WISCONSIN
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON

Contemporary Moral Issues (Phil 341)

Course Description: A philosophical study of some of the major moral issues in contemporary society. This semester we will engage philosophically with the following topics: racial justice, poverty ethics, gender justice, the ethics of social change, and one additional them to be decided by the class. These topics will lead us into discussions about social justice, generosity, racism, reparations, ethical sex, #metoo and feminism, pornography, patriarchy, the ethics of protest and resistance, and other topics. Importantly, moral reflection should not stop with theory evaluation, arguments and counter-arguments. An additional goal of this class is *moral growth*. To that end, we will have opportunities to think creatively and practically about how to close moral gaps in society and in our own lives. An overt aspiration of this class is the formation of morally ambitious, caring, just living in the contemporary world.

Instructor: Joel Ballivian
Email: ballivian@wisc.edu
Meeting time: MWF 9:55AM - 10:45AM
Location: Soc Sci 5231
Office hours and availability: Tuesdays, 10am-noon (or by request)
Instructional Mode: in person (or until Covid ruins things again...after which we will meet synchronously online)

❦ Overview of Assignments and Grading:

Socratic Note Taking (25%)
Participation (30%)
Public Philosophy (5%)
Midterm (20%)
Final (20%)

93-100% - A
88-92.9% - AB
83-87.9% - B
77-82.9% - BC
70-76.9% - C
60-69.9% - D
0-59.9% - F

❦ Assignments in Detail:

Public Philosophy (5%): Make a post on one of your social media accounts that (a) introduces your followers to a philosophical issue and (b) gives them resources for further exploration. Take a screen shot of the post (edit it so that any names are obscured, if you'd like) and submit it on Canvas. Or, if it's a video, attach a link. If you *write* a post, it should be no more than 500 words (I recommend the app *Canva* for making instagram posts). If you post a *video*, it should be no more than 2 min long. The idea is to give your audience a sneak peak into a philosophical view (e.g., Kate Manne's argument about performative consent) or a philosophical debate (relativism vs. objectivism). Explain the position(s) concisely, introduce the argument(s) concisely, and define any terms. Then, offer links to resources that allow people to explore the issue further (you won't need to go beyond the resources covered in class, though you are free to do so if you'd like). If you want the post to be opinionated ("I think the following view is right..."), please go for it. **Note**: if you feel uncomfortable taking these issues to your social media platform, no worries; in that case, treat this like another SNT assignment (see below) and email it to the TA.

Due: At any point in the semester *before the final exam*.

Socratic Note Taking (25%): For each section of the class (there are 5), you will pick a reading and do Socratic note taking on it (SNT). This involves picking a passage, statement, or argument from an assigned text, asking **two** substantive questions about it, and then answering those questions for yourself as you continue reading (~250 words per answer). The turned-in assignment should include: (a) the page # (or section) where the passage/statement/argument is found, (b) your question, and (c) your answer. These will be turned in on Canvas.

Due: each SNT must be turned in before I lecture on the content of your SNT. In other words, if you do an SNT on paper x, and the syllabus (or a class email) says that I'll lecture on paper x on Monday, you must turn in your SNT on paper x *before Monday*. You can't do an SNT on a paper that has already been covered in class.

Total number of Socratic notes: 5 (5% each). 1 per unit.

Important: You may do Socratic note taking for any of the readings below that have this caption: "[SNT option]"

Participation (30%): philosophy is done best in community and through dialogue, but good dialogue is something that requires cultivation and virtue. We will attempt to develop the skills and virtues necessary for sustaining good philosophical discussion. Hence, a large part of your grade consists in your participation in class. The minimum threshold for making discussions good in class is doing the readings; come to each class having studied the readings and be prepared to discuss them. Throughout the term you will fill out self-assessments and describe how you think your participation is going, how it has improved, and how it could get better. I will do my best to create a class environment that conduces to good discussion, charitable engagement, and freedom to

speak up. Class surveys: I will also send out periodic class surveys; taking the surveys is required and counts toward your participation grade.

