

Philosophy 220 ~ Contemporary Moral Issues

Fall 2021 Course Syllabus

Instructor Information

William F. Slavney, S.T.L.
Associate Professor of Philosophy
Thomas Center 100

<http://fwslavney.github.io>
wslavney@cbu.edu
(901) 321-3111

Office Hours: MTR 2:00 pm – 5:00 pm; WF 6:00 am – 9:00 am; other times by appointment

Course Description

For better or worse, our world is full of moral “grey areas.” Taking a position on any matter of ethical concern should involve more than mere appeal to authority, conventional wisdom, instinct, or intuition. The very best moral judgments are the result of careful and critical reflection, and they can be articulated in a coherent manner to other rational agents. Philosophy is the discipline concerned with grounding our ethical judgments, and it has a long history of reflections on how that is accomplished. In this course, we will survey the major schools of ethical theory (Virtue Ethics, Deontology, Utilitarianism, Existentialism, Contractarianism and Relativism) as well as the contributions to ethical theory made by feminist and critical race scholars in order to establish a philosophical foundation for addressing contemporary moral issues.

We will also spend a significant amount of time in this course interrogating how human life is shaped by our interactions with various technologies, as well as the particular challenges of navigating ethical life in the so-called “digital age.” Our interactions with technology are ubiquitous, essential, and quite often compulsory. In fact, one would be hard-pressed to find any corner of human life—social, political, moral, existential, psychological, or biological—that is not thoroughly shaped in one way or another by technology. So, in this course, we will also consider what the proper moral and political responses to our increasingly digital and automated machine-world ought to be.

Course Materials

All materials necessary for this course can be found through Canvas and my webpage.

Professionalism

It is good to form a habit of behaving in a professional manner. Behavior that is prohibited includes: the use of inappropriate language; playing with cell phones, tablets, or laptops in class; falling asleep; being disrespectful to the professor or fellow classmates; not addressing a teacher (or any faculty) by his/her appropriate title; and putting legs/feet on the tables or desks. If a student engages in any of this behavior, he/she may be removed from the class and given an F at the discretion of the instructor.

Shared Responsibility

I will in every instance treat students like rational, capable, and responsible adults they are. I take responsibility for making this class interesting, engaging, and informative. Students will be expected to take responsibility for their performance, active engagement, and satisfaction for of this course’s rules and requirements. If you feel like you are in “trouble” in this course at any time – whether that regards matters related to assignments, exams, or comprehension of the material – please come speak to me sooner rather than later. We are not antagonists in this venture. I want every student to do well.

Personal Responsibility

I do expect a certain level of responsibility, maturity, and integrity from you. I have I very high expectations, and I am sure you can meet them. You've made it this far, which means you have what it takes to get through this class. No excuses, and no giving up. Discuss any issues you may have with me as soon as they arise, and we will come up with a plan to tackle them. Understand, that while I want to see everyone do well and have no ill will towards anyone, it is **NOT** my responsibility to keep your GPA up, or to help you keep that scholarship, or whatever reason it is important that you do well here. These are your responsibilities. My responsibility is to facilitate you learning the material in this syllabus. I shall keep that responsibility. Please keep yours. Help me help you, and don't be shy or afraid to seek help when you need it. You can do well here; it will just take some directed effort and persistence.

Work Ethic

You are not to slack off! You are to read ahead! Very Important! Review each section before coming to class. It's better if you have your mind working on the concepts before coming to class—it will be easier for you to keep up and ask intelligent questions. Start working hard from day 1, don't put yourself in a position where you'll have to catch up. Prevention is better than cure. ***If you've taken this class before, you should be working harder than everyone else.***

**** Class meetings will be used to highlight/supplement/complement the material in the texts; however, you should NEVER expect me to “read” the text or assigned articles for you.** Regularly preparing for class and regularly attending class are two of the easier things you can do to be successful, but they are also two of the most important things you can do as well.

Classroom Learning Experience

Do not expect a homogeneous learning experience. This will not be the case and it is not good for you anyway. The text, my lectures, homework, and tests all have their place in helping you learn. Don't expect them to all be the same or cover the same material in the same way with the same level of difficulty. This is an unrealistic and unhelpful expectation. Throughout the course, I will be giving you the info you need to be prepared.

