

PHIL 237: Contemporary Moral Issues – Summer 2017 (Updated June 16th)

Course Time: 11:05 -1:25 Monday through Thursday

Office Hours: After class (by appointment)

Email: steven.sych@mcgill.ca

Classroom: MAASS 217

COURSE DESCRIPTION: *The Philosophy of Sex & Love*

Just what is a sexual act? If we abandon a religious framework, is it still possible to speak of sexual perversion and, if so, do at least some perversions merit moral condemnation? What is sexual desire, and what goes into determining it (biology, socio-cultural factors, choice)? What does it mean to identify as 'queer'? What are we talking about when we talk about love, and how does it relate to marriage, child-rearing, or to monogamy? What does it mean to 'sexually objectify' another person? What are the philosophical assumptions that lay behind the modern liberal understanding of 'good' sex as consensual sex between adults, and are there limits to such a framework?

Many of the above questions have been explored by philosophers, especially after the sexual revolution of the 1960s and the various efforts of feminist and queer scholars in the past 30 years. It is here where we will begin. Yet we will not stop there. PHIL 237 is a course in *applied ethics*. Our topic will bring us into dialogue with a number of events and issues, both historically proximate and distant: debates surrounding the morality and legality of sex work in Canada; the role of objectification in casual sex and pornography; debates surrounding the normativity of certain kinds of relationships (marriages that are heterosexual and monogamous); the problems that arise from prevailing legal conceptions of consent and feminist criticisms thereof; the way in which these latter critiques led to the Sexual Assault Prevention Policy at Antioch College in the early 1990s, as well as to the push for the Sexual Assault Policy at McGill in recent years.

Yet we should not assume that our course in applied *ethics* will take the model of applied *mathematics*. While in applied mathematics one takes theories and applies them to certain problems (for example, issues in biology or engineering), applied ethics takes by necessity a different approach. Since ethical theories must themselves be judged by how adequately they deal with specific empirical instances, we must take ourselves not only to be applying theory to concrete cases, but likewise be testing the adequacy of our theories by how well they deal with said cases.

This will necessitate not only rigorous examination of arguments and specific cases but, furthermore, the use of conceptual analysis, attention to intuitions, thought experiments, and continual reflection on the grounds of our claims.

✍ A Note on Sensitive Topics:

For much of the semester we will be discussing issues that are difficult, sensitive, disturbing, and that could be traumatic for some students. If you think that the topic and/or text for a specific day is going to be emotionally difficult for you, I'm happy to discuss with you beforehand any concerns you may have. Likewise, if you ever wish to discuss your reactions to course material with the class or with me individually afterwards, this is not only welcome but encouraged. Finally, if at any point you feel the need to step outside during the lecture or a discussion you may always do so without academic penalty (send me an email after so that I don't worry-- you don't need to explain exactly *why* you were feeling what you were feeling).

You will, however, be responsible for any material you miss. If you do leave the room for a significant stretch of time, please make arrangements to get notes from another student (you can ask on the 'student only' discussion board on MyCourses) or see me individually to discuss the situation and what we can do about it.

COURSE MATERIALS

[Power, Nicholas, Raja Halwani, and Alan Soble. *The Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings 6th Edition*. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013. Print.](#) (An anthology of texts, hereafter abbreviated as [PS]). This text is for sale at the McGill bookstore --for \$90-- and is also on reserve at the McGill library.

[Nelson, Maggie. *The Argonauts*. 2016. Print.](#) (This text is for sale at the McGill bookstore and is also on reserve at the McGill library. Abbreviated as [Nelson])

[Soble, Alan. *The Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings 4th Edition*. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002. Print.](#) (An older edition of the same anthology. This will be posted as a PDF on MyCourses under the first module. Hereafter abbreviated as [PSMyCourses]). Some readings from the above edition (2013) are available in this one (2002). When this is the case I've flagged it below. But please note: the 2002 edition lacks the study questions at the end of each article, and these will likely prove useful (see the short paper assignment guidelines)!

[Sex, love, and friendship : studies of the Society for the Philosophy of Sex and Love, 1993-2003](#) (Available as an eBook from the McGill catalogue. Mainly for supplemental readings, abbreviated as [SLF])

[Wade, Lisa. *American Hookup: The New Culture of Sex on Campus.*, 2017. Internet resource.](#) (Available as an eBook from the McGill catalogue. Abbreviated as [Wade])

There are also a few hyperlinked articles in the schedule below. Anything that is not from the texts above or linked below will be posted on MyCourses as a PDF under the module in question. These will be abbreviated as [MyCourses].

Because a great deal of the course will involve guided discussion of the texts (including references to specific passages), *you are required to have a copy or printout of the readings each class!*

CAMPUS RESOURCES

[McGill Counselling Services](#): offers a variety of services to the McGill community, including counselling, support groups, a [crisis drop-in](#), an LGBTQ-focused counselling team, and [audio for relaxation!](#)

[Sexual Assault Centre of the McGill Students Society \(SACOMSS\)](#): volunteer run service, offers both in-person and over the phone assistance as well as support groups.

[Office for Students with Disabilities \(OSD\)](#): provides mentoring, workshops, and a variety of services to students with disabilities.

ASSIGNMENTS AND EVALUATION

✍️ Participation: 10%

Much of the material we will look at will require maturity, sensitivity, and respect for other students. This is paramount especially since discussion is an essential component of this course. Not only is one's presence required, but likewise a constructive engagement in class discussions will be expected. Engagement implies more than just showing up on time (though it is this as well), and having done the reading; likewise, engagement is more than just 'saying as much as one possibly can.' Proper participation includes thoughtfully and respectfully listening to what others have to say, avoiding monopolizing the conversation, avoiding attacking others (even if what they said is upsetting), posting on the MyCourses discussion boards¹, and having a willingness to have one's own views evaluated and challenged.

