

Phil 020: Introduction to Ethics

Instructor: Karen Rice

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M-Th || 8:30am – 10:30 am || Maguire 103

Office hours by appointment

Course description:

The 2016 U.S. Presidential Election generated many responses: millions of tweets, countless arguments among families and strangers, and an outcome that will shape the U.S. for generations. It also raised urgent moral questions. When politicians advocate positions that strike us as evil, we must examine whether moral judgments are objective and universal or culturally relative and subjective. When Twitter fights become a central site of civic discourse, we must ask: is contempt always a vice, or might it be a justifiable moral attitude? When U.S. policies have life or death consequences around the world, we must think carefully about how one should weigh the impact on people far removed from us versus family or people who look like us. When someone's statements cause harm (material, emotional, and otherwise) to others, which is morally relevant: their intent or the consequences? Perhaps both?

To address these questions, we will read selections from the work of philosophers including Aristotle, J.S. Mill, Immanuel Kant, Iris Marion Young, Audre Lorde, and Macalester Bell. We will also draw on podcasts, documentaries, and fictional works. Students will be assessed based on a 4-5 page "objection ladder" paper, two drafts of a 5 page paper, and a final oral and written exam.

Prerequisites: None

Course objectives:

My aim is for students to complete the course having made substantial progress on the following goals:

- Learn the central claims of three influential moral theories, as well as important critiques of them.
- Train and sharpen one's moral sensibilities to assess what is salient about complex real-life situations, leading one to make wise, just, and virtuous decisions in response to them.
- Improve one's skills at constructing, analyzing, and improving arguments, both in writing and orally.
- Add nuance and clarity to one's understanding of the facts and moral issues involved in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election.
- Prepare one to engage in discussions about politics and policy that are principled, emotionally appropriate to the issues and people affected, morally insightful, and productive.

Required texts:

- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. Terence Irwin. Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 2007. Print. ISBN-10: 0872204642

Irwin's translation is excellent, clear, inexpensive, and includes a very useful glossary; if you think you'll be doing any more philosophy, I recommend getting this translation. Otherwise, you are welcome to use another translation. Many are available quite cheaply online.

- All other readings, videos, and materials will be posted on the course website.

Assessment:

- June 12th: **4-5 page 'objection ladder' paper** – 20%
- June 26th: **5 page paper** – 20%
- July 6th: **Revised 5 page paper** – 25%
- July 6th: **Final exam:** oral and written assessment of a case study – 20%
- Attendance and contributions to class – 15%

In addition to standard measures of class participation, each student is required twice a week to post to the course site a news or analysis article related to the election. At the beginning of class, the student must verbally assess the quality of the source, summarize the information in it, and relate it to the course materials of the day.

- Failure to complete any one of these will result in an F in the course, not just on that assignment.

The weight of each assignment in the final grade is an approximation, subject to up to 5% adjustment each during the course and in final calculation at the instructor's discretion. Some reasons they might be adjusted include reflecting improvement, backsliding, extraordinarily good (or weak) individual pieces of work, and outstanding participation.

Other requirements:

- *Consistent, on-time attendance* [see policy below]
- *Preparation for class and engaged, respectful participation* – Means of participation may vary among students, but students are expected to proactively seek out alternate ways to contribute to the learning of other students in the course if they are not able to use the offered means.
- *Ownership of one's own learning*
- *No laptops or cell phones in class* unless specifically required for an activity
- *Attentiveness to communication by email*

Accommodation:

Please communicate with me during the first week of class if you experience or expect to experience challenges that bear on your ability to do your best work for this course. I will work with you and the Academic Resource Center to provide the conditions necessary for you to participate fully and successfully in the course.

Attendance:

We only have 19 days of class in this course, compared to around 30 in a typical semester. Also, we have a smaller class than during a typical semester, so each person contributes more to the productivity of each class session.

Therefore, excused absences will only be permitted with a doctor's note (excluding appointments that could have been easily rescheduled) or extreme personal emergency (e.g. a death in the family). **Each unexcused absence beyond 2 will result in a third of a grade deduction in your final grade** (e.g. from a B+ to a B).

Grading standards:

- As far as possible, I will grade your assignments anonymously.
- I will provide you with a detailed rubric / outline of assessment standards for each assignment at least one week before it is due.
- Any grade challenge must be submitted in writing no sooner than 1 day and no later than 1 week after the graded assignment was returned. It must refer to specific standards of the grading rubric and make the case based on those standards and specific evidence from the text that a different grade is appropriate. After a grade challenge is submitted, your grade may be revised either higher or lower based on a new assessment of the assignment.

There will be no exceptions to this policy.

Late assignments:

- No extensions will be granted less than 12 hours before the assignment is due, except in extreme circumstances.
- Because of the short duration of the class, the standards to receive an extension will be high, similar to those required to receive an excused absence.
- 1-24 hours late: two-thirds of a grade penalty (e.g. from an A- to a B)
- Every 24 hours past that: a full grade penalty (e.g. from a B to a C)
- When in doubt, communicate with me about what is going on. Don't fall off the map if things start to get late or overwhelming.

Academic honesty / plagiarism:

You are expected and required to abide by the policies established in the [Honor System](#). Non-exhaustively, these policies prohibit plagiarism (“the act of passing off as one's own the ideas or writings of another”) and cheating (“the use of attempted use of unauthorized materials, information, study aids, or unauthorized collaboration on...academic exercises”). Note especially that **instances of plagiarism do not have to be intentional to be unacceptable**. Therefore, you are responsible for familiarizing yourself with what constitutes plagiarism and more broadly what the standards for academic integrity and good practice are.