Note on Attendance: Attendance in lecture and discussion sections is expected but will not be graded directly. Instead, absences from lecture or discussion sections will count against your *participation grade*. After 3 unexcused absences (from either lecture or discussion), you will lose 5 participation points for each subsequent unexcused absence (25/30, 20/30, and so on). In other words, you have 3 free unexcused absences (because why not?). Use these for a mental health day off, or to catch up on rest, etc. After that, you lose participation points. This means you cannot have more than 9 unexcused absences without losing *all* participation points and will score no higher than a C in the class. Please contact me or Xavier if you need to miss class (I'm very lenient here).

Final and Midterm Exams (20% each): nothing special here. The exams consists of short-essay questions that ask you to define key terms, re-formulate arguments, evaluate arguments, and respond critically to positions. I normally assign these as take-home exams.

❦ Readings and Texts

Required reading: All the readings will be posted on Canvas. The only reading you need to purchase is *Letter From Birmingham Jail*, Martin Luther King Jr. It is available at the University Book Store, or you can purchase it online (buy the Penguin UK publisher version). Please have this purchased asap.

❦ Course Objectives:

1. Ability to think critically about arguments.
2. Ability to interpret complex texts accurately and analyze them logically.
3. Ability to communicate precisely and concisely in both writing and speech.
4. Ability to exchange reasons about controversial matters respectfully and with the aim of uncovering the truth.
5. Interpretive charity and intellectual honesty, which includes appropriate attribution others of their ideas, and recognition and frankness about the limitations of one's own ideas.
6. Increased awareness of social problems and social vulnerabilities.
7. Increased care about social problems and social vulnerabilities.
8. Increased wisdom about responding to social problems and social vulnerabilities.

Course Schedule (subject to some modification)

Weekly Overview:

1. Intro
2. Moral relativism
3. Poverty 1
4. Poverty 2
5. Poverty 3
6. Racism 1
7. Racism 2
8. SPRING BREAK
9. Racism 3
10. Gender 1
11. Gender 2
12. Social Change 1
13. Social Change 2
14. Tbd (class decides)
15. Tbd (class decides)

Weekly Flow in Detail:

Week 1: Introduction

W
– Syllabus and course description

F
– Topic: Critical Thinking
– In class reading: bell hooks, "Democratic Education," from *Teaching Critical Thinking*.

Week 2 (1/31): Moral Relativism

– Shafer-Landau, "Ethical Relativism" (selections).

Discussion sections: McBrayer, "Why Our Children Don't Think There Are Moral Facts."

1. Poverty Ethics

Week 3 (2/7): The Ethics of Poverty 1

M-W
– Topic: How much luxury is permissible?
– Reading: Singer, "The Singer Solution to Global Poverty" [SNT option].

F
– Topic: The problem of dependency
– Reading: Ben Davis, "Dependency is Dead!"

Week 4 (2/14): The Ethics of Poverty 2

M
– Topic: How much luxury is permissible?
– Reading: Ballivian, "Poverty, Affluence, and Minimalism" [SNT option]

F
– Topic: Stigmatizing the Poor.
– Reading: Claudia Hammond, "Despising the Poor," from, *Mind Over Money*. [SNT option]

Week 5 (2/21): The Ethics of Poverty 3

M-F
– Topic: What is wrong with inequality?
– Reading: Satz & White, "What is wrong with inequality?" (Just these sections: Introduction, Sufficiency, & Equality of Opportunity). [SNT option]

T (discussion section)
– Selections from Rank et al, *Poorly Understood: What America Gets Wrong About Poverty*. Your choice: ch. 6 or ch. 7 [SNT option]

2. Racial Justice

Week 6 (2/28): Racial Justice 1

M-W
– Topic: What is racism?
– Reading: Ibram X. Kendi, "Definitions," from *How to Be an AntiRacist*. [SNT option]

F
– In-class reading: J. L. A. Garcia, "The Heart of Racism."

Week 7 (3/7): Racial Justice 2

M-W
– Topic: The legacy of Jim Crow & housing discrimination
– Listen: NPR interview with Richard Rothstein on *The Color of Law*.

