

Current Moral and Social Issues (01:730:105:02)

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Office Hours: Tuesday 1pm-2pm (or by appointment)

Course Outline

This course will explore several important contemporary moral, social, and political issues. Topics to be covered include the nature and justification of democracy, criticisms of democracy and alternative forms of government, fake news and bullshit in politics, gun rights and self-defense against the state, immigration, the ethics of veganism, and effective altruism. Along the way, students will also learn the basics of normative ethics, as well as becoming familiar with some core concepts in moral and political philosophy.

Course Requirements

Attendance and participation – 15%

Weekly reflections – 15%

Essay - 35%

Exam - 35%

Attendance and Participation

I expect students to come to class with papers read in advance, ready to discuss the relevant issues. The class will be far more engaging for all involved when you actively participate – raise objections, express confusion, discuss your ideas and arguments, bring up current examples that may help make the relevant issues concrete, and more. Throughout the term, I will be taking note of who contributes, ultimately factoring such contribution into the overall grade.

With that said, absences will be unavoidable given current circumstances. Accordingly, you may miss class *up to 4 times* without penalty, no explanation required. If you need to miss more, please try to reach out to me in advance to inform me that you're missing class, as well as letting me know why.

On a related point, I prefer if students have their cameras on during class. If you need to have your camera off (or if you have reasons to prefer not having it on), please reach out to me to discuss the matter.

Weekly Reflections

Once we begin reading the assigned papers (listed below under ‘Course Schedule’), I ask that students submit *at least one* reflection per week on the papers we are reading. Since we have classes on both Monday and Wednesday, these should be posted on Canvas *either* before the Monday class *or* before the Wednesday class (ideally the evening before). You can choose which reading to write a reflection on. You don’t need to write something on both, though you may do so if you wish.

These reflections should be around *5-10 lines* long. You will get marks for submitting, and none otherwise. Only one contribution per week will go towards your overall grade. Reflections do not need to be extremely polished. The idea is simply to get your thoughts out on paper. You can write about your own criticisms or concerns, you can talk about things that you found puzzling, you can create your own arguments, and so on. The reflections will help me gauge what sort of things students find interesting, what to focus on during class, as well as whether people are keeping up with the readings. They also prove useful if discussion falters during class (i.e., I can ‘warm-call’ students, asking them to discuss the thoughts they have already expressed in their reflection).

As with attendance, you may miss up to 4 reflections without penalty. Since we have 14 weeks of classes, that means you must submit *at least 10* reflections to get full marks.

Essay

The essay will be on the theme of ‘Democracy and its Alternatives’ (precise topics TBD). Topics will be distributed on the last day of class before mid-term break, and the deadline will be *April 28th*. I am implementing a limited *teach-to-mastery* model. Here’s what this means: from the date the topics are distributed until the final deadline, you can re-submit the essay as many times as you want in order to get a better grade. This will give you experience writing and re-writing papers in response to critical feedback, which is how academic writing works (rather than judging you on your first attempt, which is not typically how it works). Essays should be around *5-7 double-spaced pages* long.

Exam

There will be a final ‘take-home’ exam with types of questions ranging from true/false questions to short, essay-style exercises. This exam will cover all topics discussed in class. It will be distributed on the last day of term and you will have one week to complete it, returning it to me by *May 10th*.

Grade Breakdown

A: 90-100

B+: 85-89

B: 80-84

C+: 75-79

C: 70-74

D: 60-69

F: 0-59

Course Schedule

(Note: no textbook is required for this course. All readings will be made available through Canvas.)

The Basics

Jan 20th: Introduction

Jan 25th: The Basics of Argument and Reasoning

Jan 27th: Core Concepts in Moral and Political Philosophy

Theory

Feb 1st: Driver, ‘Classical Utilitarianism’; ‘Contemporary Consequentialism’ (p61-66; 76-79)

Feb 3rd: Driver, ‘Social Contract Theory’

Feb 8th: Driver, ‘Virtue Ethics’

Feb 10th: Driver, ‘Feminist Ethics’

In-Depth Case Study: Democracy and its Alternatives

Feb 15th: Valentini, ‘Justice and Democracy’

Feb 17th: Graham, ‘What is Special about Democracy?’; Landemore, ‘Why the Many Are Smarter than the Few and Why It Matters’

Feb 22nd: Brennan, excerpts from *Against Democracy*

Feb 24th: Reiss, ‘Against Epistocracy’; Hannon, ‘Are Smarter Voters Better Voters?’

Mar 1st: Gibbons, ‘Political Disagreement and Minimal Epistocracy’; ‘Is Epistocracy Irrational?’

Mar 3rd: Guerrero, ‘Against Elections’

Mar 8th: Landa & Pevnick, ‘Is Random Selection a Cure for the Ills of Electoral Representation?’

Mar 10th: Writing Tips (Essay Topics Distributed)

SPRING BREAK

Fake News

Mar 22nd: Rini, ‘Fake News and Partisan Epistemology’

Mar 24th: Nguyen, ‘Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles’

Mar 29th: McDonald, ‘Please Like This Paper’

Gun Rights and Self-Defense

Mar 31st: Huemer, ‘Is There a Right to Own a Gun?’

Apr 5th: Dixon, ‘Handguns, Philosophers, and the Right to Self-Defense’

Apr 7th: Brennan, ‘When May We Kill Government Agents?’

Immigration

Apr 12th: Huemer, ‘Is There a Right to Immigrate?’

Apr 14th: Joshi, ‘For (Some) Immigration Restrictions

The Ethics of Veganism

Apr 19th: Norcross, ‘Puppies, Pigs, and People’

Apr 21st: Hsiao, ‘There is Nothing Morally Wrong with Eating Meat’

Effective Altruism

Apr 26th: Singer, ‘Famine, Affluence, and Morality’; ‘The Logic of Effective Altruism’

Apr 28th: Acemoglu, ‘Response to The Logic of Effective Altruism’; Deaton, ‘Response to The Logic of Effective Altruism’ (essays due)

May 3rd: wrap-up (take-home exams distributed)

Plagiarism Guidelines

Please be sure to adhere to Rutgers policy on plagiarism and academic integrity. This website should contain the information you need: <http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/>

Accessibility

As students at Rutgers, you are each entitled to equal access to educational opportunities at this university. (Or to put things in a way we will later come to understand, you each have a *claim-right*

against the university that you are afforded such equal access.) Feel free to speak to me about any issues you may have, and please avail yourself of the services provided by the ODS (Office of Disability Services). Here is a link to their website: <https://ods.rutgers.edu/>

Student Wellness

Here are some links that may prove useful during your time here at Rutgers:

Rutgers Student Wellness Program

<https://ubhc.rutgers.edu/swp/index.html>

CAPS

<http://health.rutgers.edu/medical-counseling-services/counseling/>

Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance

<http://vpva.rutgers.edu/>