

Moral Problems

Hopefully, most of us would like to do the right thing. Unfortunately, as the presence of widespread disagreement over controversial issues in our society suggests, there are many important issues for which figuring out what the right thing to do *is* isn't so easy. In this class, we'll try to figure out what the right answers to some of these hard moral problems are. We'll begin by discussing some theories of what, in general terms, makes right actions right and wrong actions wrong. But we'll spend most of the class discussing controversial moral issues, and considering arguments for different approaches to them. Which issues we discuss will be determined with input from the class. Potential examples might include abortion, euthanasia, military intervention, whether you're required to give all your extra money to charity, freedom of speech, religious liberty, social justice, animal rights, gun control, the ethics of social media use, sexual ethics, or anything else people want to talk about.

Tentative Course Outline (often only specific sections of articles will be assigned--check the reading instructions on Sakai for details):

I. Introduction

"Moralizing in Public," Anita Allen

"The Possibility of an Ongoing Moral Catastrophe," Evan G. Williams

William G. Lycan and George N. Schlesinger, "You Bet Your Life: Pascal's Wager Defended"

II. Moral Theories

Stephen Nathanson, "Utilitarianism, Act and Rule"

Christine Korsgaard, excerpts from the introduction to Kant's *Groundwork*

Elizabeth Ashford and Tim Mulgan, "Contractualism"

W.D. Ross, excerpts from *The Right and the Good*

Nafsika Athanassoulis, "Virtue Ethics"

III. Applied Ethics

This section will comprise the substantial majority of the class. What it's comprised of will be determined by a combination of a classroom vote and my editorial discretion. Potential topics include animal rights, whether you're required to give all your extra money to charity, abortion, euthanasia, whether it would be good to live forever, the morality of fighting in a war, sexual ethics, economic justice, criminal justice, the morality of breaking the law, whether it makes

sense to fight an injustice when you know you won't win, or anything else people want to talk about.

Texts:

Readings for this class will be posted on Sakai. Oftentimes, you will not be responsible for the entire piece; this is both because I want to keep the length of your readings manageable and because many texts include parts which aren't too important for our purposes (for instance, those parts may address objections which we won't focus on, or attack a view which we won't discuss.) However, I will usually post the whole thing in case anyone is interested in reading non-assigned parts of it, or in case anyone would find having the entire piece helpful when writing their papers. (E.g., I may post an entire article, but you may only need to read one or two sections of it.) I will post "reading instructions" on Sakai which will tell you which parts of the assigned materials are required reading. In the case of difficult pieces, these instructions may also include a brief explanation to help you understand what the author is arguing for, some definitions, and so on. Doing the readings ahead of time will help you understand the material better and participate in class more fully. If I think people are not doing the readings, I may give pop quizzes on them which will count towards your participation grade.

Assignments and rubric:

Your grade will be calculated as follows:

Participation: 20%
First exam: 18%
Second exam: 22%
First paper: 18%
Second paper: 22%

Participation: A major part of your participation grade will just be showing up. After two unexcused absences, your participation grade will seriously suffer. However, to get an A in participation, you should also (naturally) participate in class. A big part of philosophy is just *talking* to people. You understand your own views better by learning to articulate them to other people; you get a sense of alternatives by listening to other people articulate their views to you; you refine your views by listening to how people who disagree with you respond to them, and by responding to their responses; and so on. Each of you has different skills, different perspectives, and a different set of life experiences, and so has unique things to contribute to our investigation of philosophical issues. I know that some people *really* don't like talking in class, even when they understand and are interested in the material; if this is your situation, talk to me and we'll work something out.

During discussions, you should also practice good classroom etiquette. We will talk about some sensitive and controversial topics in this class. Some of the authors we read, and some of the

students in the class, will hold views which other students find silly, morally wrong, offensive, and possibly hurtful. It is fine to disagree, and to *passionately* disagree, with the authors we read, or other students, or me; the fact that people disagree about philosophical questions is why we have to work so hard on them. But it's important, insofar as it's feasible, to state one's own views, and to express one's disagreements with others, in a way that's considerate and respectful towards the other participants in the conversation. At the same, if something happens in class that makes you uncomfortable, let me know and I'll see what can be done about it.

Exams: You will have two exams, each of which will consist of a combination of multiple choice, short answer, and short essay questions. The exams exist to test your knowledge of the material we've read. At least a week before the exam, you'll get a study guide which points out particular things which you ought to know.

Papers: You'll also have two papers due, each of which should be about 1800 words long. The papers exist to give you a chance to *do* philosophy. You'll be asked to select an author we've read whose position you disagree with, argue against their position, and anticipate and argue against the response they might give to your objection. At least two weeks before the papers are due, you'll be given a more specific prompt with guidelines about how to write the paper and the criteria I'll use when grading it. If you have questions during the paper writing process, or if you want feedback on a draft, I'll be happy to answer any questions you have during my office hours.