

## **Philosophy 115-01J: Introduction to Ethics (Spring 2012)**

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Visiting Lecturer

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Office hours: Tuesdays 2:30-5:30 and by appointment in Language Hall 203

(Note: I want to meet with you outside of class. Don't be shy.)

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

In this course, we are going to grapple with the problem of how we should live. As we do, we will consider some serious questions including the following:

- 1) What makes a life worth living? Is life just valuable all by itself, or are there some lives that are not worth living?
- 2) What is it that makes us who we are? Do you think you know who you really are? How would you find out?
- 3) Are there any absolute rules that we should follow? If so, what are they? Why should we follow them?
- 4) Is morality supposed to make people happy? Does it make people happy? If not, why be moral?

Throughout the course, we are going to consider the merits and drawbacks of a variety of moral theories (theories about the basis of moral claims). As we go, we will also consider some “hot button” political issues that might include assisted suicide, abortion, torture, terrorism, just war, animal rights, gay marriage, infant circumcision, pornography, acquaintance rape, wealth disparity and the death penalty. Which exact problems we actually discuss will be determined by student preference.

As a third component of the course, (in addition to the 4 questions of moral theory above, and the various hot-button issues), we will also consider several of these and/or similar problems (depending on time and interest):

What does it mean to forgive someone and when should you do it?

What is love? Why do people love each other and what are they doing when they love each other?

What is freedom? What is so great about it? Are people free? How can we tell?

How is technology changing humanity? Why are we so obsessed with technological progress? Is this a good thing?

How should we treat criminals?

Where do desires come from and can they be trusted? Is it good to have lots of desires?

We are often partial toward our friends, families and communities –when, if ever, is such partiality legitimate?

Is there an important difference between killing someone and just letting someone die?

Why do we lie to ourselves, and how do we manage to pull it off?

## COURSE GOALS

Part of the purpose of any introductory course is to expose students to some of the influential perspectives in the field, and this course is no exception. By the end of the course, I will expect you to be familiar with several of the major moral theories and the most significant objections to those theories. You should be able to identify arguments characteristic of each kind of theory and be able to make arguments from the perspective of each theory. You should also be conversant with key terms that philosophers use to describe moral theories.

More importantly, I want you to learn to think philosophically. That means being able to pose new and striking questions about the assumptions behind your own beliefs and the beliefs of others, and being able to draw subtle distinctions when necessary to resolve disagreements. It means being tolerant of complexity and being able to come with creative ways to approach questions that are difficult to answer. It means you can read between the lines of a text, and consider the implicit implications of what is being said. It means you are always thinking deeper to figure out what the conversation is “really about,” and where the root of the disagreement lies. To put it differently, it means that you are always seeking to identify your own reasons for your views and the reasons that others give for theirs.

My ultimate hope is that development of the skills and knowledge just described will make it really likely that you will have a transformative insight into what it can mean for you to live a human life in this class.

## TEXTS

Many of the readings for the course will be made available to you electronically either through E-reserves or Blackboard. You will be expected to print these out and bring them with you to class. In addition, you will have to buy a few inexpensive books. They are these:

Plato – *Gorgias* [Translated by Donald Zeyl, Hackett, 1986, ISBN: 0872200167]

Shafer-Landau, Russ – *The Fundamentals of Ethics* [Oxford, Second Edition, 2011, ISBN: 0199773556]

Weston, Anthony – *A Rulebook for Arguments* [Hackett, 4th edition, 2008, ISBN: 0872209547]

These books should be available in the campus bookstore. It matters that you have the correct edition of each of the texts, especially the *Gorgias*. As with anything, if this is a problem for you, we can discuss it.

Electronically provided readings may be by authors such as the following: Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, Jean-Paul Sartre, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Martha Nussbaum, Judith Jarvis Thomson, St. Augustine, Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Susan Wolf. Readings will be determined in part by student interest.

## ASSESSMENT

10% Homework assignments and quizzes

15% Paper drafts and workshops

15% Each of 3 essays (approx. 5 pages each)

5% Group presentation

10% Midterm exam

15% Cumulative final exam (Wednesday, May 9<sup>th</sup>, 9:00am-12:00pm)

There will be ample opportunity for active participation in this class. I value that highly, so I reserve the right to increase your final grade by as much as 2/3 of a letter grade based on the quality of your contribution to discussions (e.g., moving you from a C+ to a B or from a B- to a B+). Asking for clarification when something isn't clear can be a helpful way of contributing. If you are confused, chances are that a lot of other people are also! Speak up!

