

Instructor: Kristin Voigt (Dept. of Philosophy & Institute for Health and Social Policy)  
Office: Institute for Health and Social Policy, Charles Meredith House, room 303  
Office hours: Tuesdays, 2-4 pm

## PHIL237: Contemporary Moral Issues

### Winter 2017

#### 1 Course description

In this course, we will connect a range of controversial moral issues with moral and political philosophy in order to better understand the nature of these controversies. The course begins with an introduction to the philosophical study of moral issues, including the methods of applied ethics and major approaches to normative questions. After this introduction we will proceed to consider a number of specific controversial moral issues, such as torture, free speech and censorship, and the rights of religious, cultural and linguistic minorities.

The course pursues two main objectives: first, to familiarize you with the normative questions and controversies that surround the topics we will consider, thus helping you to come to a reasoned position on these issues; and, second, to help you sharpen your ability to think clearly and critically about contemporary moral issues.

#### 2 Teaching arrangements

Two lectures per week (Monday, Wednesday) and one conference with your Teaching Assistant (conferences start the week of 16 January; there is **no** class on 6 and 13 January). Times and locations for conferences will be announced through Minerva during drop/add period (usually during week 2).

**Please sign up for a conference group through Minerva.**

##### 2.1 Lectures

*Instructor:* Kristin Voigt

*Lecture times:* Mon & Wed, 12:35 – 1:25 pm, starting January 9. **Please note there is no lecture on January 4 as I am attending a conference out of town that day.**

*Location for lectures:* McIntyre Medical Building, room 522.

##### 2.2 Conferences

Conferences start the week of 16 January. For times and locations and to sign up for a conference group, please go to Minerva.

*Names and email addresses of Teaching Assistants:*

Raymond Aldred -- raymond.aldred@mail.mcgill.ca

Nicholas Dunn -- nicholas.dunn2@mail.mcgill.ca

Andre Martin -- andre.martin2@mail.mcgill.ca

Martina Orlandi -- martina.orlandi@mail.mcgill.ca

Matthew Scarfone -- matthew.scarfone@mail.mcgill.ca

### 2.3 Attendance policy

Lectures and conferences are mandatory. You – not the instructor or your TA – are responsible for any missed material. Lecture notes from missed lectures will not be provided. Material discussed in lectures not appearing elsewhere may be included in exams. Lectures will be used to communicate important information about the assignments and the final exam.

### 3 Assignments and evaluation

Your grade for this term will be based on:

- reading reflections (5%);
- summary paper (20%);
- mid-term paper (35%);
- final exam (40%).

Further details about the format of both as well as sample questions from previous years are available through myCourses.

#### 3.1 Reading reflections

Each week (starting the week of 16 January), you must submit to your TA reflections on the required readings of the respective week. This assignment must be emailed to your TA no later than 11 pm on Tuesdays. Please use 'reading reflections' or similar as the subject line so the TAs can distinguish your submissions from other inquiries.

The assignment is:

*After completing the required readings, write brief responses to at least 2 out of the following 3 questions:*

- 1. What are the main claims of the reading (1-2 sentences for each assigned item)?*
- 2. What did you find surprising or interesting? Why? (1-2 sentences)*
- 3. What did you find confusing? Why? (1-2 sentences)*

These questions are used for assessment but also help your TA identify your interests and any concerns or questions that should be clarified during the conference. The questions will be graded on a Pass/Fail basis, and your grade for the reading reflections will be calculated as the total number of passes out of 11. Failure to submit your reading reflections or late submission will count as a Fail (no exceptions).

#### 3.2 Summary paper

For the summary paper, you will identify the main claim(s) of a philosophical paper and the argument(s) offered in support (500-600 words). This assignment is used as the basis for your mid-term paper. **The summary paper is due in class on 8 February.** The header of your paper must include your name and McGill student number and your TA's name. Essays not indicating the TA will *not* be graded and receive a 0 grade. If you would like to submit your essay before this date, please leave it in Kristin Voigt's mailbox in the Institute for Health and Social Policy (NB that this building can be accessed during regular office hours only).