Two general rules will apply: **first**, we will focus on the claims or ideas being expressed rather than the person expressing those ideas; no one should deride anyone else's efforts to articulate themselves or to come to grips with the material. **Second**, although we will be speaking about issues in more or less abstract ways (this is a philosophy class), the following is a useful operative assumption: *for any sensitive issue, assume that some member of our group has a personal experience with the topic or issue.*

The participation mark will be a function of presence in class and positive contributions (either in commentary, in writing on the forums on MyCourses, or in thoughtful listening).

Entry Quizzes: 15%

¹ NOTE: there are three discussion forums: one that will be for general class discussion (and which I'll check); one that will be for student interactions (if you need to ask for notes or PDFs); one that will be for anonymous questions that you might be nervous about asking in class.

At the start of (most) class days that have readings I will pose a question for you to answer *before* the lecture or discussion. Generally, a response will be written in the first 10-20 minutes of class. You can bring a pen and paper, but emailing responses to me during that period is also fine.

(Be on time! You will not be able to submit these at a later point, so don't ask!)

The questions will be closed book and based on that day's reading(s). They will aim to be specific enough to allow you to demonstrate that you have done the reading, but may be broad enough that you can reflect a bit and talk about what struck you, troubled you, interested you, or confused you about the reading. You will receive a point, a half point, or zero points for each. If you show clearly that you have read and engaged with the text and yet misunderstood something, you may still receive a full point for that day.

The reasons for this exercise are as follows: first, as there is no midterm I require a way of holding you accountable for the readings (without this, discussion will be impossible!); second, your having to develop a response to these questions will serve as a kind of warmup for the class to come, giving you a time to articulate those nebulous feelings & thoughts you may want to bring forth during discussion; third, your responses will give me immediate feedback as to what people are getting (and not getting) from the readings.

✍ Questions for Guest Speakers: 5%

There will be 4 days when guest lecturers will come to our class (see below for schedule). For 3 of them you will need to submit a question to me by email before the class begins (10am that day). Though you are welcome to submit questions on all 4 days if you wish! Like your responses to the entry quizzes, you will receive a point, a half point, or zero points for each.

Each question should be around 250 words, can be grounded in the readings or gesture towards more general concerns regarding that day's topic. Above all the question should be respectful, show a sincere grappling with the issues at hand, and be fruitful in developing that day's discussion. You may then choose to ask the speaker the question yourself during class (though you don't need to in order to get marks). Alternatively, you can request (at the end of your question) that I do so anonymously on your behalf (NB that I may or may not do so, depending on time and circumstances).

These questions are due 10am the day of the lecture!

Specific instructions for this assignment and how it will be evaluated will be posted on MyCourses.

Short Reflection Paper: 25%

Throughout the course, students will be asked to write short reflection papers (750 words or less). *These papers are to be submitted by email **before that particular class begins (10am the day***

of), though you will have until **Friday of that same week (10am) to revise it for final submission on MyCourses. If you do not first submit the paper **before** class time, your assignment will **not** be graded.**

Students who have chosen to write on that day will self-identify at the start of class discussion and subsequently act as “discussion leaders.” This means that you will be asked to take on a more active role, and that I will be more likely to call on you. Since you will have written on the day’s reading, you will be considered a kind of expert for that day. Though you will be graded solely on your written submission, *you will not receive marks for your paper if you do not come to that class and participate.*

Since many of you are new to philosophy, I will also make you the following proposition: you are allowed to submit two different papers and I will take the highest grade (though you will not be penalized for submitting only one). However, you must have a first submission in by June 30th (and it is in your interest to do it *much* earlier than that!); furthermore, for the second paper as much as for the first, the same rules will apply: a draft must be submitted by email by 10am the day of the class on that topic, and the final version must be submitted on MyCourses the following Friday by 10am. Plan accordingly.

Specific instructions for this assignment and how it will be evaluated will be posted on MyCourses.

Final Paper: 40%

The final paper of approximately 2000 words will be submitted online by Monday, July 10th at 10am.

Specific instructions for this assignment and how it will be evaluated will be posted on MyCourses near the end of the course.

Late final papers will not be accepted.

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 (see www.mcgill.ca/integrity/ for more information).

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.

Peer Editing for Final Paper: 5%

Papers will be drafted and peer-edited in-class on Thursday July 6th. Alternatively, students may opt to peer-edit each other’s papers outside of class (but still using the form I will provide you!). When you submit your paper you will be asked to submit the *comments that the other student has given you, **not** the comments you gave to another student*-- otherwise you won’t have the comments for yourself while editing your own paper for its final submission, which would be useless.

Grades will be given on the thoroughness of commentary provided to others. The peer review form will be posted on MyCourses and we will go over it closer to the end of the course.

GUIDELINES FOR ALL ASSIGNMENT SUBMISSIONS

File type: please submit in .doc or .docx format (.odp is also fine). PDFs seem to be more finicky when it comes to sending comments.

Resubmission: please resubmit your paper after class on MyCourses (but before 10am that Friday) *regardless of whether or not you've changed anything*. Otherwise keeping track of things becomes incredibly difficult.

Email: With the exception of guest speaker questions, absolutely do *not* write your submission into the body of an email. This makes commenting impossible and your submission will be ignored.

Relevant info: include your name and ID on the document you submit.

Following these guidelines is your responsibility. Any documents submitted outside of these guidelines will not be graded or receive comments.

Late penalties: All late assignments will be docked 10% per day without a valid doctor's note (unless otherwise indicated).