Electronic Devices

The use of any electronic device in my class is strictly prohibited. All electronic devices (pagers, phones, computers, calculators, MP3, iPods, apple watches, or any device after 1980) are to be stowed away prior to entering my class. If you walk into my classroom and you have a digital device on your person or sitting out on the table, you will be docked a letter grade. Pay attention!

Food & Drinks

Eating in class is NOT allowed, however a drink is permitted, as long as you remove your garbage afterwards. I understand if you need your coffee. If you leave your garbage behind, you will lose a letter grade for each time this occurs.

Attendance Policy

Students are expected to attend class every day, to complete all textbook reading before class, and to participate in class discussion regularly. Attendance will be taken at the beginning of each class period and students must answer the rollcall in order to be counted present for the day.

- **Tardiness:** Students who arrive late will be counted absent. The roll will not be adjusted at the end of class for tardy students.
- **Penalties for Absences:** Students who accumulate 5 absences will have their final grade reduced by an entire letter grade after the fifth absence.
- **(FA) Failure due to Absences:** It is the policy of Christian Brothers University that no student can pass a course in which he/she has been absent for 20% of the class meetings. Consequently, students who miss more than 8 classes will automatically fail the course. On a student's ninth absence, a grade of an "F" will be given for the semester.
- **Excused/Unexcused Absences:** There is no difference between "excused" and "unexcused" absences in this course. If you are not in class, my default assumption is that you have a legitimate and unavoidable reason for your absence. *(It is not necessary to notify me in advance of your absence or to email me an excuse for them. Please resist the temptation to do so.)* Students who have commitments that will require them to miss class – extracurricular activities, work commitments, athletic events, family obligations, etc. – should keep in mind that the penalties for 6+ absences apply to everyone the same way. Students are responsible for consulting their own calendars at the beginning of the term and identifying conflicts between their other obligations and the attendance requirements of this course. If you see that your extracurricular commitments will take up some of your "allowed" absences, you are strongly encouraged to plan ahead and to be aware that **ALL** missed classes/absences after the fifth will be penalized.
- **Responsibility for "missed" classes:** Students are solely responsible for whatever they miss in class because of absences. If you must be absent, you should contact one of your classmates to acquire the lecture notes or find out about announcements/assignments. You should never, under any circumstance, ask your professor to "let you know what you missed."

Students are responsible for keeping up with their own absences. **Everything outlined in the Attendance Policy is non-negotiable.**

A Preliminary Note on Grades

The work that you do and the learning that you accomplish in this class are more important than your grade. I am aware that grades are important to you. However, if you come speak to me about your performance in this course, expect that our conversation will be about how to improve your work or your understanding of the material, not about how to improve your grade. At the end of the semester, there will be a handful of people that need "just a few points" to get the grade they desire. The extra credit assignments given will be designated as THE mechanism to get these points. **I WILL NOT NEGOTIATE GRADES AT THE END OF THE SEMESTER.** It is my expectation that you will accept the grade assigned to you and take responsibility for **YOUR** work throughout the semester. Grade negotiation always leads to someone receiving special treatment and is a policy that I cannot abide as I desire to maintain an atmosphere of academic honesty and integrity. If you are concerned about your grade, please come and talk to me **DURING** the semester when something can be done about it. Please note that your grade will be calculated as indicated below. You are all perfectly capable of determining your point total (and therefore your grade) at any given time. Thus, you should not ask me to help you calculate your grade. If you do, I will refer you to this document.

Course Grading Policy

Letter grade assignments conform to the Christian Brothers University standard scale.

100.0% – 90.0% = A / 89.9% – 80.0% = B / 79.9% – 70.0% = C / 69.9% – 60.0% = D / <60.0% = F
Grading in this course will be based on the total points earned over the total possible points. Grades will be based off of the effort you put into this course. With that being said, I do not and will not round your final grade. If you have an 97.9999% you will have a 97.0 (A) average for the course.

Exams: In this course, there is one exam; the final exam. The final exam given this class is not a typical final; Instead, it will consist of a research paper. It will be worth 500 points. More details about the final exam will be given closer to the exam.

Quizzes: Students will be tested on the course material in several separate quizzes that will be completed on the students own time via Canvas. Each quiz will cover one- or two-weeks' worth of material. Quizzes will consist of part multiple choice questions and part T/F questions, and occasionally some short answer. All quizzes have a 50-minute time limit, are worth 25 points, and allow only one attempt. These quizzes are open notes and reference. Once the quiz is started, you must commit to finishing the quiz as time will continue to run down. Any questions that are left unanswered will receive zero points.