F
– Topic: Asian Americans in the Black-white Binary
– In-class reading: Ancheta, "Neither Black Nor White."

Week 8 (3/14): SPRING BREAK. No class.

Week 9 (3/21): Racial Justice 3

M-F
– Topic: Reparations
– Reading: Ballivian, "'No One Responsible for Slavery is Alive.' Answering an Objection to Reparations" [SNT option]

T (discussion section)
– Darity and Mullen, ch. 12 of *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the 21st Century*. [SNT option]

F
– Guest lecture: Alexandra Gee on Black women's experience in the U.S.

3. Gender Justice

Week 10 (3/28): Gender Justice 1

M-W

– Topic: sexual ethics and gender scripts
– Kate Manne, *Entitled: How Male Privilege Harms Women,* chapter 4, "Unwanted–On the Entitlement to Consent." [SNT option] <— Due Wednesday.

F
– Topic: Gender Inequality
– **Empirical Research:** Iris Bohnet, podcast interview on *What Works: Gender Equality by Design*

Week 11 (4/4): Gender Justice 2

M-W
– Topic: The ethics of pornography
– Amia Srinavasin, "Talking to my students about sex," from *The Right To Sex,* excerpt. [SNT option]

F
– Anne Eaton, "A Sensible Anti-Porn Feminism" (just 676-680) [SNT option]

4. Justice & Social Change

Week 12 (4/12): Social Change 1

– Topic: MLK, "Letter From Birmingham Jail."

M
– Documentary on Civil Rights Movement.

W
– MLK, "Letter From Birmingham Jail," pp. 1-16 [SNT option]

F
– MLK, "Letter From Birmingham Jail," 16-30 [SNT option]

Week 13 (4/18): Social Change 2

M
– Topic: Identity Politics

– Read and/or listen: Naomi Zack, "Government Should be Boring," (*Examining Ethics* podcast) and Obama & Springsteen, "Race in the U.S.A" (*Renegades: Born in the U.S.A.* podcast). Readings available in the pdf titled, "Perspectives on Identity Politics and Universal Policy." [SNT option]

– Optional: Coates interview with Obama, "'Better is Good.' Obama on Reparations, Civil Rights, and the Art of the Possible."

W
– Topic: Identity Politics
– Read: Latrell, excerpt from *White People and Black Lives Matter*. [SNT option]

F
– Topic: Wrap up identity politics.

5. Ethics of Love and Relationships

Week 14 (4/25): Love and Relationships I

M-W
– Topic: Falling in Love
– Read: Ballivian, "I would do anything for love...but I won't do that (a dilemma about falling in love)" [SNT option]

F
– Topic: picking a partner...dos and don'ts??
– Read: Harriet Lerner, "Should You Marry Him?"

Week 15 (5/2): Love and Relationships II

M
– Topic: What is Friendship?
– Read: "3 Types of Friendship, According to Aristotle." [SNT option]

W
– Topic: Gentle parenting

– Read: Jessica Winter, "The Harsh Realm of 'Gentle Parenting.'" [SNT option]

F

– Class exercise + open Q&A about my philosophical views

– Read, David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Question for a Moral Life"* (excerpt).

❦ **UW-MADISON FACE COVERING GUIDELINES:** While on campus all employees and students are required to wear appropriate and properly fitting face coverings while present in any campus building unless working alone in a laboratory or office space.

Face Coverings During In-person Instruction Statement (COVID-19)

Individuals are expected to wear a face covering while inside any university building. Face coverings must be worn correctly (i.e., covering both your mouth and nose) in the building if you are attending class in person. If any student is unable to wear a face-covering, an accommodation may be provided due to disability, medical condition, or other legitimate reason.

Students with disabilities or medical conditions who are unable to wear a face covering should contact the McBurney Disability Resource Center or their Access Consultant if they are already affiliated. Students requesting an accommodation unrelated to disability or medical condition, should contact the Dean of Students Office.

