

Phil 108: Contemporary Ethical Issues

T, Th 9:30–11am
220 Wheeler

Instructor:

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Graduate Student 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 readings are on bSpace.**
- Most can *also* be accessed by the links, if you are on the UC Berkeley network, or connected to it via a VPN. See <http://www.net.berkeley.edu/vpn/>. **But if the links don't work, remember: all readings are on bSpace.**
- If you wish to have a paper copy, a reader can be purchased at Copy Central on Bancroft, for around \$55 + tax.

Requirements:

1. Attendance at lecture and section.
2. For each lecture, download the handout from the course website, and bring either a paper copy or a laptop to lecture. (If you would like to have a paper copy for lecture, but find it a hardship to print one out beforehand, let us know.) Each handout will end with a set of "Review Questions." Listening to the lecture and doing the assigned reading should be enough to enable you to answer these. (However, simply reading the handout will *not* be enough.)
3. Section participation: 15%.
4. Mid-term exam by email: 15%. You may take the exam at home, or anywhere where you can receive and send email. Every question on the exam will be a "Review Question." So, if you come to lecture, do the reading, and make a habit of writing out the answers to these questions, you will be fully prepared for the exam. The main purpose of this exam is to provide you with some feedback before the registrar's deadline for changing the grading option.
5. 3-page proposal for your term paper, describing a question or problem and sketching how you will address it. You may submit this for approval at any time up until the due date. However, the earlier you submit your outline, the earlier you will get comments, and so the more time you will have to write your term paper itself.
6. 8-page term paper: 35%.
7. Final exam: 35%. Open book, open note, etc. Every question on the final will be a "Review Question." So, if you come to lecture, do the reading, and make a habit of writing out the answers to these questions, you will be fully prepared for the final.

Notes:

- GSI will not comment on the term paper or final exam, but will be available to discuss them.
- Requirements may be **reduced** if enrollment is high.

Introduction

1. Introduction
Thursday, August 23

Aiding

2. How much must we do to prevent suffering?

Tuesday, August 28

Unger, *Living High and Letting Die*, Ch. 1, 2 (Oxford Scholarship Online)

<http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/oso/public/content/philosophy/9780195108590/toc.html>

Thursday, August 30

Unger, *Living High and Letting Die*, Ch. 3 (§7-10 only), 4 (§1 only), 5 (§3–6 only), 6 (Oxford Scholarship Online)

Tuesday, September 4

Murphy, “The Demands of Beneficence” (Philosophy and Public Affairs)

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0048-3915%28199323%2922%3A4%3C267%3ATDOB%3E2.0.CO%3B2-D>

Individual or group action?

3. What difference does one person make?

Thursday, September 6

Glover, “It Makes No Difference Whether Or Not I Do It” (Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplemental Volume)

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0309-7013%281975%2949<171%3AIMNDWO>2.0.CO%3B2-Q>

Tuesday, September 11

Jackson, “Group Morality”

Harming: Theory

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

Thursday, September 13

Foot, “The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect” (Oxford Scholarship Online)

<http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/oso/private/content/philosophy/9780199252862/p022.html> - acprof-0199252866-chapter-2

Tuesday, September 18

Thomson, "The Trolley Problem" (Yale Law Journal)

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0044-0094%28198505%2994%3A6%3C1395%3ATTP%3E2.0.CO%3B2-M>

Thursday, September 20

Quinn, "Actions, Intentions, and Consequences: The Doctrine of Doing and Allowing" (Philosophical Review)

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0031-8108%28198907%2998%3A3<287%3AAIACTD>2.0.CO%3B2-R>

Tuesday, September 25

Thomson, "Turning the Trolley" (Philosophy & Public Affairs)

<http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/cgi-bin/fulltext/121501239/HTMLSTART>

5. Is foreseeing harm different from intending harm?

Thursday, September 27

Foot, "The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect" (Review) (Oxford Scholarship Online)

<http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/oso/private/content/philosophy/9780199252862/p022.html> - acprof-0199252866-chapter-2

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

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0048-3915%28198923%2918%3A4<334%3AAIACTD>2.0.CO%3B2-P>

6. May we harm others to defend ourselves?

Tuesday, October 2

Thomson, "Self-Defense" (Philosophy and Public Affairs)

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0048-3915%28199123%2920%3A4%3C283%3AS%3E2.0.CO%3B2-B>

7. What is wrong with killing?

Thursday, October 4

Singer, *Practical Ethics*, Ch. 4: "What is Wrong with Killing?"

