

**Contemporary Moral Issues**  
**PHI 180-01 (3 credits)**  
**SUNY New Paltz**  
**Spring 2018**  
**MR 2-3:15pm**

**Instructor Information**

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**Course Description**

This course provides an introduction to several of the moral issues and problems that are currently being debated in the political, cultural, and religious spheres. The philosophical study of these issues falls under the heading of *applied ethics*. Accordingly, we will begin the semester by considering several of the major ethical theories from the western tradition, and will then investigate how those theories have been applied and developed in the context of some contemporary issues. The focus of the course will be the following five topics:

- Abortion
- Capital punishment
- Animal ethics
- Global poverty & immigration
- Sexual morality

In each case, we will think about what the underlying issues and concepts are, which questions are most central, and which views and answers have been offered by philosophers. Heavy emphasis will be placed on creating a space in which students can discuss these issues in a *rational, critical, respectful, and charitable* way, while recognizing that unanimity of opinion will rarely if ever occur.

There are no prerequisites for this course, and no prior experience with philosophy is needed.

## Course Goals & Learning Objectives

This course satisfies the GE III *Humanities* category, and as such seeks to help students gain “knowledge of the conventions and methods” of one of the fields of the humanities (in this case, philosophy). Specifically, this course aims to enable students to:

- achieve a better *understanding* of some of the main issues in contemporary applied ethics, how those issues are framed, and what some of the competing views are;
- *analyze* the main arguments presented on the various sides of these issues; and
- *evaluate* those arguments

Student progress in the achievement of understanding, analysis, and evaluation will be measured principally in terms of the written work (essays, exams, and quizzes) submitted during the semester.

Ethics is one of the central fields in philosophy, and rational argument is perhaps *the* central method of philosophy. Thus, aside from introducing students to several specific issues in applied ethics, this course will provide a basic introduction to philosophy itself (and how philosophy should be read, written, and talked about).

## Required Texts

There is one required text for this class:

- Julie Van Camp, Jeffrey Olen, and Vincent Barry, *Applying Ethics: A Text With Readings*, 11<sup>th</sup> edition (2015)

Any other readings will be made available on Blackboard.

## About the Readings

Compared to some of your other courses, the amount of required reading for this class will be relatively low (usually no more than 20-30 pages per week). But do not let this fool you: reading philosophical texts requires a good deal of time and patience, much more so than any other kind of reading that you may have done so far. Sometimes you may find the texts in this course to be strange, difficult, counter-intuitive, or bewildering. (Indeed, so do I!) Our goal, then, will be to read slowly and carefully, aiming at quality rather than quantity. Remember that in philosophy it is never enough to read a text just once; you should do the readings multiple times, making marginal notations and taking your own notes as you do so.

In order to assist you in your exploration of the philosophical texts, I will regularly post a set of *reading questions* on Blackboard. These questions are designed to help lead you through some of the main points and arguments of the texts. Although I will not ‘assign’ the reading questions as official homework, you should keep two things in mind: (1) much of what happens in class will be based on the reading questions (*including calling on students by name*); and (2) material for the quizzes will sometimes be taken from the reading questions. Thus, it is to your advantage to review the reading questions prior to a class meeting, and to jot down some notes and/or

points of confusion. You may find that your understanding of the lectures and the texts will be greatly increased as a result.

## About Class Meetings & Class Discussions

You should come to class not only having done the assigned reading, but also being prepared to discuss it in a thoughtful way. It's not good enough just to read *about* philosophy; your greatest learning will take place only when you begin to *talk* and *write* about philosophy. Class meetings offer you a chance to talk about philosophy by raising questions, voicing concerns and criticisms, suggesting alternatives, and helping others out of confusion. (Remember, too, that college classes are a *social* experience: if it were good enough to read philosophy on our own in the privacy of our homes, then we wouldn't need to meet.)

Here are some tips to help you get the most out of class discussion:

- Don't think for a minute that confusion should prevent you from participating in class discussion. In fact, confusion or puzzlement is usually the best *impetus* for inquiry and discussion. One of the most important things in a philosophy class is to *learn to ask the right questions, and to gain the conceptual tools with which to seek answers*. Moreover, in the process of trying to clarify *why* you are confused—which can often be a difficult task in itself—you can usually learn a great deal.
- I believe that each and every one of you is able to contribute something valuable to class discussions.
- No one in the room knows everything.
- Questions are just as valuable as comments.
- Expressing agreement with someone else's comment is just as valuable as expressing disagreement.
- If someone else is criticizing an idea that you put forward, try not to take it personally (even if it is one of your most cherished ideas).
- Some of you are shy about speaking publicly—so am I (yes, really!). There are strategies for dealing with this. If there is anything I can do to make our classroom atmosphere more welcoming, let me know.
- No one likes the people who “shoot their mouths off” or who dominate class discussion day after day. So don't be that kind of person.

