

Instructor: Kristin Voigt (Philosophy & Institute for Health and Social Policy)
Office: Institute for Health and Social Policy, Charles Meredith House, room 303
Office hours: Thu, 1:30-3pm

PHIL237 – Contemporary Moral Issues
Winter 2014

Course description: In this course, we will connect a range of controversial moral issues with moral and political philosophy in order to better understand the nature of these controversies. The course begins with an introduction to the philosophical study of moral issues, including the methods of applied ethics and major approaches to normative questions. After this introduction we will proceed to consider a number of specific controversial moral issues, such as torture, free speech and censorship, and the rights of religious, cultural and linguistic minorities.

The course pursues two main objectives: first, to familiarize you with the normative questions and controversies that surround the topics we will consider, thus helping you to come to a reasoned position on these issues; and, second, to help you sharpen your ability to think clearly and critically about contemporary moral issues.

Lecture days and times: Mon & Wed, 8:35-9:25am, starting January 6

Location for lectures: 522 McIntyre Medical Building

Conferences: Conferences start the week of 21 January. For times and locations, and to sign up for a conference group, please go to Minerva.

Names and email addresses of Teaching Assistants:

Michel Xhignesse (Michel-antoine.xhignesse@mail.mcgill.ca)

Nicole Ramsoomair (Nicole.ramsoomair@mail.mcgill.ca)

Eric Murphy (Eric.murphy2@mail.mcgill.ca)

Teaching arrangements: Two lectures per week (Monday, Wednesday) and one conference with your Teaching Assistant (conferences start in week 3). Times and locations for conferences will be announced through Minerva during drop/add period. **Please sign up for a conference group through Minerva.**

Attendance policy: Lectures and conferences are mandatory. You – not the instructor or your TA – are responsible for any missed material. Lecture notes from missed lectures will not be provided. Material discussed in lectures not appearing elsewhere may be included in exams. Lectures will be used to communicate important information about the mid-term paper and the final exam.

Course materials: There is no required textbook or coursepack for this course. All required readings, as well as additional material, will be made available through myCourses, either as PDFs or links to library and internet resources. **You must complete all required readings, and knowledge of the required readings is essential for the final exam.** Please be sure to keep up with the readings as the semester progresses.

Resources: In addition to the additional material that will be provided through myCourses, you may find the following resources interesting and helpful.

- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <http://plato.stanford.edu/>

- Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy [available as eBook through McGill library]
- International Encyclopedia of Ethics [online access through McGill library]
- Vaughn & McIntosh, *Writing Philosophy: A Guide for Canadian Students*. Available as 3-hour reserve loan at the library. [selected chapters are made available through myCourses]
- Tips and suggestions on writing philosophy papers:
 - http://cstl-cla.semo.edu/hill/writing_a_philosophy_paper.htm [also see further links at bottom of page]
 - <http://www.mcgill.ca/philosophy/undergraduate/advising/writing>
- The following are excellent podcasts, consisting for the most part of interviews with prominent philosophers who are experts on the topic addressed:
 - Philosophy Bites (<http://philosophybites.com/links-to-past-e.html>)
 - Public Ethics Radio (<http://publicethicsradio.org/>)
- Please contact the instructor or your TA if you would like additional recommendations for specific topics.

Policy on use of mobile phones and computer equipment: Laptops and other electronic devices are a distraction to those around you. ***The use of electronic devices is forbidden in lectures and conferences.*** This includes:

- computers
- mobile phones
- headphones or earbuds

The instructor may grant exceptions to accommodate valid medical or academic reasons; please contact the instructor via email if you think this applies to you. Students using or holding devices in class in violation of course policy may be told to exit the classroom. Mobiles **must** be switched off **completely** during class.

Assignments and evaluation: Your grade for this term will be based on your mid-term essay (40%) and final exam (60%). Further details about the format of both as well as sample questions will be provided through myCourses.

