

PHIL 120 – Contemporary Moral Issues

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Classtime: 1:30-2:45pm, Tues/Thurs

Location: Fountain Hall G11

Office Hours: 10:30-11:30am, Tues/Thurs, HUM 423

Course description: Are prospective parents permitted to genetically enhance their children? Does social media contribute to, or detract from, living a good life? Is abortion permissible? Does the rise of generative AI threaten human creativity? Are CEOs paid too much money? Through engaging with philosophical work on these ethical controversies, we'll learn how to more rigorously discuss and engage with them. Moreover, doing so brushes us up against some of the more foundational moral questions that have long galvanized philosophers.

Course texts

Required texts: Throughout the course, we'll read papers and selections from books: you can find all these readings in PDF form on Blackboard.

Assignments and grading

Your grade will be determined by the following items: **two ethical engagements, one essay, one mid-term, an online journal, and class participation.**

Ethical engagement: In 2-3 pages, first reconstruct (in standard, premise/conclusion form) a philosopher's argument from their text. (I'll provide you with the relevant passage.) After that, outline an objection to a premise from that argument.

Essay: In 5-7 pages, present an argument from one of the philosophers we've discussed. After that, either *defend* or *argue against* their position. (I'll provide you with a list of arguments to choose from, and we'll discuss what it means to 'defend' or 'argue against' a position in class.)

Mid-term: A mix of multiple choice and short answer questions. The mid-term will cover the first half of the course material.

Online journal: Once a week, I'll provide you a prompt related to the week's reading and you'll respond with a 100-200 word journal entry. Your posts are due by Thursdays at 11:59 PM. Late journal entries will not be accepted.

Participation/classtime: Participation is an integral component of this course. As such, you must first and foremost attend all class meetings in order to complete the course objectives. Your

participation grade will be determined by your attendance, your engagement in discussion, and your engagement in in-class activities.

We'll discuss all these assignments in far more detail in class.

Grading scheme

Ethical engagement #1 (due 2/22): 15%

Ethical engagement #2 (due 4/6): 20%

Essay (due 4/26): 25%

Mid-term (in-class 3/5): 20%

Online journal: 10%

Participation: 10%

Class policies

- You're allowed two unexcused absences. After that, you should contact me and let me know about any extenuating circumstances. Each further unnotified absence will result in a 1/3rd of a letter grade being deducted from your participation grade.
- Papers turned in late will be penalized 1/3rd of a letter grade for every day they are late. For instance, a paper that's turned in a week late will lose $2\frac{1}{3}$ letter grades. This means that I will grade it starting at a C+.
- If you send me an email, you can expect a reply from me within 24 hours (except for weekends; I'll reply first thing Monday morning).
- I will evaluate extension requests on your behalf should unexpected circumstances arise. Note: the fact that you may have similar due dates for other courses isn't an unexpected circumstance. I'm sympathetic to the vicissitudes of your lives – but plan accordingly!
- You're not permitted to use generative AI in writing your papers for this course. If I suspect the use of AI in your work, I reserve the right to request a meeting with you.
- If you're reading the syllabus this closely, great job! Email me a picture of a cat.
- You don't need an appointment to meet with me during my official office hours. Feel free to stop by! Talking through your writing projects, or the course material more generally, with another person is one of the best ways to succeed in this course.

Learning area(s)

This course is a part of the Power, Equity, Identity, and Culture (PEIC) component of the University of Richmond's general education curriculum. [Here's](#) some more information on PEIC:

“The power, equity, identity, and culture (PEIC) component of the general education curriculum strives to prepare students to understand, analyze, and contribute to a diverse, complex, and interconnected world. It engages students in a discussion about diversity and power imbalances either in the past or present among various cultural perspectives, within the U.S. or abroad. Students learn about inequities in particular societies and eras as well as efforts that aim to reduce them, and the challenges and opportunities diversity brings. Additionally, this component of the general education curriculum encourages students to engage with questions about how attitudes, experiences, and/or beliefs are shaped by context and cultural identity.

Learning Outcomes:

1. Students will analyze the origins and dynamics of structural inequities and power imbalances in specific societal contexts.
2. Students will analyze how attitudes, experiences, and/or beliefs are shaped both by context and/or cultural identity.
3. Students will demonstrate knowledge of the effects of inequities and power imbalances on a society, and the historical or current efforts, successful and unsuccessful, used to reduce such effects.”

Reading and writing philosophy

You’ll find that reading philosophy, and writing philosophy papers, is quite different than reading and writing papers on other subjects in the humanities. I encourage you to reach out via email or stop by my office hours if you have any questions, want to discuss paper structures, etc. Additionally, here are some external resources that you may find helpful:

- Connie Rosati, [“Some Suggestions for How to Approach Reading a Philosophical Article or Book”](#)
- Jim Pryor, [“Guidelines on Reading Philosophy”](#)
- Jim Pryor, [“Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper”](#)
- Elijah Chudnoff, [“A Guide to Philosophical Writing”](#)

Reading/Assignment Schedule

Pt. 1: What is morality?

Week 1: January 13, 15 (What is an argument?)

- **Read:** Korman, *Learning from Arguments* (selections)

Week 2: January 20, 22 (What is morality?)

- **Read:** Enoch, “Why I am an Objectivist about Ethics”

Week 3: January 27, 29 (Morality, cont.)

- **Read:** Benatar, “The Asymmetry Argument”

Pt. 2: Humans and animals

Week 4: February 3, 5 (abortion)

- **Read:** Thomson, “A Defense of Abortion”
- **Optional:** Marquis, “Why Abortion is Immoral”

Week 5: February 10, 12 (genetic enhancement)

- **Read:** Savulescu, “Procreative Beneficence”
- **Optional:** Sandel, “The Case Against Perfection”

Week 6: February 17, 19 (famine relief)

- **Read:** Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”
- **Optional:** Shafer-Landau, *The Fundamentals of Ethics* (selections)

FIRST ETHICAL ENGAGEMENT DUE MIDNIGHT ON SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 22

Week 7: February 24, 26 (animal rights)

- **Read:** Regan, “The case for animal rights”
- **Optional:** Diamond, “Eating Meat and Eating People”

Week 8: March 3, 5 (Mid-term)

- **3/3: Mid-term review**
- **3/5: IN-CLASS MID-TERM**

Week 9: March 10, 12 (Spring break – no class)

Pt. 3: Digital issues

Week 10: March 17, 19 (deepfakes)

- **Read:** Rini, “Deepfakes and the Epistemic Backstop”

Week 11: March 24, 26 (social media)

- **Read:** Castro & Pham, “Is the Attention Economy Noxious?”
- **Optional:** Simpson, “The Ethics of Quitting Social Media”

Week 12: March 31, April 2 (generative AI)

- **Read:** Brainard, “Creative Obsolescence”

SECOND ETHICAL ENGAGEMENT DUE MIDNIGHT ON SUNDAY, APRIL 6

Pt. 4: Bias and distribution

Week 13: April 7, 9 (implicit bias)

- **Read:** Gendler, “On the epistemic costs of implicit bias”

Week 14: April 14, 16 (racism and sexism)

- **Read:** Haslanger, “Oppressions: Racial and Other”
- **Optional:** Urquidez, “‘Racism without racists’: A clarification and refutation of the hypothesis”

Week 15: April 21, 23 (immoral artists)

- **Read:** Liao, “The Art of Immoral Artists”

FINAL PAPERS DUE MIDNIGHT ON SUNDAY, APRIL 26