

PHI2630 CONTEMPORARY MORAL ISSUES

SPRING 2024

Instructor: James Gillespie	Time: MWF 3:00–3:50 (Period 8)
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Office Hours: Monday 12:00–1:30pm, Wednesday 12:00–1:30pm, and by appointment.

Course Overview

Course Description

Do non-human animals have moral standing, comparable to that of human beings? Is abortion ever morally permissible? Are affirmative action policies morally justified or morally bankrupt? What is the most ethically justified immigration policy—one of largely open or largely closed borders? Given the persistence of vast global poverty in our world, what moral duties do those of us in wealthy nations have to persons in impoverished states? Should private gun ownership be morally permissible or impermissible? Is climate change a significant issue for individual morality? Are individuals morally responsible for their greenhouse gas emissions, despite the fact that individual actions seem to make little difference to climate change? Is the death penalty morally justified, or not?

These are examples of moral questions about which many of us have strong and often opposing opinions. And, just as we disagree on many of these issues, so do many philosophers, political theorists, and economists. In this course, we examine opposing philosophical arguments and points of view on these urgent moral questions. The governing aim of our course will be to come to grips with and critically reflect on the underlying justifications for the various sides of these different debates. This course counts towards the Humanities (H) general education requirement and the Writing (W) requirement (4000 words).

Learning Objectives

The specific learning objectives of this course may be described in terms of the three categories of content, communication and critical thinking as follows.

- *Content.* Students will become familiar with some of the major questions, positions, and arguments with respect to some important philosophical topics concerning death, such as: the knowledge/metaphysics of death, how death relates to the value of life, whether existence is better than non-existence, and the morality of killing. (Assessed by all aspects of the course.)
- *Communication.* Students will become practiced in presenting clearly and effectively ideas that are controversial and often liable to misunderstanding. Assessed by all aspects of the course, but especially the graded writing assignments. (Assessed by participation and discussion.)
- *Critical Thinking.* Students will gain skills in reasoning clearly, writing out arguments, anticipating objections, and investigating difficult questions in a conscientious fashion. (Assessed by the graded writing assignments.)

Students can find information on the General Education Objectives for the [humanities here](#).

Writing Requirement Credit This course is marked ‘WR’, and is designated to satisfy 4,000 words of Writing Requirement credit. 4,000 words amounts to approximately 17 pages of writing (12 point font, double-spaced, one-inch margins). Needless to say, there will be more writing in this course than you may be accustomed to from other courses. But, you can do it! The Writing Requirement (WR) ensures students both maintain their fluency in writing and use writing as a tool to facilitate learning. [Here is a link to the official UF statement about the WR.](#)

Students in this course can earn 4000 words towards the UF Writing Requirement (WR). The Writing Requirement (WR) ensures students both maintain their fluency in writing and use writing as a tool to facilitate learning. Course grades have two components. To receive writing requirement credit, a student must receive a grade of (C) or higher **overall** and a satisfactory completion of the writing component of the course. Satisfactory completion of the writing component requires submission of all four papers and a grade of (C+) or better on three out of four of them. (So, you can receive a C in the course without meeting the writing requirement.) A few things to note about the WR are the following:

- Written assignments that count toward the University of Florida Writing Requirement should contain extended analysis and develop original, sophisticated ideas, not merely present hastily written or cursory thoughts. UF Writing Requirement assignments should include such elements as well-crafted paragraphs, a thesis or hypothesis, a persuasive organizational structure, well-supported claims, and appropriate and effective stylistic elements.
- Writing will be evaluated based on the content, organization and coherence, effectiveness, style, grammar, and punctuation. I will provide a detailed rubric that shows how I will evaluate assignments using these criteria.
- In-class writing assignments, class notes, and essay examinations may not be counted toward the 4,000 words.
- You may find it helpful to reach out to the UF Writing Studio for writing help, [linked here](#).

