

Philosophy 332:20 - Contemporary Moral and Social Issues – Winter 2014

Professor: William Sweet

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Office Hours: Mon. and Wed. 10-11; Mon. to Thurs. 2.15-3.15, and by arrangement.

Course web page: <http://people.stfx.ca/wsweet/philosophy332.html>

Prerequisite: Philosophy 331 (Introduction to Ethics)

This class meets in the 'HJ/JH' time block (M/W 3.45-5.00)

This course introduces and discusses the principal philosophical arguments on a number of current issues in ethics. Familiarity with the major ethical theories is required and assumed. Students should be able to show how these theories apply to the issues studied, and the discussion of the issues should allow students to see the implications of the theories studied in Philosophy 331.

The objectives of this course, then, are to enable students:

- to acquire a knowledge of the basic philosophical positions and arguments on several current issues in ethics;
- to develop the skills of analysing philosophical arguments, including the ability to discern and discuss assumptions and presuppositions;
- to be able to formulate, in oral and written form, reasoned views on current issues in ethics

The class will generally have a 'lecture and discussion' format, although there will be some presentations made by students. The professor or a member of the class will introduce a topic with a summary of the relevant arguments or a commentary on a text. This will be followed by questions and discussion of the material by the class as a whole (e.g., points of clarification or criticism and of comparison; comments on the relations between or among different issues).

It is essential in studying philosophy that students be prepared to ask and answer questions in class.

Course Outline:

- Introduction and Review:
 1. Theories of Ethics (utilitarianism, deontology, contractarianism, liberalism, natural law theory)
 2. Conditions for moral responsibility

- On the basis of the theories discussed in Philosophy 331, we shall discuss such current ethical issues as the following:
 1. Should abortion be legally restricted or banned?
 2. Should individuals be legally allowed to end their lives with the assistance of physician?
 3. Should people be legally allowed to sell (or modify) their body parts?
 4. Should there be capital punishment for some crimes?
 5. Is it morally allowable to torture?
 6. Should there be legal limits on speech and expression?
 7. Do we have a duty to alleviate suffering in developing countries?
 8. Should parenthood require a license? [see electronic resource]

It is hoped that we shall also discuss which, if any, of the ethical theories discussed in the first semester best suits the conclusions arrived at in this semester.

Texts / Readings:

Contemporary Moral Arguments: Readings in Ethical Issues, Second Edition, ed. Lewis Vaughn (Oxford University Press, 2013) ISBN-10:0199922268 / ISBN-13: 9780199922260

"Licensing Parents," by Hugh LaFollette, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Winter, 1980), pp. 182-197 / available through JSTPR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/2265111.pdf>

Recommended reading:

On Liberty [1859], by J.S. Mill, any edition. [A complete edition, on the web, may be found at <http://www.constitution.org/jsm/liberty.htm>]

Students should also have a good dictionary available. They might also consult: *Philosophy Pages* (from Garth Kemerling): <http://www.philosophypages.com/>

Some policies:

Laptops and other technologies: Laptops and similar technologies **are not permitted** unless you have my prior, explicit permission. Unauthorized use or related activities will result in being asked to leave the classroom.

Students with disabilities: Students who believe they may need accommodations in this class are encouraged to contact the Centre for Accessible Learning [Bloomfield Centre room 421; (902) 867-5349] as soon as possible to ensure that accommodations can be made in a timely fashion.

Email and office policy: I can respond to short messages through email, and I try to check e-mail once a day. I **do not, however, provide grades or answers about course content by email.** Students should make use of my office hours and ask questions in class. Urgent requests (e.g., to meet) are best made by telephone. If I am not in when you call, please call later or drop by.

Writing to a course instructor is not the same as writing to a friend. For example, if you send me an e-mail message, please mention the specific topic of your message in the "subject" line. Use proper English. Begin the communication with an appropriate salutation, e.g., "Dear Professor Sweet" (A poorly written and misspelled message reflects badly on the author.) Sign the communication with your name and the course in which you are enrolled.

Policy on plagiarism and academic dishonesty: St. Francis Xavier University values academic integrity. **All forms of academic dishonesty (including plagiarism) are unacceptable and will be sanctioned.** For the university policy on plagiarism, please visit http://www.sites.stfx.ca/registrars_office/academic_integrity

Policy on Class Attendance: Learning involves listening to and engaging others in class. Attendance is, therefore, required. Attendance will be taken at each class. Life being what it is, it is not inconceivable that circumstances may occasionally conspire against you being in class; as a result, you will be allowed two (2) unexcused absences without penalty. Any further unexcused absences will result in the loss of one point for each class. For an absence to be excused, you must provide legitimate medical (or similar) documentation.

Students who miss classes are responsible for obtaining notes from other students.

Students who are repeatedly late for class will also be penalized by losing participation grades.

Class Conduct: Students are expected to have prepared the readings before class and to participate in discussion.

It is essential in learning how to do philosophy that students be prepared to ask and answer questions in class.

All members of the class are to be respectful.

Students must also refrain from whispering to one another or passing notes or texting. It is distracting to your colleagues and especially to me. If you need something repeated, no matter how trivial you think it may be, raise your hand and ask me – I will address the question expeditiously. If you need to work on assignments for other classes, wish to read non-class related materials, text, surf the web, and the like, please do so elsewhere.

Writing Centre: Students are encouraged to take advantage of the resources of the Writing Centre, particularly with regard to organizing study time, writing papers, preparing for examinations, etc. For more information, please see <http://sites.stfx.ca/writingcentre/>

Method of Evaluation: Final examination 35 %; Major essay (12 pages, due early March) 35 %; Group presentations (15 %); Class participation, class summaries, and (surprise) quizzes (15 %)

Grading: A = (80-100) Outstanding / B = (70-79) Above Average / C = (60-69) Average / D = (50-59) Below Average / F = (49 and below) Failing