

Philosophy 140

Contemporary Moral Problems

Lectures: Mon & Wed 12:00-12:50, Shoemaker Hall 2102

Instructor: Christopher Morris

Office: 1102a Skinner Hall

Office hours: Tue 2:30-4:00 and by appointment.

Telephone: 405.5692 (office), 405.5689 (dept)

Email: cwmorris@umd.edu

Teaching Assistants:

Susan Bilek, 1107d Skinner; 301.526.5625 (cell), sbilek@umd.edu

Office hours: Mon 11:00-12:00, Wed 1:00-2:00, and by appointment.

Mark Engleson, 1107a Skinner; 405.5746, mengleso@umd.edu

Office hours: Wed 1:00-2:00, Fri 2:00-3:00, and by appointment.

Wei Zhang, 1110a Skinner; 405.5747, wzhang2@umd.edu

Office hours: Fri 2:00-4:00 and by appointment.

An introduction to *ethics* or *moral philosophy*. Our approach will be to think critically and systematically about several moral controversies. In this class, we shall concentrate on *questions of life and death*: in particular, euthanasia, abortion, capital punishment, the treatment of non-human animals, and killing in time of war. All of the controversies we shall study concern killing and causing death. Consequently the conclusions we reach about one controversy will usually have implications for others.

The questions we shall consider include: Why is it generally wrong to kill? What exactly is the harm of death? Who, or what, ought to be protected by norms against killing? May we ever kill ourselves? Is the difference between killing and letting die important? When do humans acquire *moral standing*? Might they ever lose it? May death be used as a form of punishment? When may we kill in war-time? Is it ever permissible to kill civilians in war?

Students will be asked to devote a great deal of effort to *reflecting* about the controversies that we shall be examining. The course does not presuppose a background in philosophy or critical reasoning. It does, however, presuppose a willingness to work hard and to think critically about some very difficult problems, and it will not be easy to do well without a considerable investment of effort. The primary objectives of the course are (1) to acquaint students with contempo-

rary philosophical discussions of some important ethical problems, and (2) to assist students in developing certain skills: for instance, understanding a moral problem or controversy, presenting and evaluating the different sides of a debate, analyzing a moral argument, developing a position and defending it, detecting nonsense.

The instructor will communicate with the class frequently by email. Some reading assignments will be sent to students by attachment. And some announcements will be made by email. Students are responsible for checking their email regularly.

Required Text

Mark Timmons, ed., *Disputed Moral Questions: A Reader* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

Course Requirements

1. to complete the assigned readings,
2. to attend lectures,
3. to attend discussion sections,
4. to take several unannounced short quizzes (in lecture or discussion section),
5. to take a mid-term test (Wed 3 Oct)
6. to write a short (1,000-1,500 words) essay (due Mon 19 Nov)
7. to take a final exam (Tue 18 Dec, 8-10am)¹.

Topics for the short assignment and the essay will be distributed; students may select their own essay topics but only with *written* permission of the instructor. Students should take note of work requirements and deadlines; late essays will be penalized and make-up tests will not be offered. (Exceptions to these policies may be made for medical reasons and other emergencies.)

Grading Policy

Final grades will normally be a weighted average of the essay and test grades (test and quizzes 25%, essay 35%, final exam 40%). Missed assignments cannot be made up (unless the student has a genuine excuse). “Extra credit” assignments will not be offered. The instructor reserves the right to raise the final grade of anyone whose work shows dramatic improvement, as well as the right to fail any student who does not pass the final exam. Plagiarism will normally result in failure of the course (a grade of XF).²

¹ For the fall exam schedule, see <http://www.testudo.umd.edu/soc/exam200708.html>.

² The University of Maryland, College Park has a Code of Academic Integrity, administered by the Student Honor Council. This Code sets standards for academic integrity at Maryland for all undergraduate and graduate students. You are responsible for upholding these standards for this course. You should be aware of the consequences of cheating, fabrication, facilitation, and plagiarism. For more information on the Code see <http://www.shc.umd.edu>.