Course Objectives/Goals This course is designed to introduce students to the central philosophical questions and arguments concerning practical ethics as represented by a selection of historical and contemporary readings. Students will learn how to think clearly and critically about these questions and arguments, represent them clearly and fairly, and evaluate them for cogency. Students will also learn to develop their own arguments and views regarding the philosophical questions studied in the course in a compelling fashion and formulate their own answers to practical ethical questions. In these ways the course aims to develop students’ own reasoning and communication skills in ways that will be useful in any further study of philosophy and beyond the bounds of philosophy itself.

Students in this course should:

- Identify, describe, and explain the major arguments and options in core areas of contemporary practical ethics.
- Understand the conceptually-important ideas in contemporary practical ethics and apply them
- Discern the structure of arguments, to represent them fairly and clearly and to evaluate them for cogency.
- Formulate original arguments, anticipating objections and responding in a conscientious fashion.
- Read and discuss complex philosophical texts from contemporary works.
- Speak and write clearly and persuasively about abstract and conceptually elusive matters.

Course Requirements and Grading

Required texts and readings There is no required textbook for this course; any and all readings will be made available through our course’s Canvas/E-Learning page.

Expectations As a student in this class, you are of course expected to read the assigned material, attend lectures, participate in class discussion, and complete assignments. In addition, however, you are also expected to:

- be familiar with all policies and requirements as set out in the Complete Course Syllabus
- stay informed by keeping up with all deadlines and announcements made on the Canvas site
- maintain academic integrity in all of your work—or risk failing the entire course
- be respectful of your classmates, even when engaged in lively critical dialogue with them
- inform the instructor promptly of anything that will affect your ability to do what is required

If you do these things and make a serious effort, you should be able to do well in the course, especially if you are willing to seek help when you need it. It is important to understand, though, that a grade is meant to record how well you have in fact demonstrated the skills and knowledge the class is supposed to instill; it is not in itself a reward for effort.

Grade Determination Your grade is determined according to the following *four* categories.

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| 1. Attendance: | You will be expected to attend all class meetings. But, you are permitted to miss 3 class meetings, without penalty, no-questions asked. For each class meeting missed (<u>after</u> the 3 freebies), without a written, University-sanctioned excuse, you will lose 5 points—each student starts with 100 out of a possible 100 points. |
| 2. Participation: | Philosophy is best realized through conversation. My aim is to start and to frame a conversation, to which all of you will, then, contribute. You should come to each class meeting ready to talk. On the days designated as discussion-based, you should be prepared with either a question or a comment about at least one of the week's assigned readings. Additionally, you will be asked regularly to complete various discussion-based and written responses in-class, which will count towards your participation grade. N.B. Visiting office hours <i>does count</i> towards your participation grade. |
| 3. Columns: | Rather than assign nothing but traditional-style essays, most of your writing in this course will take the form of bi-weekly applied ethics advice columns (of ~400 words each). These will be mirrored on <i>The Ethicist</i> column from the <i>New York Times</i> which we will read periodically throughout the semester. You will write a total of seven advice columns. Detailed essay instructions and prompts will be distributed one week prior to the due date of the column assignment. In order to receive the WR credit for this course, your average grade must be a C+ on these three assignments, combined. |
| 4. Short Essays: | To fill out the 4000 words, there will be two short essays in this course (of ~700 words each). These will be more traditional-style writing assignments that ask you to argue for an answer to a specific prompt and defend your argument from objections. Detailed essay instructions and prompts will be distributed two weeks prior to the due date of the essay assignment. In order to receive the WR credit for this course, your average grade must be a C+ on these three assignments, combined. |

Grading Breakdown The course grade is determined by the following factors with the indicated percentages:

Kind of assignment	# assigned	% of course grade
Participation & discussion	# of class meetings	15%
Attendance	# of class meetings	5%
Ethical advice columns	7	40%
Short essays	2	40%

Additionally, I will break down the grading for the two short papers required in this course as follows. Your best paper will be worth 25% of your final grade and your worst paper will only be worth 15%. In this way, you're rewarded for your best work and not unfairly penalized for your worst.

Grading Scale The grade scale is different from what you are surely used to seeing. Instead of using a scale where an A starts at 92% or 94% or the like, the grading scale in this class is based on the 4-point scale for letter grade values, where an A is worth 4 points, an A- is 3.67 points, and so on. Since Canvas uses percentages for grades, the 4-point scale is translated into percentages to get the following scale.