#### 3.3 Mid-term paper

For the mid-term paper, you will critically assess a published philosophy paper, building on your summary paper (2000 words max.). **The midterm essay is due in class on March 15.** As with the sum-

mary paper, the header of your paper must include your name and McGill student number and your TA's name. Essays not indicating the TA will *not* be graded and receive a 0 grade. If you would like to submit your essay before this date, please leave it in Kristin Voigt's mailbox in the Institute for Health and Social Policy (NB that this building can be accessed during regular office hours only).

### 3.4 Late submission of reading reflections and papers

Late submissions of the reading reflections incur a fail grade. For the summary and mid-term papers, late submissions incur a grade penalty. Papers turned in late without an extension will be penalized at the rate of 1/3 of a grade (e.g., from a B to a B-) per *calendar day* of lateness (i.e. including weekends). If you submit after the deadline, you *must* email your paper directly to your TA and deliver a hard copy to your TA's mailbox in the philosophy department as soon as possible. Submission of corrupted files, files in non-standard formats (i.e. anything other than PDF or MS Word files) or files that cannot be opened by the TA do *not* count as submission of your paper. It is your responsibility to ensure that late submissions are received by the TA.

### 3.5 Extensions

Extensions will *not* be given, except as required by OSD and in the case of *exceptional* emergencies. Requests for extensions must be *directed to your TA* (not the instructor) and supported by appropriate documentation. You must inform your TA of any medical issues within a reasonable time frame. Be sure to plan ahead so that you will not be late on account of being ill near to the deadline. Please note that given the size of the class, we cannot make exceptions to this policy.

### 3.6 Final exam

The date for the final exam will be set and published by the university later in the semester. Please make sure that you are aware of the date, time and location of the final exam. Please also familiarize yourself with the university's exam policy.

### 3.7 Grading

All grades in this course are assigned based on the merit of the work submitted. Factors outside of merit, such as hard work, the need to maintain a high CGPA for a scholarship, or the need to meet a minimum grade requirement in the course for you major are not bases for challenging grades. Requests to reconsider grades on these bases or other non-merit grounds will be refused.

If you feel there has been an error with the grading of your summary paper or your mid-term paper, please discuss the grade with your TA in the first instance. You can request a reassessment by writing a note to the instructor, explaining why you consider the given grade unfair. You must also provide the instructor with a paper copy of the essay you submitted to your TA (i.e. including your TA's comments). *Please note that, as a result of reassessment, the grade may go up or down.*

Final exam scripts will be available for viewing after the grades are released; you will receive instructions on how to arrange a viewing after the exam period. If you feel that there has been an error with your grade, this can be discussed with the instructor in the first instance. *Please note that if you request a reassessment of your final exam, the grade may go up or down.* You can also request a re-read of your final exam as per university policy.

## 4 Course materials

### 4.1 Required readings

There is no required textbook or coursepack for this course. All required readings will be made available through myCourses, either as PDFs or links to library and internet resources. **You must complete all required readings. Knowledge of the required readings is essential for the final exam. Please be sure to keep up with the readings as the semester progresses.**

### 4.2 Movie recommendations

I have included movie recommendations for each topic covered over the course of the semester. You are not required to watch them but the movies have been selected because they illustrate or highlight particular aspects of the topic or suggest a different way of thinking about the material. The movie recommendations are a new addition to the course and I would welcome your feedback on whether you find this helpful – as well as recommendations for any other movies that you think are relevant to the topics we are covering.

### 4.3 Resources and recommended readings

Additional material -- including philosophical articles, background readings, relevant newspaper and magazine articles and podcasts – will be provided through myCourses.