Studying philosophy

Most students enrolled in this course will be new to philosophy as well as to college. So a few words are in order about how to approach the reading assignments. Students are expected to have read and to have a basic understanding of the assigned texts before coming to class. Different sorts of readings have been selected, some much more difficult than others. Philosophical writing is often dense, largely because of the abstractness of the subject and the reasoning (and sometimes, alas, because of poor writing). Consequently, it will usually be necessary to read each assigned text *more than once*. A suggestion would be first to read through the assigned essay quickly in order to understand the general point or thesis; a close second reading should then reveal the details of the author's position and arguments. You are strongly encouraged to write short summaries of the essays in your notebooks (see below). The assigned readings will usually put forward a particular position on some controversy. *You should always understand what that position is, how it differs from other possible positions, and with what sorts of considerations (reasons, arguments, evidence) the author supports it. You should ask as well whether you agree with the position and are convinced by the supporting considerations.* Is the position or conclusion true or plausible? Are the arguments valid or sound? In sum, you should study each selection *carefully* and *critically*. In class we shall presuppose familiarity with the assigned texts. Speak to the instructor or to your discussion group leader if you are having trouble with the readings.

Notebooks

You presumably will keep a notebook for this course in which to record your lecture and discussion section notes. In addition, it might be useful to keep a small notebook to record three other kinds of notes: (1) brief summaries of the assigned readings, (2) questions or thoughts that occur to you during the term, and (3) answers to questions the instructor raises in class ("notebook exercises"). These notebooks will not normally be collected by your instructors (however, should you be having difficulty with the course we may ask to see them).

(1) Writing short summaries of the readings will help you understand them; it will also permit you to check your interpretations of the assigned articles against those of the instructor and discussion section leader. You should as well list any questions or criticisms you have of the positions set out in the essays. (2) One of the best ways to learn how to think critically about difficult abstract questions is to write down your thoughts. A sign that you are thinking about the questions we raise in class will be that thoughts frequently occur to you. *Write them down.* This is the second purpose of your notebook. If an objection or a question or an idea relevant to the course comes to you some evening or morning, perhaps while doing something completely unrelated to the class, pull out your notebook and jot it down. If you do this frequently enough you may find that your term paper will almost write itself. Having your thoughts in writing will also help you analyze and criticize them. (3) From time to time the instructor will raise a question and ask you to write a few sentences or paragraphs in response to it. These will sometimes be the object of your Friday discussion section. Often they will help you think about some of the topics we are to consider.

Tentative Schedule of Lectures and Readings

You are expected to complete the readings by the time you attend the class for which they are assigned. The lecture will almost always bear directly on the assigned reading but will not necessarily explain it. Some of the readings will be discussed in detail in the Friday discussion sections. Note that some of the readings are more difficult or more important than others, and this will often be noted by the instructor in class. Changes will occasionally be made, and these will be announced at the start of class. Unless otherwise indicated, readings will be found in *Disputed Moral Issues*. Readings marked by an * will be distributed, usually by e-mail.

Date	Topic	Assignment
Wed 29 Aug	Introduction	
Wed 5 Sep	Is terrorism wrong?	<i>Morris</i> , "Terrorism"* <i>Writing assignment</i> , due Friday
Mon 10 Sep	Famine and obligations to save lives	<i>Singer</i> , "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" (452-7)
Wed 12 Sep	Why is killing wrong?	<i>Morris</i> , "Notes on the Wrongness of Killing"*
Mon 17 Sep	Why is death normally a bad thing to the victim?	<i>Morris</i> , "Notes on the Wrongness of Killing"*
Wed 19 Sep	Suicide	<i>Aquinas</i> , "Whether it is lawful to kill oneself?"; <i>Hume</i> , "Of Suicide"*
Mon 24 Sep	Euthanasia	<i>Rachels</i> , "Active and Passive Euthanasia" (243-7); <i>Steinbock</i> , "The Intentional Termination of Life"(247-52)
Wed 26 Sep	Euthanasia	<i>Brock</i> , "Voluntary Active Euthanasia" (253-6)
Mon 1 Oct	Euthanasia	<i>Doerflinger</i> , "Assisted Suicide" (256-61); <i>Watts & Howell</i> , "Assisted Suicide..." (261-6)
Wed 3 Oct	<i>Mid-term test</i>	
Mon 8 Oct	Abortion	<i>Timmons</i> , "Abortion" (267-73)
Wed 10 Oct	Abortion	<i>John Paul II</i> , "The Unspeakable Crime.." (275-7)
Mon 15 Oct	Abortion	<i>Warren</i> , "On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion" (277-83)
Wed 17 Oct	Abortion	<i>Thomson</i> , "In Defense of Abortion" (284-92)