Grade Scale	Grade Value	Grade Scale	Grade Value	Grade Scale	Grade Value
100–91.75% = A	A = 4.0	66.74–58.25% = B-	B- = 2.67	33.24–25% = D+	D+ = 1.33
91.74–83.25% = A-	A- = 3.67	58.24–50% = C+	C+ = 2.33	24.9–16.75% = D	D = 1.00
83.24–75% = B+	B+ = 3.33	49.9–41.75% = C	C = 2.00	16.74–8.25% = D-	D- = 0.67
74.9–66.75% = B	B = 3.00	41.74–33.25% = C-	C- = 1.67	8.24–0 = E	E = 0.00

Don't let yourself be confused by this scale! Your grade on Canvas will always show a letter, but if you see that you earned, say, a 68% on an assignment, don't immediately think that this means you earned a poor grade; a 68% counts as a B. The grades are not curved; they are just determined using this not very familiar scale. For information on how UF assigns grade points, [check out this page](#).

In evaluating particular assignments, we generally use the following way of assigning points:

Excellent	Good	Adequate	Minimal	Unacceptable
4	3	2	1	0

An assignment might be assessed using several factors, where each factor is evaluated using this system. All of the graded work in this class is assessed using the percentage-to-letters scale given above.

In accordance with UF policy, a grade of C- for the course is not a qualifying grade for major, minor, General Education or College Basic Distribution requirements. Further information on UF's grading policy can be found [on this page](#).

Class Routine While class sessions are a mixture of lecture and discussion, this course will be largely discussion based, and—generally—Fridays will be reserved exclusively for discussion reflecting on the week. In my experience students learn best when these two things are not separated but mixed together. You are encouraged to ask questions or make comments at any point. If I think it best to leave the question or comment until a later point, I will ask you to wait, but usually I am happy to address your thoughts immediately. I will normally come to class with an outline of topics and/or activities for us that day, though I might depart from it considerably depending on how things go.

Philosophy and Respectful Dialogue Philosophy is a highly critical enterprise; we are in the business of evaluating the merits of different arguments and claims. As a result, philosophical discussion can seem intimidating or even mean-spirited at times, at least when the participants let their enthusiasm bypass their usual sense of diplomacy. In no way do I want to discourage enthusiasm, but I want to stress that the critical points made in philosophy can all be directed at ideas and arguments, not people. Your aim should be to assess whether a given claim is plausible, whether certain arguments are cogent, and so on. Even if you decide a particular argument is a very bad one, you need not go on to think ill of the person who made the argument. The fact is that philosophy is difficult. In class discussion you should recognize that your fellow students are struggling with the ideas just as you are, and while you should feel free to criticize their ideas, you should also welcome their criticism of your own ideas. So: you should be vigorous and engaged in class discussion, but keep your critical remarks relevant and polite. And remember that you can help as well as criticize: you may note that an argument has a problematic premise, point this out, and then suggest a better one to replace it! Philosophy is not a matter of combat between people; we are all engaged in a cooperative effort to achieve understanding, and while that may mean letting the ideas fight among themselves, so to speak, it does not require that we fight with each other.

Additional Course Expectations

1. **Essay Source Materials:** Any source materials appealed to in your essay assignments that do not come from assigned course texts, must be cleared with the Professor at least 1 week prior to the due date of the assignment. If you do not clear additional sources with the Professor 1 week prior to turning in your paper, you will be penalized (10% for each source not-cleared, only if the source is cited). None of the assignments for this class will require resources beyond the required readings.
2. **Text and Note Taking:** In each lecture, we will be taking an in-depth look at the assigned readings for that session. You are expected to have a copy of the text(s) with you, and you will benefit from being able to mark the passages that are focused on in lecture. You are also expected to have a copy of the text(s) as well as paper and something to write with for each discussion section.
3. **Course Slides:** There may be slides for some class meetings, and, if so, these will be posted on the course's Canvas site after each lecture meeting. Please Note: while these slides will provide you with helpful material when drafting your papers, they will not cover everything that is discussed in either lecture or discussion session meetings. In order to have the fullest understanding of the material, you will need to be present for each lecture meeting as well as discussion section.