You may also find the following resources interesting and helpful:

- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <http://plato.stanford.edu/> [provides overviews over particular debates, including references for further reading]
- Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy [available as eBook through McGill library]
- International Encyclopedia of Ethics [online access through McGill library]
- Vaughn & McIntosh, *Writing Philosophy: A Guide for Canadian Students*. Available as 3-hour reserve loan at the library. [selected chapters are made available through myCourses]
- Tips and suggestions on writing philosophy papers:
  - [http://cstl-cla.semo.edu/hill/writing\\_a\\_philosophy\\_paper.htm](http://cstl-cla.semo.edu/hill/writing_a_philosophy_paper.htm) [also see further links at bottom of page]
  - <http://www.mcgill.ca/philosophy/undergraduate/advising/writing>
- The following are excellent podcasts, consisting for the most part of interviews with prominent philosophers who are experts on the topic addressed:
  - Philosophy Bites (<http://philosophybites.com/links-to-past-e.html>)
  - Public Ethics Radio (<http://publicethicsradio.org/>)
  - Minerva (<http://www.minerva-podcast.com>)
  - Philosophy 247 (<http://www.philosophy247.org>)

Please contact the instructor or your TA or the instructor if you would like additional recommendations on specific topics.

## 5 Course policies

### 5.1 Policy on electronic devices

Laptops and tablets are permitted for academic purposes only. Mobiles *must* be switched off during class.

## 5.2 Language policy

In accordance with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

## 5.3 Academic integrity

All students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see [www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/](http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/) for more information).

## 5.4 Access

If you have a disability please feel free to contact the instructor and/or your TA to arrange a time to discuss your situation. Please let us know if there is anything we can do to make the class more accessible. It would be helpful if you could also contact the [Office for Students with Disabilities](http://www.mcgill.ca/osd) ([www.mcgill.ca/osd](http://www.mcgill.ca/osd)) at 514-398-6009 to make them aware of any requirements you may have.

## 5.5 Courtesy in a large class

Because this is a very large class, please be respectful of your classmates and the instructor by arriving on time and not holding conversations during lectures.

## 5.6 Transmission of information and email etiquette

It is your responsibility to check myCourses regularly and to be aware of announcements and updates posted on the course website. Please direct questions in the first instance to your TA, whose name and email address you are responsible for keeping track of. All emails to TAs or the instructor *must* be sent from your university email account. Please note that, given the size of the class, emails cannot always be answered immediately. Please do not expect responses outside of regular business hours and on weekends. *Emails will not be answered if the answer to your question can be found on the syllabus or by reasonable investigation.*

## COURSE OUTLINE

### 1 Introducing applied ethics

Introduction to course: structure, goals, choice of topics. Reading philosophical papers. What is ‘applied ethics’?

#### 9 and 11 January.

NB: *There are no required readings during drop/add period but it is highly recommended that you read some of the suggested texts listed below.*

*Recommended reading:*

- James Rachels, ‘Can ethics provide answers?’
- Hugh La Follette, ‘Reading philosophy’ and ‘Theorizing about ethics’, from his *Ethics in Practice*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford, Blackwell, 2002).
- Rachels, ‘The challenge of cultural relativism’, from *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, ed. James Rachels.

### 2 Moral theorising and the problem of torture

How should we think about ethical questions? Trolley problems. Introduction to two broad approaches to ethics: consequentialism and deontology. It is ever permissible to use torture and, if so, under what conditions? How do different moral theories approach these questions? How useful is the ‘ticking bomb’ thought experiment in answering normative questions about the use of torture? Thought experiments and their use in applied ethics.

*Movie recommendations:*

- *Eye in the Sky* (dir. Gavin Hood, 2016) – available on iTunes
- *Zero Dark Thirty* (dir. Kathryn Bigelow, 2012) – available on Netflix and iTunes

#### 16 and 18 January.

*Required reading:*

- Julia Driver, “Classical utilitarianism” and “Contemporary consequentialism” from her *Ethics: The Fundamentals*.

#### 23 and 25 January.

*Required reading:*

- Julia Driver, “Kantian ethics”, from her *Ethics: The Fundamentals*.
- Immanuel Kant, selection from *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, from Timmons, *Disputed Moral Issues*.

#### 30 January and 1 February.

*Required reading:*

- Dershowitz, ‘Should the ticking bomb terrorist be tortured?’

- Response to Dershowitz, by Marcia Baron, ‘The ticking bomb hypothetical’, both from M. Timmons, *Disputed Moral Issues*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Oxford, OUP, 2014)

### 3 Non-human animals

What is the moral status of non-human animals? How should we treat non-human animals? What is the challenge of ‘speciesism’?