The grading scale:

A: 93 or above	A-: 90–92.95	B+: 87–89.95	
B: 83–86.95	B-: 80–82.95	C+: 77–79.95	
C: 73–76.95	C-: 70–72.95	D: 60–69.95	F: below 60

## EXAMS AND QUIZZES

Exams will include a mix of multiple-choice and essay questions. For some readings, I may give very short quizzes at the beginning of class to assess your comprehension. This would be partly for my own benefit and partly so you can check that you are reading carefully enough and that you are reading for the right information. In any case, I will provide a few quizzes so you'll know what to expect on the exams.

## HOMEWORK

I will ask you to complete a variety of tasks as homework. These may include answering one or several questions about the assigned reading or about your own thoughts on some issue. In some cases, I may ask you to submit things to me, and in other cases I may ask you to post them in an online discussion forum. Homework assignments may require as much as 500 words of writing per week.

## GROUP PRESENTATION

I will divide the class into several groups based on your stated topic preferences. Each group will be responsible for leading a class session on their topic, which should include a presentation followed by some guided discussion. The presentation should include some attempt to grapple with the major

points made in the reading assigned to the class on your topic. It should also involve arguing for a position on the issue or issues at hand and some attempt to acknowledge and respond to the arguments of the other side. (Different group members might separately argue for different positions if the group does not agree. In fact, that might be the best possible situation.)

To go along with this presentation, you will also be doing your own independent research on your topic. As part of this research, you will be responsible for writing a paper (this is one of the 3 essays). Prior to the presentation, you will submit a draft of this paper to your group members, and they will be expected to provide feedback on it. The final version of the paper will be due shortly after the presentation.

## LATENESS PENALTIES

Homework assignments are considered part of your preparation for class and will not be accepted once the topic/reading they are about has been discussed in class. The same goes for reading quizzes.

If you have missed or are going to miss a deadline for an essay or draft, you should contact me immediately. In cases of draft workshops, it may not be possible for you to participate if you don't submit your draft on time, in which case you may receive a 0% for the assignment.

If an essay is submitted after the deadline and arrangements have not been made in advance with me, it will be deducted 10% for the first day late, and 2% more for each subsequent day. I am usually very open to making special arrangements, but you have to contact me and let me know what is up.

Make-up exams will be given only in cases of documented emergencies. Any student who knows in advance that she is going to miss an exam should notify me of the problem immediately.

## ATTENDANCE

Attendance is required for this course. Barring extraordinary circumstances, you will be penalized for any absences after the 3<sup>rd</sup> in the amount of 2 percent of your total grade for each. A visit to the health center is not an "extraordinary circumstance," and will count as one of your 3 absences. The same goes for poorly made travel plans. On the other hand, if something is going on in your life that is requiring you to miss a lot of classes, please let me know and I will work with you to figure it out.

## TECHNOLOGY

Cell phones should be turned off throughout class meetings (this does not just mean that the ringer should be turned off; no use of cell phones, including text communications, will be tolerated barring extraordinary circumstances). Laptops are similarly prohibited. However, if you feel you have a special reason to use a laptop, talk to me about it.

## PLAGIARISM

As with all classes at Oxford, the Student Honor Code will be taken very seriously in this class. You can find an online copy of the Code here:

[http://www.oxford.emory.edu/audiences/current\\_students/academics/academic\\_success/honor\\_code.dot](http://www.oxford.emory.edu/audiences/current_students/academics/academic_success/honor_code.dot)

## ACCOMODATIONS

I will gladly make reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. However, requests for accommodation made immediately before an exam or paper deadline may be impossible to honor. It is therefore important that students with any condition such that the requirements of this class potentially present a problem should make this known to me as soon as they become aware of it. Before an accommodation can be made, students will need to consult with the Office of Disability Services to obtain proper documentation.

The Office of Disability Services website is accessible via the following link:

[http://oxford.emory.edu/life/support\\_services/disability\\_services.dot](http://oxford.emory.edu/life/support_services/disability_services.dot)

## MISCELLANEOUS

From time to time, I find a student's assignment that can be instructive, either as an example of what to do or what not to do. If yours is one of those, I may use it for instructional purposes, now or in the future. (Your name would be removed.)

Student work submitted as part of this course may be reviewed by Oxford College and Emory College faculty and staff for the purposes of improving instruction and enhancing Emory education.

Everything in this syllabus can change (and often something does). You are responsible for keeping abreast of any such changes, which will be announced in class and via email should they occur.

**\*\*Staying in this class amounts to consent to everything on this syllabus. \*\***