My goal as the instructor is to make maximum use of class meetings and to encourage you to be active, otherwise I would feel that I am wasting your time. My teaching style might broadly be described as ‘interactive’ or ‘dialogical’—which is to say that I ask a lot of questions, in the interest of eliciting discussion, reflection, and further questions from you. I do occasionally call on students by name to address a question or to offer a suggestion.

## Schedule of Topics

*Please note that this schedule is tentative and is subject to change. Specific reading assignments will be announced as we go along.*

First day, introduction to the course (Jan 22)

Introduction to philosophical argument & ethical theory

- Analyzing & evaluating arguments (Jan 25)
- Utilitarian moral theory (Jan 29)
  - Selection from J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*
- Kantian moral theory (Feb 1)
  - Selection from Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*
- Virtue ethics (Feb 5)
  - Selection from Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

Abortion

- Introduction & background (*Applying Ethics*, pp. 117-128) (Feb 8)
- Donald Marquis, “Why Abortion is Immoral” (Feb 8)
- Judith Jarvis Thomson, “A Defense of Abortion” (Feb 12)
- Mary Anne Warren, “On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion” (Feb 15)
- L. W. Sumner, “A Moderate View” (Feb 22)
- Bertha Alvarez Manninen, “Expanding the Discussion About Fetal Life Within Prochoice Advocacy” (Feb 22)
- Rosalind Hursthouse, “Virtue Theory and Abortion” (Feb 26)

Capital punishment

- Introduction & background (*Applying Ethics*, pp. 282-291) (Mar 1)
- J. S. Mill, “Speech in Favor of Capital Punishment” (Mar 1)
- William Shaw, “Punishment and the Criminal Justice System” (Mar 1)
- Igor Primoratz, “A Life for a Life” (Mar 5)
- Jeffrey Reiman, “Justice, Civilization, and the Death Penalty” (Mar 8)
- Stephen Nathanson, “An Eye for an Eye?” (Mar 8)
- Ernest Van Den Haag, “On Deterrence and the Death Penalty” (Mar 12)
- Hugo Bedau, “Capital Punishment and Social Defense” (Mar 15)

*Spring break (March 19-23)*

Animal ethics

- Introduction & background (*Applying Ethics*, pp. 444-455) (Mar 26)
- Peter Singer, “All Animals Are Equal” (Mar 26)
- Bonnie Steinbock, “Speciesism and the Idea of Equality” (Mar 29)
- Alistair Norcross, “Puppies, Pigs, and People: Eating Meat and Marginal Cases” (Apr 2)
- Tibor Machan, “Do Animals Have Rights?” (Apr 5)
- R. M. Hare, “Why I Am Only a Demi-Vegetarian” (Apr 5)

### Global poverty & immigration

- Introduction & background (*Applying Ethics*, pp. 359-367) (Apr 9)
- Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” (Apr 9)
- Garrett Hardin, “Lifeboat Ethics: the Case Against Helping the Poor” (Apr 12)
- John Kekes, “On the Supposed Obligation to Relieve Famine” (Apr 16)
- Joseph Carens, “Aliens and Citizens: the Case for Open Borders” (Apr 19)
- Christopher Wellman, “Immigration and Freedom of Association” (Apr 23)

### Sexual morality

- Introduction & background (*Applying Ethics*, pp. 74-83) (Apr 26)
- Karol Wojtyla, “Periodic Continence” (Apr 26)
- Immanuel Kant, “Duties Toward the Body in Respect of the Sexual Impulse” (Apr 26)
- Thomas Mappes, “Sexual Morality and the Concept of Using Another Person” (Apr 30)
- Howard Klepper, “Sexual Exploitation and the Value of Persons” (Apr 30)
- Robin West, “The Harms of Consensual Sex” (May 3)
- Raja Halwani, “Sexual Temperance and Intemperance” and “Casual Sex, Promiscuity, and Temperance” (May 7)

*Note: The last day for course withdrawal is April 2<sup>nd</sup>.*

## Course Requirements & Grades

Your final grade in the course will be based on the following elements:

1 <sup>st</sup> essay	25%
2 <sup>nd</sup> essay	25%
Final exam	30%
Weekly quizzes	20%

*Essays:* There will be two mid-sized (5pp.) essays assigned during the course of the semester. The first essay will be due on **February 25**, and the second essay will be due on **April 4**. You will be given an opportunity to provide drafts and/or engage in peer-review work.

*Final exam:* There will be a final exam held during the regularly scheduled period on May 13. The exam will involve several essays, and the questions will be distributed ahead of time. The exam will be comprehensive (i.e., will cover material from the entire semester).

