

PHIL 237: Contemporary Moral Issues

Winter 2019 – Tentative Syllabus

Mondays & Wednesdays 8:35-9:25, ADAMS AUD

Teaching Assistants:

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This course is an introduction to a philosophical examination of some of the moral issues taking place in our current society. We will start by looking at expression and speech and discuss whether hate speech should be regulated, and whether or not universities present an exception to such regulation. We will then transition to the potential harms that online shaming can have on those who are shamed and what ethical responsibilities we hold towards our online peers, if any. The second half of the course will focus on the relationship that we agents have towards evidence. To what extent is it reasonable to believe evidence? Should we always trust experts? And if so, is it always wrong to believe conspiracy theories? What are the morally pernicious consequences of distrust? The last part of the course will touch on the issue of political participation. We will discuss whether *epistocracy* – i.e. restricting suffrage only to voters who are rational and informed – is an immoral practice.

Readings

Among the papers we will read there will be multiple chapters from the following books:

Jason Brennan. *Against Democracy*. Princeton University Press. 2016.

Matthew R. X. Dentith. *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories*. Palgrave Macmillan. 2014.

Thomas M. Nichols. *The Death of Expertise*. Oxford University Press. 2017.

Gloria Origgi. *Reputation: What It Is and Why It Matters*. Princeton University Press, 2018.

Naomi Oreskes & Erik M. Conway. *Merchants of Doubt*, Boomsbury Press, 2010.

Jon Ronson. *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*. Riverhead Books, 2015.

Stephen Sloman & Philip Fernbach. *The Knowledge Illusion*, Penguin. 2017.

Jeremy Waldron. *The Harm in Hate Speech*. Harvard University Press. 2012.

I will make the selected readings available on MyCourses; you are not required to purchase copies of these books.

Assignments:

Workload for this course involves

1)	Weekly one-page analyses	10% of the final grade	starting week 3 due every Monday
2)	Participation in conferences	final grade will be bumped up if borderline	---
3)	Presentation in conferences	5% of the final grade	to be done once in the semester
4)	First paper (800 words)	20% of the final grade	due on February 15th
5)	Longer paper (1000 words)	25% of the final grade	due on March 15th
6)	A final exam	40% of the final grade	due date TBD

- 1) **Weekly analyses:** You will submit a total of 10 weekly analysis on My Courses starting week 3 by **Monday 11pm** (one analysis can be missed without altering the final grade). The analysis must be maximum one page, double spaced. You will be asked to summarize the reading, identify a problematic claim and briefly provide an argument for why the claim is problematic. Please submit your analyses in either DOCx, DOC or PDF. Analyses that cannot be opened by the TA will not be graded.

Note: if you fail to submit your analysis you will not receive the 1%. Please do NOT email the analysis. Emailed analyses will not be graded. No exception will be made.

- 2) **Conferences:** Attendance in conferences is mandatory. You will be expected to actively and regularly participate in the discussion. Teaching assistants will take attendance and will evaluate your participation in the following way:
At the beginning of the conference, the TA will break the class into small groups and will ask for one volunteer to present their weekly analysis to their small group. This involves verbally walking your peers through the analysis and discussing your argument with them. You will receive 5% for your presentation. You **must** volunteer to present at least once, but you will not get 5% of the final grade more than once. In addition, if, and **only if**, you have presented and attended more than half of the conferences, if your grade is borderline (say, 73 or 74) it will be bumped up (to, say, 75). If you fail one of the two requirements, say you have attended more than half the conferences but not presented or presented but attended less than half the conferences, your grade will **not** be bumped up.
In the exceptional circumstance (once or twice) that you cannot attend your TA's conference in a given week, you are allowed to attend another TA's conference if this fits with your

schedule. However, you must make sure to inform both TAs by email within the same week. Conferences will begin **January 17th/18th** and you must sign up for one of them on Minerva.