Policies and resources

Academic honesty UF students are bound by The Honor Pledge which states:

We, the members of the University of Florida community, pledge to hold ourselves and our peers to the highest standards of honor and integrity by abiding by the Honor Code. On all work submitted for credit by students at the University of Florida, the following pledge is either

required or implied: “On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing this assignment.”

The Honor Code in full can be found [right here](#). It specifies a number of behaviors that are in violation of this code and the possible sanctions. Furthermore, you are obligated to report any condition that facilitates academic misconduct to appropriate personnel. If you have any questions or concerns, please consult with the instructor or teaching assistants in this class.

In any academic writing you are obliged to inform the reader of the sources of ideas expressed in your work. Failure to do so is plagiarism. **WE HAVE A ZERO-TOLERANCE POLICY FOR ACADEMIC DISHONESTY. CLEAR EVIDENCE OF ACADEMIC DISHONESTY MEANS AN AUTOMATIC FAILING GRADE FOR THE ENTIRE COURSE.** This includes not just plagiarism but any conduct constituting academic dishonesty as defined in the honor code, including prohibited collaboration, prohibited use of resources, and so on. Any act of academic dishonesty is reported to the Dean’s Office. The Dean’s Office prevents students from dropping courses in cases of academic dishonesty. **If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism or other academic dishonesty it is your responsibility to get answers. Do not be afraid to ask if you are unsure.**

We are serious about this. If you cheat in any way and are caught, you will fail the course. Cheating is an insult to the professor, any teaching assistants, and your fellow students. It will not be tolerated.

Outside sources

There are many resources out there about philosophy, including on the internet. We cannot stop you from looking at those sources, but we want to strongly discourage you from looking at them. Doing so will probably hurt you more than it can help you. Here’s why.

- The variety of material out there is of very inconsistent quality. While there are many sites with good, informed discussion by people who know what they’re talking about, there are many other sites about which that cannot be said.
- Even if the site you are reading has high quality material on it, there is a good chance it will be more bewildering than enlightening. Without any help in approaching the material, you could end up much more confused than before.
- If you find yourself browsing through the results of a Google search on the philosophical topics under discussion in this class, you may find yourself tempted to make use of ideas you get from what you found without citing them properly. If you do that, however, that will constitute plagiarism, and you then run the risk of getting an automatic failing grade for the course as stressed above. If you refrain from such browsing, you avoid that temptation and risk.
- Even if you are entirely conscientious and cite everything you use that you find from these outside sources, you might be tempted to do something else that, while honest, is definitely not to your advantage. This is the temptation to lean on the ideas of the outside sources without trying to think through the issues on your own. More precisely, you may be tempted to fill up the paper by explaining someone else’s argument, then someone else’s objection to it, and then someone else’s reply to it, and end with nothing by way of your own contribution. If you write such an essay clearly and show that you understand the issues, it may get a passing grade, but it won’t get a good grade. We hope for you to come out of this class with some real skills in both thinking for yourself and being critically rigorous. If you merely assemble other people’s ideas, you are not developing those skills.

In light of these reasons, we strongly recommend that you refrain from surfing the net looking for outside help on philosophical issues. If you do look at any outside sources, you must provide appropriate citation,

of course. We are not picky about the method of citation, but if you refer to anything that isn't a reading made available here on this Canvas site, you must (1) refer to that source wherever in your own essay you make use of it and (2) include in a 'works cited' list information on the author(s), title, publisher, and date of publication. If it is an online source you must provide the URL. For more information on how cite properly, see the resources for basic writing assistance.

Drafts of written work

While you are working on your papers, you may wonder if I am willing to review your rough drafts. The answer is that I will not look at such drafts in *full*, but I am willing to discuss the drafts with you. You can come to office hours with your own draft and/or notes in hand and talk through with me, what you hope to say, how you hope to defend it, and so on. From experience, this seems the most fruitful way to help you in the process of writing your papers, in contrast to reviewing rough drafts.

