Volume)

First Paper Assigned

Tuesday, February 12
Jackson, "Group Morality"
Scheffler, "[Individual Responsibility in a Global Age](#)" (Oxford Scholarship Online)

Harming: Theory

4. Is allowing people be harmed different from harming them oneself? (Is letting die different from killing?)

Thursday, February 14
Foot, "[The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect](#)" (Oxford Scholarship Online)

No class: Tuesday, February 19

Thursday, February 21
Thomson, "[The Trolley Problem](#)" (Yale Law Journal)

First Paper Due

Tuesday, February 26
Quinn, "[Actions, Intentions, and Consequences: The Doctrine of Doing and Allowing](#)" (Philosophical Review)

5. Is foreseeing harm different from intending harm?

Thursday, February 28
Foot, "[The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect](#)" (Review) (Oxford Scholarship Online)

Quinn, "[Actions, Intentions and Consequences: The Doctrine of Double Effect](#)"
(Philosophy and Public Affairs)

6. May we harm others to defend ourselves?

Tuesday, March 4

Thomson, "[Self-Defense and Rights](#)" (Philosophy and Public Affairs)

Harming: Applications

7. May we kill in war?

Thursday, March 6

McMahan, "[The Ethics of Killing in War](#)" (Ethics)

8. Is there a difference between terrorism and "collateral damage"?

Tuesday, March 11

Rodin, "[Terrorism without Intention](#)" (Ethics)

Scheffler, "[Is Terrorism Morally Distinctive?](#)" (Journal of Political Philosophy)

Thursday, March 13

No reading. Catch up and review.

9. Is abortion permissible?

Tuesday, March 18

Thomson, "[A Defense of Abortion](#)" (Philosophy and Public Affairs)

Thursday, March 20

McMahan, [The Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margin of Life](#) 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.5.1, 1.5.2, 1.5.5 (Oxford Scholarship Online)

Tuesday, April 1

McMahan, [The Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margin of Life](#) 4.1, 4.2, 4.7 (Oxford Scholarship Online)

10. May we kill ourselves?

Thursday, April 3

Velleman, "[A Right to Self-Termination?](#)"

11. May we punish criminals?

Tuesday, April 8

Ewing, *The Morality of Punishment*, Ch. 2

Bentham, [*An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*](#), Ch. I, XIII,
XIV

No class: Thursday, April 10

Tuesday, April 15
Morris, "Persons and Punishment"
Second Paper Assigned

Thursday, April 17
Hart, "Prolegomenon to the Principles of Punishment"

Tuesday, April 22
Feinberg, "The Expressive Function of Punishment"

Thursday, April 24
Quinn, "[The Right to Threaten and the Right to Punish](#)" (Philosophy and Public
Affairs)

Creating life:

12. What do we owe people whom we caused to exist?

Tuesday, April 29
Parfit, [Reasons and Persons, Ch. 16: "The Non-Identity Problem"](#) (Oxford
Scholarship Online)

Thursday, May 1
Shiffrin, "[Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of
Harm](#)" (Legal Theory)

Review:

Tuesday, May 6
Final Paper Due

Thursday, May 8

Final Exam:

Monday, May 19, 8-11am

Course Policies:

Academic Dishonesty:

“Any test, paper or report submitted by you and that bears your name is presumed to be your own original work that has not previously been submitted for credit in another course unless you obtain prior written approval to do so from your instructor.

—Report of the Academic Dishonesty and Plagiarism Subcommittee, June 18, 2004.

You are expected to be familiar with the definitions of academic dishonesty in the Code of Student Conduct, which can be found here:

<http://students.berkeley.edu/osl/sja.asp?id=1143&rcol=1201>.

Plagiarism and cheating will be penalized, at a minimum, by an “F” on the paper or exam in question. It may also, depending on its seriousness, result in an “F” in the course as a whole and a report to Student Judicial Affairs.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities:

If you have an official accommodation letter from the Disabled Students’ Program that is relevant to this course, please notify both me and your GSI at a reasonable time. We will do whatever we can to help.