

Philosophy as Conversation: Contemporary Ethical Issues
Spring 08

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Course Description:

The focus of this course is contemporary ethical issues, including abortion, same-sex marriage, capital punishment, animal rights, terrorism & torture, and welfare. It's likely that all of you already have some opinions on some or all of these issues, which will hopefully make it easy for us all to engage the material. I do want to emphasize, though, that while we will be discussing a range of hot-button issues, I am much more interested in the arguments supporting the various positions than with the position itself. There are at least two sides to every issue, and there are good and bad arguments on every side. The main goal of this course is to help you acquire the skills to analyze, formulate and evaluate the arguments, not to once and for all settle any of these debates. So I say this sincerely: I don't care what side you take on any given issue, and no part of your grade will be affected whatsoever by the position you take. You *will* be evaluated on your ability to provide solid arguments in support of your position. All opinions are not equal. Some are supported by good argument and some are not. My hope is that this course helps you develop the former.

The class will be (hopefully) be heavily weighted towards discussion, which means your input is vital. My aim is to keep lecturing to a minimum. This means you must come to class prepared, having done the assigned readings and thought seriously about the arguments. In my view, philosophy is much more about a set of skills than a body of knowledge. And like any skill, you can only learn it by doing it. My hope is that a majority of our class time will be spent actually doing philosophy, and that requires your active participation. Philosophy is not a spectator sport.

Text:

All readings are available online through D2L

Grading:

Two in-class exams: 1st--15%, 2nd--20%

Take home final: 25%

Participate in a debate: 15%

Presentation: 15%

Class Participation: 10%

*** (You must complete all assignments to pass this course. A zero on any assignment will result in you failing the course, regardless of what your other grades are.)

Explanation of Assignments

The *in-class exams* will be a combination of short answer and short essay. The *final* will be a take home essay exam.

Debate: You are required to participate in one semi-formal debate. For each debate, there will be two people representing each side of a particular issue. One person will make an argument for her position while the other person will offer a response to the arguments from the opposing side. Though you should work together with your partner before the debate, you will be graded individually, based on your ability to formulate and communicate your argument or response. I will give more details on the debate as they approach.

Class Presentation: Each person will be responsible for presenting a response/criticism/addendum/postscript to the previous day's reading/lecture/discussion. For this assignment, you must also write a brief (~2 pages) discussion paper that includes the main points of your presentation. Your presentation should not be a mere summary of the previous day's events. Your job is to add something to the discussion by elaborating, criticizing, questioning, etc. the text or something we discussed in class. Focus on what you found interesting/troubling/worth exploring more, and use the presentation as a way to jumpstart or continue a discussion. I will provide a handout with a more detailed explanation of what I expect and what criteria I will use to grade the presentation.

If your presentation falls on the first day of a new topic, you should look at your presentation as a way of starting the entire discussion. Give us your own view on the issue and tell us why you hold the view you do. Explain what complicates the issue or why it is an issue that generates the kind of disagreement it does. Find a way to bring out the points that you think are interesting or worth discussing.

Participation: Participation in class discussion is important. It not only helps you engage the material, it also makes class much less boring for everyone. So speak up. If you don't like actually speaking up, you can e-speak up by posting a message on the D2L message board or, if you want to speak or e-speak anonymously, by sending me your thoughts on a particular issue either by email or through the D2L dropbox. One way or another, I should hear (or e-hear) from you regularly. The default grade here will be a 'C'. Regular contributions will move your grade up while a lack of contributions will move your grade down.

Attendance: There is no formal attendance requirement in this course, but excessive absences will obviously affect your ability to effectively participate in class discussion, and that will be reflected in your grade. Attendance (or lack of) will also be used to determine whether borderline final grades are moved up or down (more on this below). Also, as a matter of empirical fact, students who attend class regularly tend to do substantially better in the course overall.

Warning:

I tend to be fairly laid back, and I enjoy an informal and relaxed atmosphere in class. Please do not mistake any of this for me being “easy,” or for this course being “easy.” I will hold you to high standards, and you will have to earn a good grade. While I think this course can be fun, philosophy is hard work, and you will need to invest your time and effort in order to do well.

Grading Policies

A--Truly exceptional work. Demonstrates mastery of the material, sophisticated critical engagement, and an excellent ability to communicate that effectively.

B--Very good work. Demonstrates solid understanding of the material, a high level of critical engagement, and a good ability to communicate that effectively.

C--Good, satisfactory work. Demonstrates fairly good understanding of material, some ability to critically engage it, and adequate ability to communicate that effectively.

D--Below average work. Demonstrates little understanding of material with no or almost no critical engagement.

F--Bad!

+/-’s simply indicate which end of the above scale your grade is tending towards, if any.

I calculate grades on an 11 point scale. An ‘A’ is 11 pts, an ‘A-’ is 10, a ‘B+’ is 9, etc. For each assignment, the letter grade is converted to a number based on this scale. The correct percentages of these grades are added together to get the final grade. The final grades are assigned as follows: ‘A’-10.5+, ‘A-’-9.5+, ‘B+’-8.5+, ‘B’-7.5+, etc. (Note that this means your raw score on tests is not used when calculating final grades. The raw number is converted to a letter grade, which is assigned a number value from the above scale.)

Your attendance (or lack of) may bump an in between grade either up or down. So a final grade of 9.4 with an exceptional attendance record will likely be bumped up from an ‘A-’ to an ‘A’. An 8.6 with an abysmal attendance record will likely be bumped down from a ‘B+’ to a ‘B’.

Academic Integrity:

Cheating is always bad, but it’s especially bad in an ethics course. Don’t do it. If you do, you will receive a zero on the assignment (see above to figure out what that means for your final grade) and I will report it to the proper university administrators.

Schedule: This schedule is only tentative, and I reserve the right to alter it at any time. I will keep you updated on which readings you should be doing for each class.

Topic	Dates	Readings
Introduction/course overview	Aug. 26	none
Philosophical progress/basic logic	Aug. 28	Flew, "What counts as progress in philosophy"
Moral Relativism Morality and Religion	Sept. 2, 4	Arthur, "Morality without God" Rachels, "Ethics and the Bible"
Abortion	Sept. 9, 11, 16, 18	Noonan, "An almost absolute value in history" Warren, "On the moral and legal status of abortion" Marquis, "Why abortion is immoral" Thomson, "A defense of abortion"
Test #1	Sept. 23	none
Homosexuality and Same-Sex Marriage	Sept. 25, 30, Oct. 2	Card, "Against Marriage and Motherhood" Shell, "The liberal case against gay marriage" Wilson, "Against Homosexual Marriage" Wedgwood, "The fundamental argument for same-sex marriage"
First Debates	Oct. 7	none
Animal Rights/Welfare	Oct. 9, 16, 21	Singer, "All Animals are Equal" Cohen, "Why animals have no rights" Steinbock, "Speciesism and the idea of equality" Singer, "A vegetarian philosophy" Diamond, "Eating meat and eating people"
Capital Punishment	Oct. 23, 28, 30	Bedau, "The case against the death penalty" Van Den Haag, "The ultimate punishment: a defense" Nathanson, "On equal treatment" Brennan, from <i>Furman v. Georgia</i>
Second Debates	Nov. 4	none
Test #2	Nov. 6	none
Terrorism/Torture	Nov. 11, 13, 18	Dershowitz, "Make torture an option" Luban, "Torture and the ticking time bomb" McMahan, "Torture in principle and in practice" Bybee/Yoo memos
TBD	Nov. 20, 25	TBD
Third Debates	Dec. 2	none
Review	Dec. 4	none