I care about academic integrity very much on a moral and fairness level, but also on a pragmatic level. It's very imprudent to plagiarize, as **plagiarism on any one assignment will result in you failing the course**. If you're between a rock and a hard place, just do a crummy job on the assignment—it cannot hurt your grade as much as plagiarizing or cheating will.

Instructional continuity:

If weather or other university-wide unforeseen interruption occurs, I will be in touch with you by email about how we will continue to move forward in the course. Continuity options include writing and commenting on blog posts, class by video conference, and additional reading/video lectures to watch with quizzes over the content.

COURSE and HOMEWORK SCHEDULE

Subject to revision before and throughout the term.

Date	Topic	Election application	Materials to review before class	Assignment due at start of class
6/5	Introduction Argumentation Complexity	Assessing news sources Election narratives	We Need to Talk About TED (video/text) “How to Avoid Passing on Fake News” (Luvvie Ajayi) Skewed News (Kennedy Institute of Ethics)	<i>Twice a week article assignment</i>
6/6	Systemic injustice	Racial backlash narrative	“Political Responsibility and Structural Injustice” (Iris Marion Young) “White Fragility” (Robin DiAngelo) Do You Live in a Bubble and American Fact Finder	
6/7	Relativism	Deplorable? Nasty? What kind of moral judgements can we make?	“Tolerance, Pluralism, and Relativism” (Gordon Graham) “Morality is a Culturally Conditioned Response” (Jesse Prinz)	
6/8	Relativism (cont.)	Ought identity influence judgments?	“Moral Relativism is Unintelligible” (Julien Beillaird) “Sotomayor’s Reasoning” (Linda Martin Alcoff) “Seriously?” (<i>This American Life</i> podcast, Ira Glass)	
6/12	Components of human flourishing	Campaign promises for a good life	“Happiness and Living Well” (video lecture, Susan Meyer) “Happiness and Harmony” , part 4 only (video lecture, Tamar Gendler) <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> Book I, Ch. 1,5,7-11 (Aristotle)	Objection ladder paper due
6/13	Virtues Civility	...Twitter.	“Virtue and Habit II” (video lecture, Tamar Gendler) skim <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> Book III, Ch.5-10, all of Book	<i>Twice a week article assignment</i>

			IV and select two virtues to study carefully (Aristotle)	
6/14	Objections to Aristotle Contempt as a Virtue?	Twitter, 'deplorables' and more	"A Woman's Scorn: Toward a Feminist Defense of Contempt as a Moral Emotion" (MacAlester Bell) "Our New Age of Contempt" (Karen Stohr)	
6/15	Humor and mockery	SNL, Fallon, Samantha Bee, imitation of disabled reporter	"Humor" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy) "Humour" (Wikipedia)	
			Suggestion: watch <i>Eye in the Sky</i> and/or <i>13th</i> over the weekend	
6/19	Anger Protest	Violence at Trump rallies, protests of Clinton, Sanders by BLM	"The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism" from <i>Sister Outsider</i> (Audre Lorde), "1 Year Later: BLM Protester Who Interrupted Bernie Sanders Rally..." (Marissa Jenae Johnson) "Why Trump Voters Are So Angry" (Jeff Guo)	<i>Twice a week article assignment</i>
6/20	Utilitarianism Calculating the value(s) of lives	Drone policy, tech policy, Islamophobia	<i>Eye in the Sky</i> (feature-length film, dir. Gavin Hood) <i>Utilitarianism</i> Ch.2 (John Stuart Mill) "Self-Driving Cars and Trolley Problems" (Joel Achenbach)	
6/21	Calculating the impact of policies	Welfare programs, private prisons, tax cuts	"Famine, Affluence, and Morality" (Peter Singer) <i>13th</i> (documentary, dir. Ava DuVernay) Human Life Value Calculator (Life Happens organization)	
6/22	Moral luck	When elections turn on tiny margins, protest votes	"Moral Luck" (Thomas Nagel) One Vote (<i>Radiolab</i> podcast, Latif Nasser)	
6/26	Intent v. impact of speech acts	Shrill, 'bad hombres', 'super predators', hate crimes	"Discursive Injustice" (Rebecca Kukla), <i>On Liberty</i> Ch. 2 selections (John Stuart Mill)	5 pg paper due
6/27	Speech acts (cont.)	Prerequisites for debate	Selections from "Testimonial Smothering" (Kristie Dotson)	<i>Twice a week article assignment</i>

6/28	Kantian ethics Respect	Torture, sexual assault	“A Simplified Account of Kant’s Ethics” (Onora O’Neill) <i>suggested:</i> video interview with Korsgaard	<i>paper drafts returned with comments</i>
6/29	Methods of moral improvement	Polarization What now?	“Troubles with Stereotypes for Spinozan Minds” (Bryce Huebner) “ Virtue and Habit I ” (video lecture, Tamar Gendler) “ How Do You Change Voters’ Minds? Have a Conversation ” (Benoit Denizet-Lewis)	
7/3	Moral community, damage, and repair	What now?	<i>Moral Damage, Moral Repair</i> Ch. 1 (Margaret Urban Walker) “The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro” (Frederick Douglas)	<i>No article assignment this week</i>
	4th of July			
7/5	Forgiveness	What now?	“ Forgiveness ” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry, Paul Hughes) “Some Thoughts on Mercy” (Ross Gay)	
7/6	Exam		Prepare for final exam, written and oral	Final paper due