Mon 22 Oct	Abortion	<i>Marquis</i> , “An Argument that Abortion is Wrong” (292-6)
Wed 24 Oct	Abortion	
Mon 29 Oct	Non-human animals	<i>Singer</i> , “All Animals are Equal”(477-85)
Wed 31 Oct	Non-human animals	<i>Cohen</i> , “In Defense of Speciesism” (485-8); <i>Warren</i> , “Human and Ani. Rights...” (493-8)
Mon 5 Nov	Theoretical Interlude: what are moral judgments?	<i>Writing assignment</i> (notebook exercise)
Wed 7 Nov	The death penalty	<i>Timmons</i> , “The Death Penalty” (359-63)
Mon 12 Nov	The death penalty	<i>Kant</i> , “Punishment...” (364-6); <i>Nathansan</i> , “An Eye for an Eye?” (366-72)
Wed 14 Nov	The death penalty	<i>van den Haag</i> , “A Defense of the Death Penalty” (372-6)
Mon 19 Nov	The death penalty	<i>Bedau</i> , “The Case Against...” (376-81) <i>Essays due</i>
Wed 21 Nov	???	
Mon 26 Nov	The Morality of War	<i>Timmons</i> , “War...” (390-1, 393-5)
Wed 28 Nov	The Iraq War	
Mon 3 Dec	Terrorism	<i>Khatchadourian</i> , “Terrorism...” (401-8); <i>Walzer</i> , “After 9/11...” (409-411)
Wed 5 Dec	Hiroshima and Nagasaki	<i>Truman</i> , “Address to the American People”, 9 August 1945*; <i>Wasserstrom</i> , “Does Morality Apply to War?” (398-401)
Mon 10 Dec	Concluding thoughts	
Tue 18 Dec, 8-10am	FINAL EXAM	Please note: <i>no one</i> will be allowed to take the exam before this date.

Short Assignment (Fri 7 Sep). Explain in a few words, possibly a page, why killing is generally wrong. That is, state the *reasons* why killing is wrong. Do not tell us why you think that *others* believe killing to be wrong; we also don't want an *explanation* of people's beliefs ("we were raised to think that..."). Rather tell us why *you* think that killing is, in fact, wrong. That is, why is killing typically something that we *should* consider to be wrong? What is it about killing which makes it wrong (in circumstances when it *is* wrong)?

We all believe that killing is generally wrong – that is, we all believe that killing some people in certain circumstances is morally wrong and should not be allowed. We have not stated what exactly we mean when we say that killing is wrong or generally wrong. This is something that we shall discuss throughout the term. For now, do not think too hard about the precise meaning of terms or the distinctions or qualifications you may need; focus instead on a few clear cases of wrongful killing, ones where there is no doubt about the wrongfulness of the act. For instance, someone walks into a school and shoots a number of children, perhaps because he had been fired from his job and was unhappy. Or someone kills his or her former spouse out of jealousy. Explain why killing in these kinds of clear cases is wrong. What is it that makes killing wrong?

What we are looking for are the *reasons* why killing is wrong (when it is wrong). State the reasons for the wrongness of killing and be sure to explain why they are genuine reasons.

This course focuses on ethical questions about life and death. We shall be asking whether it is ever permissible to take another's life (for instance, euthanasia, self-defense, capital punishment, war), or one's own life (i.e., suicide). To know what to think about these difficult controversies, we need first to know why killing is generally wrong. Determining that is the purpose of this exercise.

(A note on religion and religious considerations. If you are a theist – you believe in God – and some of your thoughts about the wrongness of killing have to do with God, you may offer theistic arguments (i.e., arguments that assume the existence of a deity). By contrast, if you are an atheist or agnostic, presumably none of your reasons will make reference to a divine being. In general, this term you should learn to reason about moral matters both from theist and atheist perspectives.)

This exercise is *very* difficult, so do not be surprised if you find it challenging. We all believe that killing is generally wrong but rarely do we ask ourselves why. Trying to come to some settled view of the matter will be very important for our discussions this term.