

# PHL F304: Contemporary Moral Problems

University of Texas at Austin

Summer 2016

## Course Instructor:

Fatema Amijee

Email: famijee@gmail.com

Office Hours and Location: Wednesdays 3-5pm in WAG 303

## Class Time and Place:

Monday to Friday from 1-2:30pm in WEL 3.266

## Course Description

This course serves as an introduction to a number of central issues in moral philosophy. We will begin by asking what the good life consists in, and what makes actions right or wrong. We will then investigate questions about the status of moral truths: Are there any moral truths? Do they owe their existence to God? If there are any moral truths, how can we access them, or in other words, how is moral knowledge possible? Are moral truths relative or absolute? Finally, we will transition into investigating questions at the center of applied moral philosophy. A large section of this latter part of the course will be devoted to the morality of war: What are the limits of our right to self-defence? Are there any circumstances under which one gives up the right not to be killed? Can a war be just? When is humanitarian intervention into the affairs of another state justified?

## Course Reading

There are two required texts in this course. They are:

- *The Ethical Life* (3rd Edition) edited by Russ Shafer-Landau
- *Killing in War* by Jeff McMahan

Any other readings will be made available on Canvas.

## Evaluation

*Grading:* I adhere to a blind grading policy. So when you submit your assignments, please only include your student EID.

1. Midterm Exam: 30% Date: Friday, June 24th
  - The midterm will be a mix of multiple-choice and short answer questions. Only material discussed in lecture will be examinable.
2. Term Paper: 40%. Due: Thursday, July 7th
  - *Instructions:* You will write a long term paper on one of multiple questions that I will assign ahead of time. It will require that you engage closely with the readings. I'll send out more detailed instructions well before the paper is due. The paper will be due on the last day of class.
3. Active Engagement: 20%
  - Twice a week, you will be required to submit answers to a 'reading question' pertaining to a particular assigned reading. I will post the reading question on Canvas prior to our discussing the reading in class. Your answers to these questions will be graded and constitute the 'active engagement' portion of your grade.
4. Attendance: 10%
  - Attendance in class is not just a physical achievement, but an intellectual one. As such, the following will negatively affect your attendance grade:
    - Tardiness (two instances of tardiness will count as one absence)
    - Checking your phone in class
    - Wearing headphones/earphones in class
    - Falling asleep
    - Being disruptive (this includes leaving class early without giving the instructor prior notice)
    - Using your laptop (Laptops are not permitted in this class. I will have a handout for you every class. Research has also shown that note-taking by hand is much more effective for both comprehension and memory).

## Course Schedule

*Reading Guide:* I have assigned at least one article (or book chapter) per lecture as required reading. It is possible to do very well in this course without reading all the papers. I think this is a good thing. Better that you should carefully read a hard but classic paper than that you should instead skim two or three papers. When you study for the midterm, use my handouts as a guide to which bits of the assigned reading are most relevant.

1. Course Introduction

2. The Good Life

*Reading:* John Stuart Mill “Hedonism”; Robert Nozick “The Experience Machine”

3. Theories of Right Conduct I

*Reading:* Plato “Euthyphro”; J.J.C. Smart “Extreme and Restricted Utilitarianism”

4. Theories of Right Conduct II

*Reading:* Thomas Hobbes “Leviathan”; W.D Ross “What Makes Right Actions Right?”; Hilde Lindemann “What Is Feminist Ethics?”

5. The Status of Moral Truths I

*Reading:* David Hume “Moral Distinctions Not Derived from Reason”; A.J. Ayer “A Critique of Ethics”

6. The Status of Moral Truths II

*Reading:* J.L. Mackie “The Subjectivity of Values”; Harry Gensler “Cultural Relativism”

7. The Status of Moral Truths III

*Reading:* David Enoch “Why I Am an Objectivist about Ethics (And Why You Are, Too)” Simon Blackburn “How To Be an Ethical Anti-Realist”

8. Poverty and Hunger

*Reading:* Peter Singer “The Singer Solution to World Poverty”; Jan Narveson “Feeding the Hungry”

9. Euthanasia

*Reading:* James Rachels “The Morality of Euthanasia”; John Harris “The Survival Lottery”; David Velleman “Against the Right to Die”

10. Abortion

*Reading:* Judith Jarvis Thomson “A Defense of Abortion”; Don Marquis “Why Abortion Is Immoral”; Mary Anne Warren “On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion”

11. Limits of the Law

*Reading:* Igor Primoratz “Justifying Legal Punishment”; Michael Huemer “America’s Unjust Drug War”

12. Terrorism and Torture

*Reading:* Michael Walzer “Terrorism: A Critique of Excuses”; Alan Dershowitz “Should the Ticking Bomb Terrorist Be Tortured?”

13. *Jus ad Bellum*

*Reading:* Jeff McMahan, Chapter 1 of *Killing in War*

14. *Jus in Bello I*

*Reading:* Jeff McMahan, Chapter 2 of *Killing in War*

15. *Jus in Bello II*

*Reading:* Jeff McMahan, Chapters 3&4 of *Killing in War*

16. *Jus in Bello III*

*Reading:* Jeff McMahan, Chapter 5 of *Killing in War*

## Course Business

1. *Plagiarism and Academic Misconduct.* The University of Texas at Austin takes plagiarism (and academic misconduct more generally) very seriously. You are responsible for knowing what plagiarism is, and also for knowing the particular plagiarism penalties. Plagiarism includes (but is not limited to) the use of a thinker’s ideas or words without proper citation; the purchase of assignments; the use of internet resources without proper citation; and the submission of work written (in whole or in part) by another. Penalties for plagiarism range from a zero on the assignment to suspension from the university. Furthermore, I’m known to be an excellent detector of plagiarism: *if you cheat, I will catch you.* So don’t do it.

2. *How to Avoid Plagiarising:* Most students plagiarise because they believe themselves to be without options. But no student will ever be without options in this course. If you find yourself in trouble, and tempted to cheat, contact me *immediately*. If you haven't *yet* cheated, a solution can always be found.
3. *Late Penalties.* This will be a challenging and fast-paced course. It is highly recommended that you attend every class meeting and get your work in on time. The late penalty on the paper is set at 1/3 of a letter grade per day, to a maximum of three days (this includes weekends/holidays), unless accompanied by a documented medical explanation or due to a family emergency. Any work outstanding beyond this point will receive a grade of 0.
4. *Your Course Contact.* I am your primary contact for this course. Course-related emails MUST have "PHLF304" somewhere in the subject line. I will not answer emails that ask for information readily available through on either Canvas or the course syllabus, so it is always a good idea to begin by checking those two places. Also, I recommend that if you have a substantive philosophical question, you come to my office hours rather than send me an email. I will respond to all other emails within two working days.
5. *Special Accommodations.* I am more than happy to assist with special accommodations for students registered with accessibility services. If you are registered with accessibility services, please don't hesitate to have your accessibility services representative get in touch with me.