*Movie recommendations:*

- *BoJack Horseman*, Season 2, episode 5, ‘Chickens’ (dir. Mike Roberts, 2015) – available on Netflix
- *Speciesism* (dir. Mark Devries, 2013) -- available for rent from <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/speciesism>

### 6 and 8 February.

*Required reading:*

- Peter Singer, “All animals are equal,” reprinted in *Ethics in Practice*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Hugh La Follette (Blackwell, 2002).
- T. Regan, ‘The case for animal rights’ [selection].

### 13 and 15 February.

*Required reading:*

- R. G. Frey, “Moral standing, the value of lives, and speciecism”, reprinted in *Ethics in Practice*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Hugh La Follette (Blackwell, 2002).
- Bonnie Steinbock, ‘Speciecism and the idea of equality’, *Philosophy & Public Affairs* (1978).

### 4 Free speech

Is there a ‘right’ to free speech? What kinds of harms might be associated with speech? Which kinds of harms, if any, are legitimate reasons for restricting free speech? What is hate speech? Should it be regulated? If so, on what grounds?

*Movie recommendations:*

- *Denial* (dir. Mick Jackson, 2016) – available on iTunes
- *Imperium* (dir. Daniel Ragussis, 2016) – available on iTunes (also of interest: opinion piece by the FBI agent on whose story the film is based: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/06/04/AR2005060400147.html>)

### 20 and 22 February.

*Required reading:*

- Katherine Smits, ‘Should offensive speech be regulated?’, from her *Applying Political Theory*, pp. 152-170.

- Joshua Cohen, 'Freedom of Expression', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 22(3), 1993. Please read introduction (pp. 207-213) and section III (pp. 222-250).

**\*\* Reading week \*\***

**5 and 8 March**

*Required reading:*

- L. W. Sumner, 'Hate Crimes Literature and Speech', from Frey & Wellman, ed., *A Companion to Applied Ethics* (2003).
- Andrew Altman, 'Speech codes and expressive harm', from *Ethics in Practice*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Hugh LaFollette.

**5 Minority rights**

What rights, if any, should cultural, religious and linguistic minorities have? Can minority come into conflict with individual rights and, if so, how can such conflicts be resolved?

Movie recommendation:

- *The Hutterites* (dir. Colin Low, 1964), available at [https://www.nfb.ca/film/the\\_hutterites/](https://www.nfb.ca/film/the_hutterites/)

**13 and 15 March**

*Required reading:*

- Katherine Smits, 'Are minority cultures entitled to recognition and rights?', from her *Applying Political Theory*, pp. 18-41.
- Will Kymlicka, 'Justice and minority rights', extract from his *Multicultural Citizenship*, reprinted in Goodin & Pettit (ed.), *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Anthology*.

**20 and 22 March.**

*Required reading:*

- Susan Moller Okin, 'Feminism and multiculturalism: some tensions', *Ethics* 108 (1998).
- Chandran Kukathas, 'Are there any cultural rights?', *Political Theory* 20 (1992).

**6 Health care professionals and conscientious refusal**

Should health care professionals (doctors, pharmacists, etc.) be allowed to refuse the provision of medical services that they regard as inconsistent with their religious and/or ethical beliefs?

Movie recommendation: *Vera Drake* (dir. Mike Leigh, 2004)

**27 and 29 March.**

*Required reading:*

- Dan Brock, 'Conscientious refusal by physicians and pharmacists: who is obligated to do what, and why?', *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 29 (2008).



- Myers & Woods, 'An obligation to provide abortion services: what happens when physicians refuse?', *Journal of Medical Ethics* 22 (1996).

### **3 and 5 April.**

*Required reading:*

- Daniel Weinstock, 'Conscientious refusal and health professionals: does religion make a difference?', *Bioethics* (2013). [*Please note there is a typo in this article. The last full sentence on p. 5 should read: 'The reason for this is that an HCP making a claim ultimately grounded in religious considerations will be exercising a capacity that is not as clearly beneficial to healthcare institutions and practices as are those made by professionals making moral claims.'*]
- Jonathan Marks, 'Doctors of Interrogation', *Hastings Center Report* (2005).

### **10 April.**

Conclusion to course and any outstanding questions; Q&A for final exam.