

Present Moral Problems

L30 131F 02

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Syllabus

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Introduction

This course introduces students to philosophy via careful examination of contemporary hot-button issues in ethics. The goals of the course are the following:

1. The students should learn varying views on the topics, as well as the arguments for and against them.
2. The students should learn how to critically evaluate arguments on these topics, and, by extension, arguments in general.
3. The students should be introduced to various tools from the philosopher's toolbox, e.g. logic, critical thinking, conceptual analysis, identifying fallacious and valid reasoning, clarifying and reconstructing murkily presented arguments, as well as learning how to spot errors in the use of empirical data.
4. Students should improve their ability to formulate and defend their own ethical views, and argue for them in a way that is charitable to their opponents.
5. Students should also learn how various ethical theories relate to specific topics in applied ethics.

Course Texts

There is only one text to buy, James Rachels's *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (6th edition). The rest of the course material is on-line. Links to this material is found on the course reading schedule on the [homepage](#). Many of the links are to publicly available webpages. For copyrighted material which is not publicly available (but available to all WashU students via the library) I have put them on a password-protected webpage [here](#). I

will announce the passwords in class. Please email the instructor or TA if you need the password.

Course Requirements

The course requirements and their percentage weighting is as follows:

1. Class Participation - 20%
2. Midterm 28%
3. Final Exam (non-cumulative) 32%
4. Homework and Quizzes 20%

Your class participation final score is a function of your attendance, how often and how well you ask questions and enter into class discussion, how you conduct yourself in class, how well you interact with fellow students in group activities, and so on. Two things at this point to mention—Please try and remain respectful of your fellow students, guest speakers (and me!) in this course. We will often be dealing with issues that tend to get folks angry. Just because you disagree with one another, or me, is no reason to get nasty, or to make things personal. In fact, one of the goals of this course is to get past what are usually knee-jerk, emotional reactions, and to see instead what *reasons* those who disagree with you have for their beliefs, in order to promulgate a useful and sensible dialogue and an assessment of such reasons, rather than engaging in personal attacks and vindictive behavior. In connection with this, it is important to note that I will often play what's called the 'Devil's Advocate' in this course. That is, I will often advocate views that I do not really hold, or go against views that I really do hold, because of the pedagogical utility that such a strategy has in getting students to think about why it is that they believe what they do, and whether such views are defensible. Since I do this, I'll occasionally appear a moral monster, or puritanical, or downright stupid. I think it's important to realize this, so that students understand why it might be that I say some of the apparently outrageous things that I do. And now, **for the most important point in the syllabus - *the greatest predictor and guarantee of success in the course is to regularly do all your readings on time—before the class where we will discuss the readings in question.*** If you don't do the readings regularly, and on time, you will most likely not do well in the course.

In order to encourage timely and engaged reading, there will be several homework assignments and in-class quizzes on the material. All of these assignments are on the course [homepage](#), so no one can claim surprise. I will not always announce upcoming assignments or quizzes. Students are responsible for keeping up to date on the readings and various assignments. I might also post important announcements from time to time at the [Announcements page](#).

The midterm and (non-cumulative) final exam are rather straightforward attempts to ascertain that you have read and understood the

course readings and listened to and grasped the lectures and discussions. The exams are objective in that they are questions about what positions the authors have, and what their arguments for them are, rather than essay examinations of the veracity of these views.

Rather than merely parroting back the course material which is what the exams are all about, students are encouraged (nay, required!) to express their opinions and give arguments for them in the course. This is a discussion course, not a lecture course (although I will often lecture). A significant part of your grade is how well you participate.

One more point. I hope that none of you hesitate seeking me out for help. I can be reached via e-mail, can meet with you in office hours, after class, and so on. I am here to help, and some of the material is quite difficult.

Lastly, I hope you enjoy the course. Anybody who has special needs, requirements, learning disabilities, etc., should feel free to consult me about what might aid you in succeeding in the course.