Basic writing assistance

Students will also find a number of resources for improving their writing at the university's Writing Studio page ([which you can find here](#)), including a link to an electronic version of Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* (<http://www.bartleby.com/141/>), the recommended style manual for this course.

Another very useful resource is Purdue University's Online Writing Lab, also known as the 'OWL.' It is especially good for getting detailed information on how to cite sources properly. You can find it [here](#).

Make-up policy

Requirements for class attendance and make-up exams, assignments, and other work in this course are consistent with university policies that can be found at: <https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/attendance.aspx>.

Disability accommodations

Students with disabilities requesting accommodations should first register with the Disability Resource Center 352-392-8565, www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/) by providing appropriate documentation. Once registered, students will receive an accommodation letter which must be presented to the instructor when requesting accommodation. Students with disabilities should follow this procedure as early as possible in the semester.

UF Evaluations Process

Students are expected to provide feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing online evaluations at <https://evaluations.ufl.edu>. Evaluations are typically open during the last two or three weeks of the semester, but students will be given specific times when they are open. Summary results of these assessments are available to students at <https://evaluations.ufl.edu/results/>

Support services

You should be aware that UF provides counseling and other kinds of help for students in distress. You can call the on-campus Counseling and Wellness Center at **352-392-1575** and see their website at <https://counseling.ufl.edu>.

The "U Matter, We Care" program provides resources for everyone in the UF community. See the website at umatter.ufl.edu/. Students can contact umatter@ufl.edu seven days a week for assistance for students

in distress. There is also a phone number for this program: **352-294-CARE**.

Announcements and archive

When you log in to Canvas, you should see any and all announcements from your online class sites. If there is a new announcement you have not read, make sure you read it! That may seem obvious, but we want to emphasize doing this so that you keep on top of the course. Announcements might include information that you really don't want to miss out on. For instance, if we hear that a particular assignment is causing confusion among students, we may post an announcement clarifying that assignment. They may also include links to additional materials designed to help you do better in this class. So be sure to pay attention to those announcements.

Instead of having announcements linger on the "announcements" page for the entire term, after a few days or so announcements will be removed. Some announcements will include things that you will want to be able to go back to later, however, such as links to samples of good student work that we provide to you during the term or documents that provide additional comments on the material to improve everyone's understanding. A separate discussion board called "Links Archive" is maintained where that material is stored for the entire term so you can return to it at any point later in the course.

Accessing in-text comments on written work

Here's what you should do to see the "in-text" (or "inline") feedback on those assignments:

1. Click on the Assignments tab located on the left of the Canvas website
2. Select the Short Writing Assignment or Argumentative Essay you would like to view.
3. You will see a screen with a link "Submission Details" on the right. Click on that.
4. On the next screen you will see a link (upper right corner) that says "View Feedback." Click on that.
5. You will then have a preview of the graded work with our in-text comments. You can look at it there or download it, using the link on the upper left corner. We recommend downloading it and opening it separately; it should be much easier to read that way. The download will be a PDF file with the comments. (Make sure you are able to view comments in your PDF reader.)

For additional help on seeing the in-text comments can be found here: <https://community.canvaslms.com/docs/DOC-10542-4212352349>.

Weekly Schedule (an asterisk * indicates that an Advice Column is due)

