



PHIL 111: Contemporary Moral Issues

Summer 2020

Course Description

In this course we're going to start small, asking basic questions about the nature of morality: what it is and isn't, what's involved in making judgements, and how philosophy can help us talk about moral issues and disagreements clearly and constructively. The first two concrete moral issues we'll look concern abortion and the use (or *abuse*) of animals. This is a good place to start because the moral status of fetuses and animals are both hotly contested topics, and opinions tend to be divisive. My hope is that we can think critically about these topics, reflect on our own assumptions, and be open to seeing other's perspectives while minimizing the influence of our own inherent biases.

Week three moves from morality as it exists between individuals to a broader social view. Here we will be looking into the way that unconscious prejudices, as they exist in individuals, can often result in a society that systematically discriminates against certain groups of people. This is often called "structural oppression." We will learn not just about why and how it happens, but also about why it's so harmful and what we can do to fight it.

Week four deals with ethical quandaries that arise when the good of the individual conflicts with the good of society. Specifically, we'll be asking questions concerning free speech: Is it always good or can it sometimes be harmful? Should any limits be placed on what is said? What about hate speech? We will also be looking into ethical issues revolving the individual restrictions that have been placed in response to the current coronavirus: Do we have a duty to self-quarantine or is this an excessive burden on the freedom of individuals?

Our final week will be about technology and the culture of consumerism. How has our reliance on technology shaped the way we interact with others? When we mediate experiences through our devices, is there anything we lose out on? Does it influence our values? Does it make us more materialistic? Less thoughtful?

Instructor Information

Kristian Cantens (please just call me Kristian; no "Mr.")

Email: kjcantens@tamu.edu

Phone number: 5707303490 (sure, you can text me, but please be judicious in how often you text me and concerning what you text me about)

Office hours: Quarantine for me means a very flexible schedule. Just give me a heads up and we can arrange phone or zoom meeting.

Synchronous and Asynchronous Meetings

We will be meeting synchronously *twice a week*. Our first synchronous session will be on Tuesday (at 12pm to 1:05pm CT via Zoom). *Everyone must attend this meeting!* The second will *either* be on Thursday *or* Friday (also 12pm to 1:05pm CT via Zoom). Here's are how the Thursday/Friday synchronous meetings will work: I will be dividing the class into two groups of 20. One group will meet on Thursday, the other on Friday. The synchronous meetings will only be for the purpose of discussions. Expect the discussions to last the full class period.

I will also be uploading three videos a week for you to watch on your own time. The purpose of these will be (1) to give some background to the readings for the week, (2) to clarify some of the important themes and arguments from these readings, and (3) to prepare you for discussions by pointing out interesting questions or implications that the readings bring up.

Grading Breakdown

A = 90-100%

B = 80-89%

C = 70-79%

D = 60-69%

F = <60%

1) Writing Component (60%)

I will be requiring that each of you write between 4000 (minimum) and 5000 (maximum) words over the course of the class. However, I will give you an option over how to break down this writing component of the class.

Option A:

Turn in one 250-word entry for the first four weeks of class (for a total of 1000 words), and then turn in a final entry that is 3000 words long (bringing you up to 4000).

Option B:

Turn in one 500-word entry for the first four weeks of class (for a total of 2000 words), and then turn in a final entry that is 2000 words long (bringing your total up to 4000).

Option C:

Turn in one 800-word entry every week (and then you wouldn't have to worry about writing a final paper at the end of the semester).

Note: Regardless of which option you end up picking, you need to write at least one entry a week.

Regarding the due dates for the weekly entries: These need to be submitted to me by Wednesday at 11pm if you are scheduled to meet for discussion on Thursday, or by Thursday at 11pm if you are scheduled to

meet for discussion on Friday. This is VERY IMPORTANT because I want to have time to read your entries prior to our discussions so that I know how to structure these discussions, what to focus on, and what interested you.

Late entries will get a letter grade deduction.

2) Participation in discussions (20%)

If you, for whatever reason, foresee yourself struggling or being uncomfortable with this aspect of the class, please reach out to me and we can try and come up with a different kind of assignment to make up for this portion of the grade. If it is simply that you are shy, then I could just call on you to explain something you wrote in your weekly entry. I really do hope everyone gets full points on this.

3) Take home essay/test (20%)

At the end of the semester, I will assign a take home test where you can choose from a number of possible prompts. Minimum word length for this will be 1000.

Attendance Policies

"The University views class attendance as the responsibility of an individual student. Attendance is essential to complete the course successfully. University rules related to excused/unexcused absences and make-up work are located on-line at <http://student-rules.tamu.edu/rule07>."

