

COURSE OUTLINE/ PHIL 197 RIGHT & WRONG, GOOD & BAD

Fall term 2024: Tuesday 14:30 - 17:30

EDUC 613

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Office Hours: M 11:00-13:00

This is a discussion-based seminar focused on the question of how to think about what is right or good and what is wrong or bad. The approach will be historical, and will allow students to discover some of the different ways in which philosophers have understood the question. In particular, we will consider that right and wrong, good and bad, are concepts that we invoke both as individuals as collectives -- as we consider what is morally right, and what is politically right. We will also pay special attention to the central role of desire in discussions of right and wrong, in two senses: first, for many philosophers, what it is to do right is to do what a good person would do, and a good person is one whose desires are subject to their reason; second, there are questions about how to regulate our desires, and when to do so. Finally, we will be considering how and why questions of right and wrong are sometimes taken to vary according to the gender of the agent: why someone might think that women, or men, have special moral obligations, and why sexual relations are often taken to have moral and political significance.

We will read influential texts from the classical period in Greece, Hellenistic Greece and Rome, and the Renaissance and early modern period in Europe, where the question is most often cast as what sort of person one has to become in order to be good. In this context, much of the discussion is about virtue, vice, and later (in Christian contexts) sin. We will look at different ancient accounts of moral and political right: how to organize our souls, what the right attitude to pleasure should be, whether or not we should engage in politics. In the last section of the course we will consider nineteenth century utilitarianism, to draw the contrast with an understanding of right and wrong as following certain rules of conduct rather than cultivating virtue, and some contemporary work that suggests another way to think about the relation between the moral and the political.

Readings:

Readings for this course (all of which are required) will be available on myCourses. You are advised to print out the readings so that you can bring them with you to lectures (see Policy on the Use of Technology in the Classroom below).

Course requirements:

(i) Participation: come to class having read the reading(s) assigned for that day, and prepared to discuss the material.

(ii) Weekly discussion questions in writing (10 @ 2% each = 20%). This assignment assesses your ability to:

- read carefully, charitably and critically
- identify important passages in a text
- formulate a question of philosophical significance

(iii) One assignment (25%) (~600 words) you will be required to analyze a term that is central to one of the readings. This assignment assesses your capacity to:

- read carefully, charitably and critically
- identify important passages in a text
- analyze nuances in philosophical meaning
- synthesize different philosophical claims
- distinguish philosophical terms
- articulate claims with precision

(iv) Term paper proposal (20%), comprising (a) a question, (b) a paragraph or two motivating the question (c) an outline of the paper (describing the different sections and indicating the argument you will make and at least one objection that you will entertain), and (d) a bibliography. This assignment assesses your capacity to:

- identify a significant philosophical question, and articulate it
- explain the importance of a question
- structure an argument
- identify and address objections to a philosophical conclusion
- conduct bibliographical research and identify appropriate sources

(v) A term paper (35%), written on the basis of the proposal and taking into account my comments on the proposal. The term paper will assess your capacity to:

- conduct independent research
- synthesize claims and arguments from different readings
- engage critically with the claims of different authors
- respond to comments and criticisms
- structure a cogent and persuasive answer to a philosophical question

All work to be assessed will be submitted to the instructor, in hard copy.

Work submitted for evaluation as part of this course may be checked with text matching software within myCourses.

Grading criteria: To do excellent work in this course you need to be able to do more than just reiterate what various authors have said in your reading or what was said in class. An "A" indicates that you not only understand and comprehend the material, but that you have thought critically about it, fully drawing out its subtleties and implications so that you can creatively apply the material at many levels. A "B" reflects an above-average understanding of the material without any major errors; "B" work does not capture the complexity of the issues and tends toward accurate summary rather than independent analysis. A "C" suggests a struggle with the material that manages an average, basic comprehension of it but is flawed by some significant misunderstandings or errors. A "D" indicates only a rudimentary comprehension of part of the material with much of the material being misunderstood. An "F" indicates no understanding of the material, or a failure to comply with instructions.

Policy on the use of technology in the classroom:

The use of electronic devices (computers, iPads, cell phones, etc.) is not permitted in class. All electronic devices must be turned off and stored during the class period. If you believe you have exceptional circumstances that make the use of an electronic device beneficial to your learning, you may request permission by e-mail from the instructor. **The recording of lectures and conferences is not permitted and is illegal without the consent of the instructor/T.A.**

Policy on extensions:

No extensions will be granted without prior approval from the instructor. If you need an extension, send an email to the professor; include if possible a proposed date of submission. If you have not received approval for an extension, late work will be penalized at the rate of a third of a grade **per calendar day** past the due date. For example, a paper that is evaluated as a B, if one day late, will be assigned a grade of B-; the same paper, if two days late, would receive a C+.

Required Course Outline Statements:

Policy statement: Academic Integrity

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the [Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures](#)" (Approved by Senate on 29 January 2003) (See [McGill's guide to academic](#)

[honesty](#) for more information).

L'université McGill attache une haute importance à l'honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l'on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon le Code de conduite de l'étudiant et des procédures disciplinaires (pour de plus amples renseignements, veuillez consulter le [guide pour l'honnêteté académique de McGill](#)).

Policy statement: Language of Submission

Conformément à [la Charte des droits de l'étudiant](#) de l'Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté, sauf dans le cas des cours dont l'un des objets est la maîtrise d'une langue.

In accord with McGill University's [Charter of Students' Rights](#), students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded. This does not apply to courses in which acquiring proficiency in a language is one of the objectives.

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.