Mid-term paper. The midterm essay is due **in class** on **February 24**. The header of your paper **must** include your name and McGill student number **and your TA's name**. Essays not indicating the TA will **not** be graded and receive a 0 grade. If you would like to submit your essay before this date, please leave it in Kristin Voigt's mailbox in the Institute for Health and Social Policy (access to the building only during regular office hours).

Late submissions: Late submissions incur a grade penalty. Essays turned in late without an extension will be penalized at the rate of 1/3 of a grade (e.g., from a B to a B-) per *calendar day* of lateness. If you submit after the deadline, you **must** email your paper directly to your TA and deliver a hard copy to your TA's mailbox in the philosophy department as soon as possible. Submission of corrupted files, files in non-standard formats (i.e. anything other than PDF or MS Word files) or files that cannot be opened by the TA do **not** count as submission of your essay. It is your responsibility to ensure that late submissions are received by the TA.

Extensions: Extensions will *not* be given, except as required by OSD and in the case of *exceptional* medical emergencies. Requests for extensions must be directed to your TA (not the instructor) and supported by appropriate medical documentation. You must inform your TA of any medical issues within a reasonable time frame. Be sure to plan ahead so that you will not be late on account of being ill near to the deadline. Please note that given the size of the class, we cannot make exceptions to this policy.

Final exam. The date for the final exam will be set and published by the university later in the semester. Please make sure that you are aware of the date, time and location of the final exam. Please also familiarize yourself with the university's exam policy.

Grading: All grades in this course are assigned based on the merit of the work submitted. Factors outside of merit, such as hard work, the need to maintain a high CGPA for a scholarship, or the need to meet a minimum grade requirement in the course for you major are not bases for challenging grades. Requests to reconsider grades on these bases or other non-merit grounds will be refused.

If you feel there has been an error with the grading of your mid-term exam, please discuss the grade with your TA in the first instance. You can request a reassessment by writing a note to the instructor, explaining why you consider the given grade unfair. You must also provide the instructor with a paper copy of the essay you submitted to your TA (i.e. including your TA's comments). **Please note that, as a result of reassessment, the grade may go up or down.**

Final exam scripts will be available for viewing after the grades are released; you will receive instructions on how to arrange a viewing after the exam period. If you feel that there has been an error with your grade, this can be discussed with the instructor in the first instance. **Please note that if you request a reassessment of your final exam, the grade may go up or down.** You can also request a re-read of your final exam as per university policy.

Language policy: 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.

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/ for more information).

Access: If you have a disability please feel free to contact the instructor and/or your TA to arrange a time to discuss your situation. It would be helpful if you could also contact the **Office for Students with Disabilities** (www.mcgill.ca/osd) at 514-398-6009 to make them aware of any requirements you may have.

Courtesy in a large class: Because this is a very large class, please be respectful of your classmates and the instructor by arriving on time and not holding conversations during lectures.

Transmission of information and email etiquette: It is your responsibility to check myCourses regularly and to be aware of announcements and updates posted on the course website. Please direct questions in the first instance to your TA, whose name and email address you are responsible for keeping track of. All emails to TAs or the instructor **must** be sent from your university email account. Please note that, given the size of the class, emails cannot always be answered immediately. **Emails will not be answered if the answer to your question can be found on the syllabus or by reasonable investigation.**

Course outline:

Introduction to course

Introduction to course: structure, goals, choice of topics. Reading philosophical papers. What is 'applied ethics'? Thought experiments.

NB: There are no required readings during drop/add period but it is highly recommended that you read some of the suggested texts listed below.

6 and 8 January.

Recommended reading:

James Rachels, Can ethics provide answers?

Hugh La Follette, 'Reading philosophy' and 'Theorizing about ethics', from his *Ethics in Practice*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, Blackwell, 2002).

13 and 15 January.

Recommended reading:

David Edmonds, 'Matters of life and death', *Prospect Magazine*.

