**Class Conduct Policy**

This document describes appropriate behavior in class discussions. The requirements for your grade on discussion assignments are described in the document [xxxx]

**Rationale**

Physicists make progress by creating hypotheses and then testing them through experiments. Philosophers make progress by clearly articulating reasons for believing something and then having others try to come up with objections.

In a philosophy class, if we are not vigorously disagreeing with each other, we’re doing it wrong. If someone sees a flaw in our reasoning but doesn’t feel comfortable bringing it up, we don’t make progress. We don’t learn. We do waste our time.

## Obligations

We all lose out when someone does not contribute to our discussions. Therefore, each of us has two fundamental responsibilities:

1. You must contribute to the discussion. You are required to put forward your ideas. When you think you see a flaw in someone else’s reasoning, you must bring it up.
2. You must ensure that our discussion forums are a safe and respectful space for all students to express their reasoned opinions.

Okay, so everyone is equally responsible for ensuring that our discussions remain collegial. What does that mean?

First, it means refraining from doing things which undermine the environment yourself. When you post, don’t be an asshole. But more importantly, before you hit submit, it is your responsibility to read over your post and ensure that you are not violating our guidelines.

Second, it means speaking up when you feel remarks directed at you have violated our rules.

Third, it means keeping an eye out of comments, regardless of whom they are directed at, which violate our rules and listening with empathy when someone identifies comments as problematic.

Every student is expected to:

1. Participate in class discussions and other activities.
2. Ensure that everyone feels able to participate

My aim throughout the class will be for all of us to learn from each other. Therefore consistent and high quality participation is absolutely vital; it will be a requirement of many assignments.

Similarly, we will vigorously and critically argue over difficult ideas. We all lose out when someone does not feel able to contribute to our discussions. Therefore, each of us is responsible for maintaining a safe and respectful space for all students to express their reasoned opinions.

## Principles

Most generally, all class-related conduct must be in accordance with the StudentConduct Code(http://www.csun.edu/catalog/policies/student-conduct-code. All conduct must be civil and in the spirit of joint discovery.

Like everything human, there will be gray areas. That doesn’t mean everything is gray. Let’s start with some things which are never acceptable

1. Offensive comments related to gender, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, disability, mental illness, neuro(a)typicality, physical appearance, body size, race, religion, national origin, veteran status, or age.
2. Unwelcome comments regarding a person’s lifestyle choices and practices, including those related to food, health, parenting, drugs, and employment.
3. Deliberate misgendering (e.g., if someone identifies as male, referring to him as ‘her’)
4. Gratuitous or off-topic comments about sex or sexual behavior
5. Simulated physical contact (e.g,, textual descriptions like “\*slap\*”, “\*hug\*” or “\*backrub\*”)
6. Threats of violence
7. Incitement of violence towards any individual, including encouraging a person to commit suicide or to engage in self-harm
8. Deliberate intimidation
9. Comments which suggest an intent to engage in stalking or following
10. Sustained disruption of discussion
11. Pattern of inappropriate social contact, such as requesting/assuming inappropriate levels of intimacy with others
12. Continued one-on-one communication after requests to cease
13. Deliberate “outing” of any aspect of a person’s identity without their consent
14. Publication of non-harassing private communication

Hopefully, everything above strikes you as ‘duh’. Let’s turn to the trickier cases.

## Stay on topic

It's probably impossible to design a comprehensive set of principles of conduct if there are no constraints on topics. Fortunately, this is a class. We are discussing specific questions and specific arguments regarding their answers.

Simply keeping to the topic at hand should prevent a lot of problems. I cannot imagine any portion of this class in which it would make sense to bring up different crochet techniques. Nor can I imagine any portion where it would be appropriate to imply that straight white men should have more (or less) rights than others. We don’t even need to make judgments about where the lines of offensive vs. poor taste lie on a subject like that. They are off-topic.

The trickier situations will involve how an idea or opinion is expressed. It is perfectly possible to make legitimate points in an illegitimate way. We all have different values, and styles of communicating. Indeed, I expect that this some people will step over the line purely by accident.

I want to emphasize that there are two parts to this: topics and mode of expression.

## Political labels

If a political label (democrat, republican, liberal, fascist, et cetera) can be omitted without loss of content, don’t use it. Here’s my thinking.

Human beings are deeply tribal creatures. We evolved to have very close ties to other humans in our group. For most of human history we’ve lived in pretty small groups. Thus we are wired to respond differently to in-group members vs out-group members. Often that’s harmless ⎯Go Dodgers! Sometimes it isn’t.

There’s good psychological / political science research that once an issue, position, idea gets identified with political labels, it becomes extremely hard to think critically about it.

This one’s going to be messy.

## Me, as well

Let me be clear that everything in this document applies equally to me. I will be quite unhappy if you could’ve saved me from error but allowed me to go on believing false things or reasoning poorly.

If I do / say something which you believe violates our rules, you must say so. I want everyone to be included. If I do something which excludes people and nobody says anything, I won’t be able to fix the mistake.