Week	Topic	Readings & Assignments
Week 1	Intro/Animal Rights	<p>Mon., 01/08: None</p> <p>Wed., 01/10: (i) René Descartes, <i>Letters</i>; (ii) Immanuel Kant, “Our Duties to Animals” (first par. only)</p> <p>Fri., 01/12: Peter Singer, “All Animals Are Equal”</p>
Week 2	Animal Rights	<p>Mon., 01/15: Holiday</p> <p>Wed., 01/17: (i) Peter Singer, “All Animals Are Equal (cont.); (ii) Reflections on <i>Elizabeth Costello</i></p> <p>Fri., 01/19: Carl Cohen, “The Case for the Use of Animals in Biomedical Research”</p>
Week 3*	Animal Rights	<p>Mon., 01/22: Alastair Norcross, “Puppies, Pigs, and People: Eating Meat and Marginal Cases”</p> <p>Wed., 01/24: Alastair Norcross, “Puppies, Pigs, and People: Eating Meat and Marginal Cases”</p> <p>Fri., 01/26: No readings</p>
Week 4	Challenges of Abortion	<p>Mon., 01/29: John Noonan, “An Almost Absolute Value in History</p> <p>Wed., 01/31: Don Marquis, “Why Abortion is Immoral”</p> <p>Fri., 02/02: No readings</p>
Week 5*	Challenges of Abortion	<p>Mon., 02/05: Judith Jarvis Thomson, “A Defense of Abortion”</p> <p>Wed., 02/07: Judith Jarvis Thomson, “A Defense of Abortion” (cont.)</p> <p>Fri., 02/09: Susan Sherwin, “Abortion Through a Feminist Lens”</p>
Week 6	Affirmative Action..?	<p>Mon., 02/12: Louis Pojman, “Why Affirmative Action is Immoral”</p> <p>Wed., 02/14: Daniel Hausman, “Affirmative Action: Bad Arguments and Some Good Ones”</p> <p>Fri., 02/16: No readings</p>

Week 7*	Affirmative Action..?	<p>Mon., 02/19: Shelby Steele, “Affirmative Action: The Price of Preference”</p> <p>Wed., 02/21: Elizabeth Anderson, “Racial Integration Remains an Imperative”</p> <p>Fri., 02/23: No readings</p>
Week 8	Population & Poverty	<p>Mon., 02/26: Garrett Hardin, “Lifeboat Ethics”</p> <p>Wed., 02/28: William W. Murdoch & Allan Oates, “A Critique of Lifeboat Ethics”</p> <p>Fri., 03/01: No readings</p>
Week 9*	Population & Poverty	<p>Mon., 03/04: Peter Singer, “The Life You Can Save”</p> <p>Wed., 03/06: John Arthur, “World Hunger and Moral Obligation”</p> <p>Fri., 03/08: No readings</p>
Week 10	Spring Break	<p>Mon., 03/11: Holiday</p> <p>Wed., 03/13: Holiday</p> <p>Fri., 03/15: Holiday</p>
Week 11	Collective Harm & Climate	<p>Mon., 03/18: No readings (First Short Paper Due)</p> <p>Wed., 03/20: Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, “It’s Not My Fault: Global Warming and Individual Moral Obligations”</p> <p>Fri., 03/22: John Nolt, “How Harmful Are the Average American’s Greenhouse Gas Emissions”</p>
Week 12*	Collective Harm & Climate	<p>Mon., 03/25: Avram Hiller, “Climate Change and Individual Responsibility”</p> <p>Wed., 03/27: Morten Fibieger Byskov, “Climate Change: Focusing on How Individuals Can Help is Very Convenient for Corporations”</p> <p>Fri., 03/29: No readings</p>
Week 13	Politics, Ethics, & Gun Control	<p>Mon., 04/01: Jeff McMahan, “Why ‘Gun Control’ Is Not Enough”</p> <p>Wed., 04/03: Michael Huemer, “Gun Rights and Non-compliance”</p> <p>Fri., 04/05: No readings</p>

Week 14*	Politics, Ethics, & Gun Control	<p>Mon., 04/08: Jeff McMahan, “A Challenge to Gun Rights”</p> <p>Wed., 04/10: Nicholas Dixon, “Handguns, Philosophers, and the Right to Self-Defense”</p> <p>Fri., 04/12: No readings</p>
Week 15	Ethics of Capital Punishment	<p>Mon., 04/15: James McClosky, “Convicting the Innocent”</p> <p>Wed., 04/17: Stephen Nathanson, “An Eye for an Eye?”</p> <p>Fri., 04/19: No readings</p>
Week 16*	Ethics of Capital Punishment	<p>Mon., 04/22: Ernest Van Den Haag, “A Defense of the Death Penalty”</p> <p>Wed., 04/24:</p> <p>Fri., 04/26: Reading day (no class)</p>
Finals Week	Final Short Paper Due	Fri., 05/03: Final Short Paper Due