- 3) **First paper:** You will write a paper of no more than 800 words, 12pt and double-spaced, where you are expected to reconstruct and explain the main argument of one of the papers discussed in the previous weeks and critically assess it. Instructions will be released on January 31st on MyCourses and the assignment must be submitted through MyCourses by 11pm on **February 15th**. You must submit your assignment in the folder with the name of your TA. You must include in your assignment only your student number (the grading will be blind), and the name of your TA.
Note: submissions for this course are electronic, thus it is your responsibility to ensure you have submitted your assignment properly.
- 4) **Longer paper:** You will write a paper of no more than 1000 words, 12pt and double-spaced, on an assigned topic. Instructions will be released on MyCourses on March 1st and the paper must be submitted through MyCourses by 11pm on **March 15th**. You must include in your assignment only your student number and the name of your TA.
- 5) **Final exam:** The exam will consist of 6 short questions. Approximately two weeks prior to the exam you will be given 8 questions to practice, but only 6 of those questions will be on the final exam. The structure of the exam will be as follows. Each question will consist of a *conceptual part* where you will be asked, for example, to explain an author's claim or a theory; and an *argumentative part* where you may be asked to give your own take on an issue. Because formulating one's own personal argument can be challenging in a stressful setting like a final exam, prior practice of the question is given in order to minimize this aspect.

Note: Final exams dates are set by the university. **Instructors have no control over it.** It is not possible to set up an individual exam nor one on at a different date. For this reason, **extensions cannot be given:** applying for deferral or supplemental is your only option if you cannot make it to the exam. It is **your responsibility** to apply, this link explains the procedure: <https://www.mcgill.ca/exams/dates/supdefer>. If you defer the exam, you will write an exam that has the same structure as the final, but with different questions. An early schedule of the final exams is released in October.

Texts: All texts will be available on MyCourses.

Extensions: Extensions to deadlines on papers will be granted exclusively for medical reasons and must be appropriately documented with a medical note. Assignments submitted after the due date will be penalized at the rate of 1/3 grade per day (including weekends). For example, a paper that is evaluated as a B+, if one day late, will be assigned a B, and if three days late, it will be assigned a C+.

Important note: Requests for **extensions must be directed to the TAs**, not the instructor. Extensions will be granted only on the basis of a medical note. Because this is a very large class **no exceptions will be made.** Extensions will be applied retroactively if you provide a later medical note pertaining to the date when the paper was due.

Grading: If you think there has been a problem with the grading of your first paper, longer paper or final exam the procedure for regrading is the following: **first** discuss the paper and comments with the TA. If you still think the grade is unfair then, and **only then**, you must fill out the re-evaluation form that can be found on My Courses. After you have filled out the form, you must email it to me. You can come to see me during office hours **only after you have gone through the first steps of this process**. I will **not** review your paper if you have not either met with your TA or filled out the re-evaluation form.

Email policy and etiquette: when emailing both instructor and TAs allow **24 hours** for a reply and **48 hours** during the weekend.

Remember: answering emails is actual *work*. This means that a request for an appointment on Monday sent on Friday after 5pm will not work.

1. *Before* writing the email, **check the syllabus** and other course material. Most questions are already addressed in these resources. **Because of the large size of the class, emails whose answer is included in the syllabus will not be answered.** If you have a substantive philosophical question, please avoid emailing and instead come to see me or the TA during office hours.
2. Use your McGill address.
3. Please always **include at the beginning of the email a form of salutation** and avoid referring to the instructor or the TAs in overly colloquial ways (e.g. “Hey dude”) unless otherwise specified.
4. It is *possible* that we forget to answer some emails. If this happens, you can send a polite reminder after a reasonable delay.

Electronics and Laptop Policy: Students may use laptops for academic purposes only. Phones must be turned off during the lectures and conferences.

Note: The recording of lectures is strictly forbidden.

Prerequisites: There are no prerequisites for this course but the material is difficult and some readings can be pretty dense.

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 (see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/students/ for more information).

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

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. According to Senate

regulations, instructors are not permitted to make special arrangements for final exams. Please consult the Calendar, section 4.7.2.1, General University Information & Regulations at www.mcgill.ca

If you have a disability please contact the instructor to arrange a time to discuss your situation. It would be helpful if you contact the Office for Students with Disabilities at 514-398-6009 before you do this.

List of Topics and Readings

All readings will be made available on MyCourses.