Creating Life:

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

Tuesday, October 9

Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, Ch. 16: “The Non-Identity Problem” (Oxford Scholarship Online)

<http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/oso/private/content/philosophy/9780198249085/p087.html> - acprof-019824908X-chapter-16

Thursday, October 11

Shiffrin, “Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm” (Legal Theory)

<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayIssue?jid=LEG&volumeId=5&issueId=02>

Tuesday, October 16

Mid-term exam (by email)

No class Thursday, October 18

Harming: Applications

9. What may we do to animals?

Tuesday, October 23

Singer, *Practical Ethics*, Ch. 2 (up to p. 24): “Equality and its Implications,” Ch. 3: “Equality for Animals?” and Ch. 5: “Taking Life: Animals”

10. Is abortion permissible?

Thursday, October 25

Thomson, “A Defense of Abortion” (Philosophy and Public Affairs)

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0048-3915%28197123%291%3A1%3C47%3AADOA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-G>

Tuesday, October 30

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)

<http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/oso/public/content/philosophy/9780195079982/toc.html>

Thursday, November 1

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

11. Is euthanasia permissible?

Tuesday, November 6

Singer, *Practical Ethics*, Ch. 7: "Taking Life: Humans"

No class Thursday, November 8

12. May we kill in war?

Tuesday, November 13

McMahan, "The Ethics of Killing in War" (Ethics)

<http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/422400>

Term Paper Proposals Due

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

Thursday, November 15

Rodin, "Terrorism without Intention" (Ethics)

<http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/383442>

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

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2006.00242.x/pdf>

14. May we punish criminals?

Tuesday, November 20

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

Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Ch. I, XIII,
XIV

<http://www.econlib.org/library/Bentham/bnthPML.html>

No class Thursday, November 22

Tuesday, November 27

Quinn, "The Right to Threaten and the Right to Punish" (Philosophy and Public
Affairs)

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0048-3915%28198523%2914%3A4<327%3ATRRTAT>2.0.CO%3B2-7>

Review:

15. Parting thoughts

Thursday, November 29

Term Paper Due: Tuesday, December 4

Final Exam: Tuesday, December 11, 3–6pm

Course Policies:

Extensions:

Plan ahead. You may request extensions from your GSI *up until 72 hours* before papers are due. After then, extensions will be granted *only for medical and family emergencies*.

Submitting Work:

Papers must be submitted, on paper, by you, to your GSI, in class, by 9:40am, before the lecture starts. Papers submitted later will lose *one step* (e.g., B+ to B) *immediately* and then an *additional step every 24 hours*. If you cannot come to lecture on the due date, you may request to make other arrangements with your GSI, so long as you do so well before the deadline. Whatever the circumstances, you are responsible for ensuring that your GSI gets your paper. Forgotten or unopenable attachments, bounced or lost emails, and so on, are your responsibility.

“Re-grading”:

You are strongly encouraged to discuss grades and comments on papers with your GSI or me. However, *grades on particular papers and exams will not be changed under any circumstances*. While there is no perfect system, selective “re-grading” at students’ request only makes things worse. “Second” grades are likely to be less accurate and less fair than “first” grades. This is because, among other things, the GSI does not have access to other papers for purposes of comparison, the student will inevitably supply additional input (clarifications, explanations, etc.) that the original paper did not, and there are certain biases of self-selection.

The only exception, to which none of these concerns apply, is a suspected arithmetical or recording error in your final course grade. Please do not hesitate to bring this to your GSI’s or my attention.

Academic Dishonesty:

Plagiarism or cheating will result in an “F” in the course as a whole and a report to Student Judicial Affairs.

“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.

“In all of your assignments, including your homework or drafts of papers, you may use words or ideas written by other individuals in publications, web sites, or other sources, but only with proper attribution. ‘Proper attribution’ means that you have fully identified the original source and extent of your use of the words or ideas of others that you reproduce in your work for this course, usually in the form of a footnote or parenthesis.”—Academic Dishonesty and Plagiarism Subcommittee, June 18, 2004.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities:

If you have an official accommodation letter 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.