Students who choose not to wear a face covering may not attend in-person classes, unless they are approved for an accommodation or exemption. All other students not wearing a face covering will be asked to put one on or leave the classroom. Students who refuse to wear face coverings appropriately or adhere to other stated requirements will be reported to the Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards and will not be allowed to return to the classroom until they agree to comply with the face covering policy. An instructor may cancel or suspend a course in-person meeting if a person is in the classroom without an approved face covering in position over their nose and mouth and refuses to immediately comply.

Quarantine or Isolation due to COVID-19:

Student should continually monitor themselves for COVID-19 symptoms and get tested for the virus if they have symptoms or have been in close contact with someone with COVID-19. Student should reach out to instructors as soon as possible if they become ill or need to isolate or quarantine, in order to make alternate plans for how to proceed with the course. Students are strongly encouraged to communicate with their instructor concerning their illness and the anticipated extent of their absence from the course (either in-person or remote). The instructor will work with the student to provide alternative ways to complete the course work.

❦ **PRIVACY OF STUDENT RECORDS and the USAGE of AUDIO RECORDED LECTURES.**

View more information about FERPA.

Lecture materials and recordings for this course are protected intellectual property at UW-Madison. Students in this course may use the materials and recordings for their personal use related to participation in this class. Students may also take notes solely for their personal use. If a lecture is not already recorded, you are not authorized to record my lectures without my permission unless you are considered by the university to be a qualified student with a disability requiring accommodation. [Regent Policy Document 4-1] Students may not copy or have lecture materials and recordings outside of class, including posting on internet sites or selling to commercial entities. Students are also prohibited from providing or selling their personal notes to anyone else or being paid for taking notes by any person or commercial firm without the instructor's express written permission. Unauthorized use of these copyrighted lecture materials and recordings constitutes copyright infringement and may be addressed under the university's policies, UWS Chapters 14 and 17, governing student academic and non-academic misconduct.

❦ **ELECTRONICS:** No electronics for face-to-face meetings—unless permitted by the instructor (say, for in-class surveys, or unless special accommodations are required).

❦ **COURSE CREDITS AND SATISFACTION:** 4 credits. The credit standard for this course is met by an expectation of a total of 180 hours of student engagement with the course's learning activities (45 hours per credit), which includes time spent in class, reading, writing, posting on the course website, and other student work as described in this syllabus.

❦ Students' Rules, Rights & Responsibilities

❦ **ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:** By virtue of enrollment, each student agrees to uphold the high academic standards of the University of Wisconsin-Madison; academic misconduct is behavior that negatively impacts the integrity of the institution. Cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, and helping others commit these previously listed acts are examples of misconduct which may result in disciplinary action. Examples of disciplinary action include, but is not limited to, failure on the assignment/course, written reprimand, disciplinary probation, suspension, or expulsion.

❦ **ACCOMMODATIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES.** The University of Wisconsin-Madison supports the right of all enrolled students to a full and equal educational opportunity. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Wisconsin State Statute (36.12), and UW-Madison policy (Faculty Document 1071) require that students with disabilities be reasonably accommodated in instruction and campus life. Reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities is a shared faculty and student responsibility. Students are expected to inform faculty [me] of their need for instructional accommodations by the end of the third week of the semester, or as soon as possible af-

ter a disability has been incurred or recognized. Faculty [I], will work either directly with the student [you] or in coordination with the McBurney Center to identify and provide reasonable instructional accommodations. Disability information, including instructional accommodations as part of a student's educational record, is confidential and protected under FERPA. (See: McBurney Disability Resource Center)

❦ **DIVERSITY & INCLUSION. Institutional statement on diversity:** "Diversity is a source of strength, creativity, and innovation for UW-Madison. We value the contributions of each person and respect the profound ways their identity, culture, background, experience, status, abilities, and opinion enrich the university community. We commit ourselves to the pursuit of excellence in teaching, research, outreach, and diversity as inextricably linked goals. The University of Wisconsin-Madison fulfills its public mission by creating a welcoming and inclusive community for people from every background – people who as students, faculty, and staff serve Wisconsin and the world." https://diversity.wisc.edu/