## What to do when you believe someone has violated our rules

If the post is seriously disruptive, contact me immediately. You still need to raise the concern as described below, but get me in the loop right away. If someone else has already raised the concern, you should still contact me. Don’t assume I know what’s going on.

If the post threatens harm to anyone, contact the CSUN police department first. [INSERT PHONE #] Then contact me.

You still need to raise the concern as described below, but let me

First, remember that it remains your responsibility not to be an asshole. If you respond to an illegitimate remark in an illegitimate way, you are now also on the hook. That will often be hard to do. If you feel someone is being an asshole to you, you’ll probably feel angry. Give it a bit of time; grumble about the poster to your roommate; yell at the screen; whatever helps you calm down. The same applies if you are a 3rd party. I’m with Aristotle (and against the Stoics) in believing that it is a good thing that we get upset when we see someone doing something we believe to be wrong. Again, calm down first.

Cooled off? Now it’s time to reply.

First, it’s not going to help to just say “I think that post violates our rules!” The person posting probably has no idea which rule you believe they violated. Being called out in public is uncomfortable. Being called out without understanding why and without any means of response is infuriating.

Since everyone involved is either upset or about to be upset, let’s have a standard way of doing this. This will help the person who feels targeted not have to carefully word something when they are upset. And having a standard phrasing takes some of the sting out of it for the poster.

I am concerned that saying \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ is problematic. I feel it violates \_\_\_\_[rule number]\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. [Optional: This makes me feel \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.]

Notes

Notice that the author of the post isn’t being referred to at all. The only person named here is you.

## What to do when someone believes that you have violated our rules

If you mess up (a 2 step process)

You may think that the other person is overreacting. You may genuinely not understand why your post caused offense or hurt. That's often normal. We're all sensitive to different things. But you didn't mean to offend them or hurt them, right? (If the answer is no, you do not belong in this class.)

Step 1: Repair the situation. You know, apologize. Tell them that you didn't mean to cause offense.

Step 2: Repair yourself. This is the harder one. Remember

Acknowledge that someone

If someone else violates

Thus this is going to be a difficult moment to

## Language

## Requirements

Should be at a level of professionalism that you would use at your dream job. Not communicating with friends.

Grammar / spelling

## Profanity

We all have different tolerances for profanity. Personally, I believe there is a legitimate place for profanity in communication. Notice above that I said “Don’t be an asshole”. I didn’t say, “Don’t be someone who pervasively treats others without concern for their feelings or worse deliberately tries to make them feel bad.” The profanity (I believe) builds in an emotional charge which improves the chance that you’ll follow my injunction.

Occasional use is okay.

Be sensitive to the fact that some people do feel strongly about profanity.

Make sure that there’s no chance it could be interpreted as directed at someone.

Make sure that the profanity is not a slur (you might not be aware of the origin so be careful[[1]](#footnote-1)).

## Good communication practices

Personally, I continue to be amazed by how effective certain linguistic devices can be for managing conflict. Imagine that your significant other feels neglected because you’ve been working a lot. If they say, “You care more about your job than you do about me!” how will you feel? Probably defensive. They’ve charged you with a romantic crime; you’ll want to respond and clear your name.

But if they say “I feel like you care more about your job than you do about me”, they’ve said something about them. You might be annoyed, but you probably won’t feel defensive. (If they’re really crafty, they’ll acknowledge up front that you do care about them. Now it’s just about how they feel.)

## Handling of violations

I will read everything posted in our discussion forums when I grade them. That means there will often be a delay in my ability to respond to violations of our rules.

It is always okay to contact me to let me know about violation. Remember, our rules require that you raise the issue. So, you need to do that in addition to contacting me. Calling out violations can be uncomfortable; simultaneously letting me know may help you feel more comfortable doing so.

Penalties

If I find a post which I believe violates our rules and it has been dealt with as our rules require (i.e., the perpetrator apologized), I will base my actions on whether it seems to me that there remains a problem in need of remedy.

In the event of seriously uncivil or disorderly conduct, I will stop the class and ask the offending parties to leave for the day. I will not resume class until they leave; anyone who leaves before the end of the class period in such an event will be counted as absent. The offending parties will be counted as absent for the day and their participation grade will be seriously impacted. In cases of severe or persistent violations, I may pursue further action with the Dean of Students as provided for in the Student Conduct Code.

The same requirements of civility and decorum apply to any interactive online course activities. I will normally give one public warning for violations. Upon a second violation, the offending party will be barred from all such online course activities for the remainder of the semester. They will receive a zero on all of the assignments they miss. I reserve the right to impose this sanction without warning for particularly egregious violations.

## Agreement

By remaining enrolled in this course, you agree to conduct yourself in accordance with Class Conduct Policy and its revisions.

1. Yes, this gets murky. For example, I’ve had a long running debate with a friend over ‘dumb’. He maintains that it remains a slur against people with speech impairments. I maintain that the word has so thoroughly come to mean ‘stupid’ that virtually no one understands as a slur. Still, this argument has made me ask myself whether anyone will understand it as a slur against the disabled whenever I use it. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)