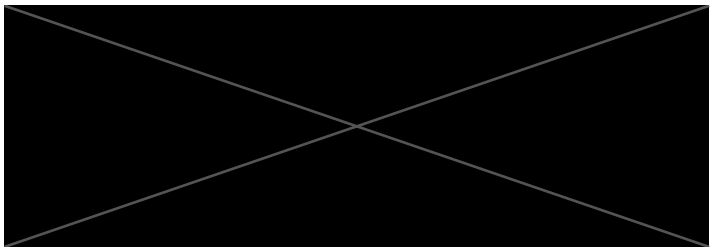
PHIL 120 – Contemporary Moral Issues



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 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 that 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 10/4): 15%
Ethical engagement #2 (due 11/8): 20%
Essay (due 12/9): 25%
Mid-term (in-class 10/14): 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).

- If you're reading the syllabus this closely, great job! Email me a picture of your favorite food.

- 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.

- 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, 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: August 24, 26 (What is an argument?)

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

Week 2: August 31, September 2 (What is morality?)

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

Week 3: September 7, 9 (Normative ethics)

- **Read:** Enoch, "Why I'm an Objectivist About Ethics"

Pt. 2: Humans and animals

Week 4: September 14, 16 (abortion)

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

Week 5: September 21, 23 (genetic enhancement)

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

Week 6: September 28, 30 (antinatalism)

- **Read:** Benatar, "The Asymmetry Argument"

FIRST ETHICAL ENGAGEMENT DUE MIDNIGHT ON SUNDAY, OCTOBER 4

Week 7: October 5, 7 (animal rights)

- **Read:** Regan, "The Case for Animal Rights"
- **Optional:** Diamond, "Eating Meat and Eating People"

Week 8: October 12, 14 (Mid-term)

- **10/12: FALL BREAK: NO CLASS**
- **10/14: IN-CLASS MID-TERM**

Pt. 3: Digital issues

Week 9: October 19, 21 (deepfakes)

- **Read:** Rini, "Deepfakes and the Epistemic Backstop"

Week 10: October 26, 28 (social media)

- **Read:** Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles"
- **Optional:** Castro & Pham, "Is the Attention Economy Noxious?"

Week 11: November 2, 4 (generative AI)

- **Read:** Brainard, "Creative Obsolescence"

SECOND ETHICAL ENGAGEMENT DUE MIDNIGHT ON SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 8

Pt. 4: Bias and distribution

Week 12: November 9, 11 (art and artist)

- **Read**: Li, "Immorality and Transgressive Art"
- **Optional**: Liao, "The Art of Immoral Artists"

Week 13: November 16, 18 (racism and sexism)

- **Read:** Haslanger, "Oppressions: Racial and Other"
- **Optional:** Urquidez, "'Racism without racists': A clarification and refutation of the hypothesis"

Week 14: THANKSGIVING BREAK — NO CLASS

Week 15: November 30, December 2 (implicit bias)

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

Week 16: December 7

- Paper workshopping

FINAL PAPERS DUE BY 12:00PM THURSDAY DECEMBER 10