WEEK 1 – NORMATIVE ETHICS

1. January 7th: Intro to the course (no readings)
2. January 9th: Intro to normative ethics (no readings)

WEEK 2 – EXPRESSION & SPEECH 1

3. January 14th: Waldron (2012), “Approaching Hate Speech”, from *The Harm in Hate Speech*, Chapter 1. (18 pages)
4. January 16th: Waldron (2012), “Anthony Lewis’s *Freedom for the Thought that We Hate*”, Chapter 2 (16 pages)

Suggested reading: Smits (2009), “Should offensive speech be regulated?”, from *Applying Political Theory: Issues and Debates*. (18 pages)

Movie suggestion: “Denial” (2016)

Conferences start

WEEK 3 – EXPRESSION & SPEECH 2

5. January 21st: John Paul Stevens (2012), “Should Hate Speech Be Outlawed?” (9 pages)
First reading analysis due

6. January 23th: Altman (2002), “Speech Codes and Expressive Harm” (from *Ethics in Practice*) (9 pages)

Suggested reading: McKinnon (2006), “Should we tolerate Holocaust denial?”, *Res Publica*. (20 pages)

WEEK 4 – ONLINE SHAMING 1

7. January 28th: Ronson (2015), “God That Was Awesome”, from *So You’ve Been Publicly Shamed*, Chapter 4. (16 pages)

Alternatively, or ideally in addition, Ronson’s TEDTalk: “When online shaming spirals out of control” (17 minutes) available at the McGill Library:

http://digital.films.com.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/p_ViewVideo.aspx?xtid=114632

8. January 30st: No readings, continuation of Ronson

Suggested reading: Tosi & Warmke (2016), “Moral Grandstanding” (21 pages)

WEEK 5 – ONLINE SHAMING 2

9. February 4th: Norlock (2017), “Online Shaming” (15 pages)
10. February 6th: Ramirez (2017), “A Conditional Defense of Shame and Shame Punishment” (read **only** the sections: “The Regulation of Moral and Non-Moral Shame”, “Shame Punishments” and the “Conclusion”, 8 pages)

WEEK 6 – KNOWLEDGE & EVIDENCE 1

11. February 11th: Kelly (2008), “Evidence: Fundamental Concepts and the Phenomenal Conception” (20 pages)
12. February 13th: Oreskes & Congway (2010), “What’s Bad Science? Who Decides? The Fight over Secondhand Smoke”, from *Merchants of Doubt*, Chapter 5. (34 pages)

Short paper due on February 15th

WEEK 7 – KNOWLEDGE & EVIDENCE 2

13. February 18th: No readings, continuation of Oreskes & Congway

14. February 20th: Sloman & Fernbach (2017), “Why We Think What Isn’t So”, from *The Knowledge Illusion*, Chapter 4. (15 pages)

Movie suggestion: “Concussion”, 2015.

WEEK 8 – CONSPIRACY THEORIES 1

15. February 25th: Dentith (2014), “The Public Trust”, from *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories*, Chapter 6. (17 pages)

16. February 27th: No readings, Continuation of “The Public Trust”

WEEK 9 – Reading week – No reading analysis due

17. March 4th- 8th – NO CLASS

WEEK 10 – CONSPIRACY THEORIES 2

18. March 11th: Dentith (2014), “Should We Prefer Official Theories?”, from *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories*, Chapter 8. (20 pages)

19. March 13th: No readings, continuation of “Should We Prefer Official Theories?”

Longer paper due on March 15th

WEEK 11 – EXPERTS 1

20. March 18th: Nichols (2017), “How Conversation Became Exhausting”, from *The Death of Expertise*, Chapter 2 (12 pages).
21. March 20th: Nichols (2017), “The ‘New’ New Journalism”, from *The Death of Expertise*, Chapter 5 (34 pages).

Suggested reading: Levy (2017), “The Bad News About Fake News”, *Social Epistemology*.

WEEK 12 – EXPERTS 2

22. March 25th: No readings, continuation of “The ‘New’ New Journalism”.
23. March 27th: Nichols (2017), “Conclusion”, from *The Death of Expertise*, excerpts. (12 pages)

WEEK 13 – POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

24. April 1st: Brennan (2016), “Hobbits and Hooligans”, from *Against Democracy*, Chapter 1. (21 pages)

Suggested: Interview with Jason Brennan (YouTube) – <https://goo.gl/At3pa8>

25. April 3rd: Soon (2018) “Review of ‘Against Democracy’” (9 pages)

WEEK 14

26. April 8th: wrap up of the course & review for the exam