Moral theory: consequentialist and deontological approaches

How should we think about ethical questions? These sessions will introduce two broad approaches to ethics, consequentialism and deontology.

20 and 22 January.

Required reading:

- Julia Driver, "Classical utilitarianism" and "Contemporary consequentialism" from her *Ethics: The Fundamentals*.

27 and 29 January.

Required reading:

- Julia Driver, "Kantian ethics", in her *Ethics: The Fundamentals*.
- Immanuel Kant, selection from *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, from Timmons, *Disputed Moral Issues*.

Torture

Is it ever permissible to use torture and, if so, under what conditions? How do different moral theories approach these questions? How useful is the 'ticking bomb' thought experiment in answering them?

3 and 5 February.

Required reading:

- Dershowitz, 'Should the ticking bomb terrorist be tortured?' and response by Marcia Baron, 'The ticking bomb hypothetical', both from M. Timmons, *Disputed Moral Issues*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, OUP, 2014)

Animals

What is the moral status of non-human animals? How should we treat non-human animals? What is the challenge of 'specieism'?

10 and 12 February.

Required reading:

- H. La Follette, 'Animals', *The Practice of Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 224-234.
- L. Vaughn, 'Animal rights', *Doing Ethics*, 3rd ed. (NY: Norton, 2013), 543-552.
- Peter Singer, "All animals are equal," reprinted in *Ethics in Practice*, 2nd ed., ed. Hugh La Follette (Blackwell, 2002).

17 and 19 February.

Required reading:

- R. G. Frey, "Moral standing, the value of lives, and speciecism", reprinted in *Ethics in Practice*, 2nd ed., ed. Hugh La Follette (Blackwell, 2002).
- Bonnie Steinbock, 'Speciecism and the idea of equality', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* (1978).

Free speech and censorship

Is there a 'right' to free speech? What kinds of harms are legitimate reasons for restricting free speech?

24 and 26 February.

Required reading:

- Katherine Smits, 'Should offensive speech be regulated?', from her *Applying Political Theory*, pp. 152-170.
- Joshua Cohen, 'Freedom of Expression', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 22(3), 1993. Please read introduction (pp. 207-213) and section III (pp. 222-250).

**** Reading week – 3-7 March ****

10 and 12 March.

Required reading:

- Susan Brison, 'The price we pay? Pornography and harm', from La Follette, *Ethics in Practice*.
- Ronald Dworkin, 'Liberty and pornography', from Timmons, *Disputed Moral Issues*.
- Judith Hill, 'Pornography and degradation', from Timmons, *Disputed Moral Issues*.

Minority rights

What rights, if any, should cultural, religious and linguistic minorities have? Can minority come into conflict with individual rights and if so, how can such conflicts be resolved?

17 and 19 March

Required reading:

- Katherine Smits, 'Are minority cultures entitled to recognition and rights?', from her *Applying Political Theory*, pp. 18-41.
- Will Kymlicka, 'Justice and minority rights', extract from his *Multicultural Citizenship*, reprinted in Goodin & Pettit (ed.), *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Anthology*.

24 and 26 March.

Required reading:

- Susan Moller Okin, "Feminism and multiculturalism: some tensions", *Ethics* 108 (1998).
- Paula Casal, 'Is multiculturalism bad for animals?', *Journal of Political Philosophy* 11 (2003).

Health care professionals and conscientious refusal

Should health care professionals (doctors, pharmacists, etc.) be allowed to refuse the provision of medical services that they regard as inconsistent with their religious and/or ethical beliefs?

31 March and 2 April.

Required reading:

- Dan Brock, 'Conscientious refusal by physicians and pharmacists: who is obligated to do what, and why?', *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 29 (2008).
- Daniel Weinstock, 'Conscientious refusal and health professionals: does religion make a difference?', *Bioethics* (2013).

7 and 9 April. Conclusion to course

Conclusion to course; Q&A for final exam.