

McGill University

PHIL 237 Contemporary Moral Issues

Winter 2015

MWF 1:35 PM-2:25 PM

Adams Building AUD

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Office location: LEA 923

Office hours: Monday, 2:30 PM-4:30 PM

This course is an introduction to contemporary debates and research in applied moral philosophy or ethics. Through the semester, we will have a chance to familiarize ourselves with a number of specific moral issues, such as abortion, euthanasia, war, terrorism, torture, executive compensations, questions of socio-economic inequalities more broadly, and questions raised by the development of artificial intelligence. Contemporary life comes with its fair share of moral challenges, to say the least. In this course, we will have a chance to reflect upon some of them.

As a second objective, the course aims to familiarize students with the methods of ethics. Students will develop the ability to apply rigorous philosophical thinking and argumentation to real-world issues and debates. Hopefully, the readings, lectures, and discussions will allow us to see contemporary moral challenges in a new, and more systematic light.

Readings

All required readings and documents will be posted in [myCourses](#).

Additional good reference work in philosophy, moral philosophy, ethics, or political philosophy include Edward N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford: The Metaphysics Research Lab); Tim Crane (Ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge); Hugh LaFollette (Ed.), *Ethics in practice: an anthology* (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing 2007); Robert Goodin and Philip Pettit (Eds.), *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Anthology* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005); Robert Goodin, Philip Pettit and Thomas Pogge, (Eds.), *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007). References to further readings will be given in class or upon request.

Schedule

There will usually be two lectures and one conference per week. The dates below are for lectures only. Conferences will start in the third week of the course, each student must sign up for a conference in Minerva.

Week 1 Introduction

Jan. 7 Peter Singer (2011), Chap. 1, "About Ethics."

Jan. 8 Hugh LaFollette (2007), "Theorizing about Ethics."

Hugh LaFollette (2007), "Reading Philosophy."

Part I. Theoretical foundations

Week 2 Deontological ethics, consequentialism and virtue ethics I

- Jan. 11 Immanuel Kant (2008), *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, excerpts.
Jan. 13 William D. Ross (1930), Chap. 2, "What Makes Right Acts Right?"
Jan. 15 John Stuart Mill (1863), Chap. II, "What is Utilitarianism?"
Robert E. Goodin (1995), Chap. 1, "Utilitarianism as a Public Philosophy."

Week 3 Deontological ethics, consequentialism and virtue ethics II

- Jan. 18 Aristotle (2000), *Nicomachean ethics*, excerpts.
Jan. 20 Rosalind Hursthouse (1991), "Virtue Theory and Abortion."

Part II. Bioethics

Week 4 Abortion

- Jan. 25 Peter Singer (2011), Chap. 6, "Taking Life: The Embryo and Fetus."
Jan. 27 Don Marquis (1989), "Why Abortion is Immoral."

Week 5 Euthanasia

- Feb. 1 Peter Singer (2011), "Taking Life: Humans."
Feb. 3 Daniel Callahan (1992), "When Self-Determination Runs Amok."

Part III. Political violence

Week 6 War

- Feb. 8 Hans Morgenthau (1978), "A Realist Theory of International Politics".
Feb. 10 Brian Orend (2008), "War."
G. E. M. Anscombe, "Just War: The Case of World War II", in Robert Goodin and Philipp Pettit (2005).

Week 7 Terrorism

- Feb. 15 Ariel Merari (1993), "Terrorism as a strategy of insurgency."
Feb. 17 Michael Walzer (2006), Chap. 12, "Terrorism."
Michael Walzer (1988), "Terrorism: A Critique of Excuses."

Week 8 Torture

- Feb. 22 Alan Dershowitz (2002), "Should the Ticking Bomb Terrorist Be Tortured?"
Feb. 24 Marcia Baron, "The Ticking Bomb Hypothetical," in Mark Timmons (Ed.) (2013)

Study Break

Part IV. Socio-economic inequalities

Week 9 Executive compensations

- Mar. 7 Jeffrey Moriarty (2005), "Do CEOs Get Paid Too Much?"

Mar. 9 John Boatright (2010), "Executive Compensation: Unjust or Just Right?"

Week 10 Economic inequality

Mar. 14 Thomas Piketty (2014), *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, excerpts.

Mar. 16 Anthony Atkinson (2015), *Inequality: What Can Be Done?*, excerpts.

Week 11 World Poverty

Mar. 21 Peter Singer (1972), "Famine, Affluence, and Morality".

Mar. 23 Peter Singer (2011), Chap. 8, "Rich and Poor."

Thomas Pogge (2001), "Eradicating Systemic Poverty: Brief for a Global Resources Dividend."

Week 12 What is equality?

Mar. 30 Derek Parfit (1997). "Equality and Priority."

Part V. Artificial intelligence

Week 13 The future of work

Apr. 4 Richard Susskind and Daniel Susskind (2015), *The Future of the Professions: How*

Apr. 11 *Technology Will Transform the Work of Human Experts*, excerpts.

Martin Ford (2015), *Rise of the Robots: Technology and the Threat of a Jobless Future*, excerpts.

Week 14 Conclusion

Apr. 11 Nick Bostrom (2014), *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies*, excerpts.

Apr. 13

Evaluations

- Participation in conferences: 10%
- Midterm writing assignment, announced on Feb. 1, due on Feb. 15: 20%
- Final writing assignment, announced on Mar. 30, due on Apr. 11: 30%
- Final exam, date and location TBA: 40%

The writing assignments must be submitted electronically in [myCourses](#). Further instructions will be provided when the assignments are announced. Any assignment handed in late without medical excuse will be penalized by one third of a grade (e.g. from B+ to B) per calendar day of lateness.

In accordance with *McGill University's Charter of Student's Rights*, students in this course have the right "to submit in English or in French written work that is to be graded."

Teaching assistants

Students must first contact their teaching assistant for any question: practical functioning of the course, content and materials taught, evaluations and grading, and so on.

- Raymond Aldred: raymond.aldred@mail.mcgill.ca, LEA 934, W 3:00 PM - 4:00 PM.
- David Collins: david.collins3@mail.mcgill.ca, LEA 934, W 12:00 PM-1:00 PM.
- Daniel Harris: daniel.harris2@mail.mcgill.ca, LEA 934, W 3:00 PM-4:00 PM.
- Eliot Litalien: eliot.litalien@mail.mcgill.ca, FERRIER 434, W 3:00 PM-4:00 PM.
- Matthew Scarfone: matthew.scarfone@mail.mcgill.ca, LEA 934, R 3:00 PM-4:00 PM.

Statement of academic integrity

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all instructors and students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see http://www.mcgill.ca/files/integrity/Code_of_Student_Conduct.pdf for more information).

References

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- Atkinson, Anthony B. 2015. *Inequality : What Can Be Done?* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Boatright, John R. 2010. "Executive Compensation: Unjust or Just Right?" In *The Oxford Handbook of Business Ethics*, edited by George G. Brenkert and Tom L. Beauchamp. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
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- Parfit, Derek. 1997. "Equality and Priority." *Ratio* 10 (3): 202.
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- Timmons, Mark. 2013. *Disputed Moral Issues: A Reader*. Third Edition edition. New York: Oxford University Press.
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