*Weekly quizzes:* There will be one in-class quiz each week (with the exception of days on which an exam is taking place). The purpose of these quizzes is to ensure that you are keeping up with the readings, lectures, and in-class discussions. The quizzes will cover any material that was assigned or discussed during the *previous* two classes (i.e., the material covered since the previous quiz). The quizzes will generally consist of multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and other short answer questions. The quizzes will be brief (10min) and will be administered at the *beginning* of class (late-comers will not be provided with extra time). Each quiz will be worth 10 points; at the end of the semester, *your lowest quiz score will be dropped*.

### A Note on the Calculation of the Final Course Grade

Your final course grade will be calculated based on the above elements and percentages. However, please also note the following policy:

*Upward adjustments in a student's final course grade will be made in borderline cases for steady and unmistakable improvement in coursework and for informed, thoughtful, and fairly regular participation in class.*

This policy is no guarantee, and it applies *only* to genuine "borderline" cases.

## Course-Specific Policies

1. *Lateness policy*: Late essays will be penalized at the rate of *one half-letter grade per day*. The first “day” is defined by the beginning time of the class period on which the paper is due. For example, a paper that is due during class on a Monday but is turned in at 9pm on Monday will have one +/- subtracted; if it is turned in on Tuesday it will have two +/- subtracted; and so on. The only exceptions to this are those cases of special *documented* situations serious enough to prevent you from being in class and outside your control (e.g., the death of a family member or a documented medical emergency); in addition, you must notify me of the situation *prior* to turning in work late.
2. *Makeup policy*: Makeup quizzes will be considered *only* in those emergency cases noted in #1 above. Makeup quizzes will not be administered to students who arrive late to class, nor will any extra time be permitted.
3. *Work completion policy*: In order to receive a grade other than ‘F’ in the course, students must submit both essays and the final exam.
4. *Attendance policy*: Regular attendance and participation are essential to your learning. Students with nine or more unexcused absences will receive an automatic ‘F’ in the course.
5. *Classroom civility policy*: All students are expected to promote a respectful classroom atmosphere by adhering to the following:
  - Only one person should be speaking at any one time (whether that person is me or one of you). If you want to speak, please raise your hand first. Don’t engage in side conversations.
  - Laptops may be used only for taking notes, not for checking email or surfing the web. All other electronic devices (cell phones, blackberries, iPhones, etc.) must be completely *turned off* and *put away* (out of sight) during class.
  - Please don’t arrive late or leave early.
  - Coming to class unprepared is disrespectful to your peers who are prepared.
  - Practice the principle of charity. Understand an idea before criticizing it. Don’t engage in ad hominem attacks.

Individuals who persistently display incivilities will be asked to leave and/or will have their course grade lowered.

## Campus-Wide Policy Statements

6. *Academic integrity policy statement:* Students are expected to maintain the highest standards of honesty in their college work. Cheating, forgery, and plagiarism are serious offenses, and students found guilty of any form of academic dishonesty are subject to disciplinary action. New Paltz's policy on academic integrity is found at [http://www.newpaltz.edu/ugc/policies/policies\\_integrity.html](http://www.newpaltz.edu/ugc/policies/policies_integrity.html), and several excellent resources to help with avoiding plagiarism are available on the Sojourner Truth Library's website: <http://lib.newpaltz.edu/assistance/plag.html>.
7. *Reasonable accommodation of individuals with disabilities statement:* Students needing classroom and/or testing accommodations related to a disability should contact the Disability Resource Center (Student Union, Room 210, 845-257-3020) as close as possible to the beginning of the semester. The DRC will then provide students' instructors with an Accommodation Memo verifying the need for accommodations. Specific questions about services and accommodations may be directed to Deanna Knapp, Assistant Director ([knappd@newpaltz.edu](mailto:knappd@newpaltz.edu)).
8. *Veteran and Military Services statement:* New Paltz's Office of Veteran and Military Services (OVMS) is committed to serving the needs of veterans, service members and their dependents during their transition from military life to student life. Student veterans, service members or their dependents who need assistance while attending SUNY New Paltz may refer to [www.newpaltz.edu/veterans](http://www.newpaltz.edu/veterans); call 845-257-3120, -3124 or -3074; or stop by the Student Union, Room 100 South.
9. *Computer and network policies statement:* Users of New Paltz's computer resources and network facilities are required to comply with the institutional policies outlined in the Acceptable Uses and Privacy Policy (<https://sites.newpaltz.edu/csc/policies/acceptable-uses-and-privacy-policy>).
10. *SEI statement:* You are responsible for completing the Student Evaluation of Instruction (SEI) for this course and for all your courses with an enrollment of five (5) or more students. I value your feedback and use it to improve my teaching and planning. Please complete the online form during the period April 30-May 9.