Q&A Discussions: Discussion Forums will be given on Canvas just about every week to discuss the material of focus for the week. In the study of Philosophy, formulating a good question is just as difficult, and just as important, as providing a good answer. In advance of each week's symposium, students will be required to post one Question about that week's material and post one Answer to a classmate's Question on Canvas. Each Q&A discussion will be worth 60 points, so please consult the "Guide to Formulating Good Questions (and Answers)" on your Canvas course site for tips on how to receive full credit for yours. All Questions must be posted to Canvas before Thursday at midnight each week, and all Answers must be posted to Canvas before Saturday at midnight.

Essays: In this course, you will write four, somewhat lengthy, essays on a given prompt. The first two essay assignments will focus on a specific philosopher, meanwhile the other two will focus on applying philosophical ideas to moral issues. Each essay will be worth 100 points. *(These will be the equivalents of an in-class exam.)*

Case Studies: Case Studies are assignments that require you to place yourself in a moral situation and take a position and argue it based off a philosophical moral theory that we have studied so far. There are no wrong answers to these case studies, however there are such things as bad answers. More details about these assignments can be found on Canvas and my webpage. Each case study that you complete in this course will be worth 30 points.

Symposium:

Philosophy is best done in conversation. Talking through an issue is the best way to really understand it. Being able to explain your position to someone else, and responding to objections in real time, is the best evidence that you really believe what you're saying. In fact, the ancient Greek philosophers would regularly gather together for **symposia** (Greek for "conversations"), during which they would eat, drink, ask big questions, and discuss big ideas. Each Friday

throughout the semester, we will do the same, minus the eating and drinking part. Each Friday's symposium will focus on the material from that week. Students will have the opportunity to ask questions about anything they did not understand, and we will discuss together how the philosophies we are studying apply to important moral, political, social, and technological issues in our contemporary lives and world.

Course Deadlines

LATE WORK WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED! Only in a case involving unusual and documented circumstances can the student be given an extension on a deadline. I will employ the strictest possible definitions of "unusual" and "documented," so be forewarned that it is exceedingly difficult (*read: almost impossible*) to warrant an extension. Being sick, although documentable, is not unusual and not merit an extension. Being abducted by aliens, although unusual, is not documentable and also will not merit an extension. In other words, consider deadlines in this course as "hard" deadlines.

Office Hours

Don't be scared of coming to office hours! I genuinely enjoy talking to my students outside of class. If you're struggling or confused by some aspect of the class, don't wait until you're failing—come see me! However, don't feel like you need to have a major crisis. You're perfectly welcome to stop by for a casual chat or general guidance/questions. If you're not taking advantage of your professors' office hours, you're not fully taking advantage of the college experience. Individual access to experts in a variety of fields is a big part of what you're paying for.

Instructor Feedback on Assignments & Conferencing

I do not accept any assignments via e-mail unless I explicitly request them that way. I also do not proofread or edit assignment drafts. Draft your assignments early and bring them into my office hours well before the deadline if you would like to receive feedback or guidance on an assignment. When you come to my office, you must provide a detailed description of the work that you have done so far to complete the assignment; provide proof of your work in the form of a bibliography or draft; and articulate the specific problem that you have encountered and would like to discuss, or the kind of feedback on your work that you would like to receive from me. If you set up a conference to tell me, "I do not know what to write about," or, "There are no sources on my topic," you have yet to do enough work to make a conference productive. Conferences that require my feedback on work that is already in progress will receive my highest attention.

Classroom Communication & Email Correspondence

Please consider the following email communications in this course.

- **Emails from the Professor:** If I need to contact the entire class outside of regular class time, I will send an email as well as post an announcement on my website. Students are responsible for any information communicated to the class in emails, or on the class website.
- **Emails to the Professor:** When students have questions about the course material, requirements, or assignments, they should ask those questions in class. If your questions are not fully addressed in class, you should come to my office hours or make an

appointment to speak with me. If you are unable to come to office hours, or if you have a time-sensitive issue to discuss, your next best option is to speak with me immediately before or after class. Keep in mind that, for most of the semester, you will see me within the next 48 hours, so EMAIL SHOULD BE USED ONLY AS A LAST OPTION. Email is **never** the appropriate medium for negotiating special requests or addressing grade concerns, both of which must be handled in person. Please regard email a formal communication and abide by conventional rules of professional etiquette when you are composing your email. I will make every effort to respond to emails promptly, but at no point should students expect emails to be answered in less than 24 hours.