Given that we're only meeting twice a week, your attendance on these days is crucial. I will allow only for **one** unexcused absence. Each absence after that will result in a 2.5-point deduction from your final grade. Of course, if there are good reasons for your absence, then please come talk to me (AHEAD OF TIME).

Plagiarism and Academic Integrity

"An Aggie does not lie, cheat or steal, or tolerate those who do."

Plagiarizing or cheating on any assignment for this course will result in a grade of F for the assignment. Any subsequent instances of plagiarism or cheating will result in a grade of F for the course. All instances of academic misconduct will be reported to the university.

Plagiarism means using someone's ideas or words without giving them credit. If you are quoting directly from someone, you need to use quotation marks and state who it is that you're taking these words from, and what text they are coming from. If you're just using a general idea that originated with someone else, just make sure to mention who that person is.

For additional information, please visit: <http://aggiehonor.tamu.edu>.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Policy Statement

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal anti-discrimination statute that provides comprehensive civil rights protection for persons with disabilities. Among other things, this legislation requires that all students with disabilities be guaranteed a learning environment that provides for reasonable accommodation of their disabilities. If you believe you have a disability requiring an accommodation, please contact Disability Services, currently located in the Disability Services building at the Student Services at White Creek complex on west campus or call 979-845-1637. For additional information, visit <http://disability.tamu.edu>.

Title IX and Statement on Limits to Confidentiality

Texas A&M University and the College of Liberal Arts are committed to fostering a learning environment that is safe and productive for all. University policies and federal and state laws provide guidance for achieving such an environment. Although class materials are generally considered confidential pursuant to student record policies and laws, University employees — including instructors — cannot maintain confidentiality when it conflicts with their responsibility to report certain issues that jeopardize the health and safety of our community. As the instructor, I must report (per Texas A&M System Regulation 08.01.01) the following information to other University offices if you share it with me, even if you do not want the disclosed information to be shared:

- Allegations of sexual assault, sexual discrimination, or sexual harassment when they involve TAMU students, faculty, or staff, or third parties visiting campus.

These reports may trigger contact from a campus official who will want to talk with you about the incident that you have shared. In many cases, it will be your decision whether or not you wish to speak with that individual. If you would like to talk about these events in a more confidential setting, you are encouraged to make an appointment with the Student Counseling Service (<https://scs.tamu.edu/>).

Students and faculty can report non-emergency behavior that causes them to be concerned at <http://tellsomebody.tamu.edu>.

Readings

Week one: (1) Common yet problematic beliefs about the nature of ethical judgments; (2) virtue ethics; (3) abortion.

- (1) Mary Midgley's "Can't we Make Moral Judgments?" (9 pages) and "Trying Out One's New Sword" (7 pages).
- (2) James and Stuart Rachel's "Does Morality Depend on Religion?" (7 pages) and "Ethical Egoism" (13 pages)
- (3) Rosalind Hursthouse's "Virtue Theory and Abortion" (23 pages)

Week two: (1) The role of the emotions in moral reasoning; (2) animals.

- (1) Selection from Martha Nussbaum's *Upheavals of Thought* (14 pages)
- (2) Peter Singer's "All Animals are Equal" (10 pages); Pattiann Rogers' "Animals and People: The human heart in conflict with itself" (poem)

- (3) [D. H. Lawrence's "Snake"](#) (poem); Mary Midgley's *Why Animals Matter* (18 pages).
- (4) Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka's *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights* (17 pages)

Week three: Agency, freedom, and (structural forms of) oppression.

- (1) Sharon Krause's "Beyond non-domination: Agency, inequality and the meaning of freedom" (18 pages)
- (2) Selections of W. E. B. Du Bois' "The Souls of Black Folk."
- (3) [Martin Luther King Junior, "Loving your enemies"](#) (40-minute speech)
- (4) Adrienne Rich's "Transcendental Etude" (poem)

Week four: The Individual and (or in) Society

- (1) Selections from John Stewart Mill's *On Liberty*; Something on the permissibility or impermissibility of hate speech (TBD)
- (2) Selections from Henry David Thoreau's "Resistance to Civil Government"
- (3) Linda Barclay's "Autonomy and the Social Self"
- (4) Something on the ethics of self-quarantine and our duties to others in the context of the Corona virus (TBD)

Week five: Technology and consumerism

- (1) Mary Midgley's "The Supernatural Engineer"
- (2) Selections from Albert Borgmann's *Real American Ethics*
- (3) David Loy's "The Religion of the Market"
- (4) Selections from Albert Borgmann's *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*