

St. Francis Xavier University
Department of Philosophy
Course Outline
PHIL 332 Contemporary Moral & Social Issues

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Course Description:

This course is meant to serve as an introduction to the process of thinking philosophically about practical ethical problems that confront individuals and communities. We shall seek to apply the study of ethical theory to specific issues, and thereby help students generate their own substantial moral positions. Hopefully, students coming out of this class will be equipped with the skills necessary to participating in both current ethical discussions as well as future debates over moral issues as yet untreated. To aid us in this process, the course will provide an analysis of topics such as animal rights, capital punishment, environmental ethics, filial duties, surrogacy, the right to strike, the market for body parts, and terrorism.

In the application of the skills covered in this class, we shall look over and evaluate various articles that present philosophical arguments advocating some position within the topic being covered. Careful analysis of the reasoning process being used in the readings will help us to become better able to engage in moral debates, and much class time will be spent discussing the issues that this sample material raises. Classes will be a mix of lecture, discussion and debate. Lectures will be devoted to covering the material presented in the text, and discussions will be more open-ended in structure in order to facilitate student participation.

Schedule:

The following is a tentative schedule for the semester. The issues-based readings may be found in Soifer text; readings in moral theory as set out in the works of Aristotle, Kant, and Mill are a prerequisite to the course and it is assumed that students have access to them. While this schedule may be changed depending on the progress of the class, students can expect to cover the following topics in roughly this order:

WEEK	TOPIC	READINGS
1 Jan 9	Assessing happiness	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> bk III
2 Jan 16	Animal Rights	Feinberg, Singer
3 Jan 23	Environmental Ethics	Narveson, Naess
4 Jan 30	Famine Relief	Arthur, Singer
5 Feb 6	Euthanasia	Brock, Callahan
6 Feb 13	Presentations	
7 Feb 27	Presentations	
8 Mar 5	Terrorism	Primoratz, Sterba
9 Mar 13	Civil Disobedience/Debate	Plato's <i>Crito</i>
10 Mar 20	Debates	
11 Mar 27	Debates	
12 Apr 2	Debates	

Evaluation:

Students are responsible for completing the following assignments:

- 1) 2 written responses (600 words each, 15% of final grade each).
- 2) A group presentation on the happiness of a certain individual (15% of final grade)
- 3) Participation in 1 debate (20% of the final grade each)
- 4) A final essay resolving to your satisfaction one of the issues you debated. In your essay you must take into account the arguments made on both sides of the issue as set out in the outlines handed out for that debate (1800 words, 35%)

Response Questions:

- 1) Is the practice of owning exotic pets ethical? In answering this question, students must give some account of arguments on both sides and then give reasons for deciding the issue one way or the other.
- 2) Do countries giving aid to other countries for disaster relief have a right to determine how that aid is distributed and used?

Possible Debate Topics (students will be required to sign up for one of the following debates):

Students will form teams of two or three and participate in the following debates in "Mace" style; students will be given four minutes each to make opening arguments, and then after a question period, three minutes each for rebuttal. We shall go over debating procedures in class.

- 1) Is prostitution a morally acceptable, and therefore in principle legal, form of employment?
- 2) Should athletes be allowed to take steroids to enhance their performance?
- 3) Are zoos ethical?
- 4) Should the police be using profiling in their investigation of crime?
- 5) Should Canada reinstate capital punishment?
- 6) Should vaccination for serious, highly communicable diseases be mandatory?
- 7) Should we ban boxing and other forms of competitive fighting (UFC, et cetera)?
- 8) Would Aristotle assess Martin Luther King as a happy man?

Required Text:

Eldon Soifer, Ethical Issues: Perspectives for Canadians

Technical Considerations for Written Assignments:

- 1) All written assignments must be typed (black ink, please) and double-spaced on pages with at most 1 inch margins. No extra line spaces between paragraphs. Indent the first line of a paragraph. Printing on both sides of a sheet of paper is quite acceptable.
- 2) Please no title pages. Also no "Works Cited" or "Bibliography" pages referring to one work; do bibliographic references in a footnote if you must. Please no enormously large-fonted things like titles, names, dates, course numbers, student numbers, phone numbers, or due dates that take up half a page of space. Your title, name, and student number at the top of the first page is quite sufficient. Please visibly number any multiple-page assignments. If for some reason you must hand in the assignment to the office, please include my name at the top of the assignment as well.
- 3) No duo-tangs, folders, binders, or paperclips. Loose sheets are acceptable, but do remember to number them.
- 4) Under no circumstances will emailed assignments be accepted. Please hand in your assignments at the start of class on the day they are due.
- 5) For help on writing humanities papers, please consult the handout, "The Logic of Essays".

6) The final page of this outline is the evaluation form that will be used in the assessment of your writing. This evaluation form provides the clearest explanation of my requirements for an essay. Please, study it carefully before you write your work.

7) The late policy is a deduction of 3% per day that the assignment is handed in late. No comments will be given to late assignments. This course outline lets you know when assignments are due, and you have been given plenty of time to complete them. Consequently last minute excuses for not completing assignments on time will be met with skepticism.

7) Many of the above requirements are arbitrary demands on my part, but they really do facilitate the assessment of your work. If you do not follow these guidelines, **YOUR MARK FOR ORGANIZATION ON THE EVALUATION FORM WILL SUFFER DRASTICALLY.**

8) Plagiarism is completely unacceptable. If you make use of an idea that is not of your own devising, you must cite the source of that idea. Failure to properly cite sources may result in removal from the course and expulsion from the school.

EVALUATION FORM
(Late assignments will not receive comments)

Style:

Grammar: Are the sentences understandable? Are there any spelling mistakes? Is the diction clear and concise? Can the thought behind each sentence easily be grasped?

/10

Organization: Do the ideas logically follow each other, or are they haphazardly strewn together? Are there explicit premises deductively producing conclusions? Are the arguments connected at all, showing a chain of reasoning?

/10

Content:

Argument Outline: /10

Thesis: Does the assignment give an answer to a question or problem put forward? Is the answer more than a simple "yes" or "no"? Is the answer insightful, being an interpretive idea itself? Is the thesis explicitly stated?

/10

Arguments: Are there arguments presented in the paper? Are the arguments interesting or banal? Are the arguments incisive or superficial? Do the arguments explicitly outline broad premises that act as guides to understanding and reveal the unquestioned perspectives adopted in the paper?

/20

Originality: Does the student provide input into the conceptual debates the text engages in? Is there evidence of insight on the student's part into the topic? Are there any new ideas being explored in the assignment? Is the student able to go beyond ideas raised in class discussion?

/20

Evaluation: Does the student give a fair summation of the ideas contained in the texts used? Are passages from the text cited? Does the use of these ideas meaningfully contribute to the thesis of the essay, or is the use of material a mere addendum to the main arguments of the paper?

/20

TOTAL /100