Emails to your professor should always include the following:

- **a formal salutation:** For example, “Dear Professor Jones,”
- **a clear indication of who you are:** For example, “My name is Abraham Lincoln and I am in your 10 am CBU 101 class.”
- **a detailed and specific question:** If I cannot answer your question in 3 sentences or less, then you are writing about something that requires an in-person meeting.
- **an indication of what you have already done to answer your question:** You should never email a question to your professor that can be answered by consulting your syllabus, one of your classmates, the webpage, the CBU Handbook, or (in many cases) Google.
- **a valediction and your name:** For example, “Sincerely, Abraham Lincoln”

Before sending an email to any of your professors: wait one hour, reread it, consult a classmate, and then think *very hard* about whether emailing is necessary.

Academic Honesty & Integrity

Dishonesty of any kind will not be tolerated in this course. Dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, cheating, plagiarizing, fabricating information or citations, facilitating acts of academic dishonesty by others, having unauthorized possession of examinations, submitting work of another person or work previously used without informing the instructor, or tampering with the academic work of other students. All policies for academic honesty will be strictly enforced in all that you do for this course.

Grades are given as an evaluation of your work. Any attempt to pass somebody else's work as your own or being found in violation of academic honesty will earn you a grade of a F for the course as well as a possible academic dismissal from the institution.

Confidentiality of Academic Work

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 recognizes specific rights held by you as a student. These include your right to consent or denial of disclosure of your academic records, including any and all grades pertaining to this course. In accord with FERPA, apart from the following stated exceptions, I will not discuss your personal academic work in this course with anyone without your written consent, as filed with the Registrar. The exceptions are: 1) reporting your grades at the end of the semester to the Registrar, 2) cases where performance in the course is low to the point of potential failure in the final grade, in which case I may consult with the Academic Dean, 3) cases where, in my estimation, you may present a danger to yourself or to others.

Students, of course, are free to discuss the specifics of their personal academic performance with whomever they wish. However, the instructor will not be held responsible for any disclosures made by the student on the student's own volition, or for any consequences of such self-disclosures.

Students with Disabilities

Any student who may need class or test accommodations based on the impact of a disability is encouraged to speak with CBU's Director of Student Disability Services privately to discuss your specific needs. Students with disabilities should also contact Student Disability Services in the Thomas Center at (901) 321-3536. Student Disability Services coordinates reasonable accommodations for students with documented disabilities. If you have a disability or difference that requires assistance from the Office of Disability Services, please bring me documentation so that we can ensure that the proper arrangements will be made for you.

Lastly, An Important Note to My Students

I CARE ABOUT YOU AND I TAKE YOU VERY SERIOUSLY!

YOU, the student, as a whole person, are my top priority as a teacher. Given the rigor of the course, and the fact that students are often participating in other school and community activities or obligations, at times significant stress can result. While stress is normal (and can actually be a positive thing in the right circumstances), it should never be suffocating. Students should first and foremost know that the language of my classroom is one of love and laughter. Your wellbeing matters more to me than any test score or grade could ever mean. You should also know that my door is always open to you, and I am here to listen and provide as much support as I can. If the workload of the course becomes overwhelming, please come talk to me individually, so that we can strategize how to make things work while also accomplishing the objectives of the course. College courses are not for everyone, and there is no shame in struggling. Honors courses and grades do not define who you are as a person or as a student. Sometimes, through absolutely no fault of our own, the weight of the stresses and emotions in our lives become overwhelming. Students should know that I, and other staff members at the university, including our professionally trained guidance counselors, are always willing to listen free of judgement. However, if you do not feel comfortable talking with me or someone else here, a few important free numbers that you can utilize 24/7/365 are:

- Crisis Text Line: Text "HOME" to 741741
Every person who texts is connected with a Crisis Counselor, an actual person trained to bring you from a difficult moment to a cool calm through active listening and collaborative problem solving, and provide further resources as necessary.
- TrevorText for LGBTQ College Students: Text TREVOR to 1-202-304-1200
TrevorText is a confidential and secure resource that provides live help for LGBTQ college students with a trained specialist.
- The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255
A national network of local crisis centers that provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress.

Note: *I reserve the right to make any changes to this syllabus and its accompanying directives as circumstances internal or external to our learning experience may unfold in unanticipated ways throughout the semester.*

Finally, Good Luck and May God Bless You!