Introduction to Moral and Political Philosophy [DRAFT]

Course Level: Intro

[Semester], [Institution]

Description & Overview

Ethics pertains to right action. We act ethically when we act rightly, and we act unethically when we act wrongly. Even from this simple formulation, though, several controversies arise. For one, what does it mean for us to act rightly or wrongly? Why are there ethical standards that supposedly apply to us such that our actions can be right or wrong in the first place? And how are we to discern right actions from wrong actions? Matters become even more complicated when we consider these kinds of questions within the political arena. When is it okay to punish people for their behavior? Is lying in politics different from lying in our everyday exchanges? Should we disobey unjust laws?

Accordingly, this course is designed to introduce students to philosophical debates surrounding these questions. In it, students will become accustomed to examining moral and political issues from a philosophical angle. The course is divided into five parts. For the first unit, we'll investigate the classic question, "Why be ethical?". The issue here isn't so much whether there are ethical facts, but why one should abide by them. What compels us to adhere to ethical standards? The second part turns to liberty and paternalism. Presuming we have decisive reason to be ethical, are we justified in forcing people to behave well? For the third unit, we'll explore lying and deceit. Is there any context in which lying is permissible? In the fourth unit, we'll look at apologies and forgiveness. Here, we'll ask whether we have duties to forgive those who've wronged us and what all is capable of forgiveness. Finally, the fifth unit explores the ethical dimensions of civil disobedience. When is it acceptable to disobey the law and is there any circumstance in which this might be required of us?

Course Information

Instructor:
C.J. Oswald
[Email]

Lecture:
[Location]
[Time]

Office Hours:
[Location]
[Time]

Readings:
Course Packet

Student Learning Objectives: By the end of this course, students will be able to

- Explain the basic challenge of justifying morality (i.e., the problem of the amoralist), and differentiate the philosophical strategies for explaining why adhering to morality is justified
- Define 'paternalism' and explain how it comes into conflict with the moral presumption in favor of liberty
- Examine the arguments for and against the moral permissibility of lying; explain how the moral problems with lying take on a special status in the political arena
- Examine whether we have a duty to forgive those who have wronged us, and further examine whether forgiveness for mass atrocities is possible

- Define 'civil disobedience' while assessing the activity's permissibility; examine whether uncivil forms of disobedience are ever justified
- Carefully read long-form argumentative texts in philosophy and reconstruct the arguments within
- Analyze and interpret philosophical texts and identify where difficulties and challenges might emerge from individual passages

General Course Policies

Syllabus Policy: I think of syllabi as pseudo-contracts between myself and students. Consequently, the policies, requirements, and guidelines listed throughout should be read as promises made to students about what they can expect from the course. However, as instructor, I reserve the right to modify the syllabus as needed to best achieve the course learning objectives. Students will be promptly informed—and likely consulted—regarding any such changes.

Email and Communications: The best way to communicate with me is through email. When emailing me, please include **"[Course Name/Number]"** in the subject heading. I plan on responding to all emails within **2 business days** (so excluding weekends and holidays). If you haven't received a response after that period, please feel free to follow up.

Office Hours: Office hours are times set aside and dedicated for meeting with students. You're welcome (and encouraged!) to drop by and discuss whatever you need or want to. Often, students come prepared with questions regarding the course material, assignments, or grades. Yet I'm also happy to discuss philosophy, university life, and related topics. By attending office hours, you can receive more personalized instruction, feedback, and even advice on both the course and being a student. So please don't hesitate to use them!

Screens (and In-Class Materials): Evidence is mounting that the use of digital technologies or "screens" (e.g., laptops, phones, tablets) in educational settings hinders learning. These technologies distract both you and your classmates, preventing you from both attending to the material during class and, accordingly, from absorbing and reflecting on it. So, this will be a **screens-free** classroom: the use of screens within the classroom is prohibited. However, since printing is often costly, I will provide handouts for class discussion, which will include passages from the day's assigned reading. If students require a laptop or tablet for **accessibility** reasons, please inform me as soon as possible.

Grading, Requirements, and Assignment Policies

AI & Original Work: Much of philosophy's value stems from practicing it. By doing philosophy, we contribute to a collective intellectual project while also enhancing and refining our capacities for rational thought, communication, and so on. That is, there's value in doing the work independent of material outcomes (e.g., grades, jobs, etc.). As such, I require all students to submit their own, original work. The use of either generative AI programs (e.g., chatbots and other LLMs) or AI tools that significantly shape the writing (e.g., Grammarly) is therefore prohibited. If, for whatever reason, I suspect submitted work may not be your own, I may invite you for an interview regarding both the material and process. This interview will be treated as an oral examination counting for **50%** of your grade on the relevant assignment.

Revisions and Resubmissions: We learn and improve most when we have opportunities to correct--what we come to learn are--our mistakes. Moreover, philosophical writing is rarely finished after just one draft. To facilitate this, students are granted **three** opportunities to revise and resubmit their work in light of my feedback. This policy applies to the following assignments: Exam 1, Exam 2, Exam 3, and Exam 4.

Late/Missing Assignments and Extensions: Students are expected to submit all assignments by their designated deadline. Any assignments submitted after the deadline are subject to **a late penalty** consisting of the removal of **one** opportunity to revise and resubmit assignments. **Late submissions for revisions and resubmissions aren't allowed**. However, I'm fairly lenient in granting extensions for assignments. So long as I'm asked within a reasonable time frame (e.g., not a few hours before the deadline), I'll typically grant an extension, the length of which will depend on student circumstances.

Grading Scheme:

A+	99-100
A	94-98.9
A-	90-93.9
B+	87-89.9
B	83-86.9

B-	80-82.9
C+	77-79.9
C	73-76.9
C-	70-72.9
D+	67-69.9

D	63-66.9
D-	60-62.9
F	0-59

Assignments: Below are the assignments that students will complete for this course, along with their corresponding weight.

Class Attendance & Participation (15%): Becoming more comfortable with philosophy requires active participation, so mere attendance will not suffice for learning the relevant material. As such, you're expected to have completed the readings before class and be prepared to discuss them. Relevant passages via handouts will be provided for you during class. If you need to miss class for whatever reason, please simply let me know ahead of time.

Critical Reflections (10%): At the beginning of every unit, I will pose a question relating to the unit's content. Students will submit **two** responses to each question. The first response must be submitted by **12pm** on the first day of the unit and the second must be submitted by **11:59pm** on the last day of the unit. The first reflection is to get you thinking about the central question(s) of the unit, while the second invites you to re-consider your first response in light of the readings and class discussion. Each reflection should be around **one to two paragraphs** and will be submitted on a course discussion forum.

Reading Annotations (25%): For each unit, students must submit two reading annotations (**10 total**). For these, students will annotate a hard copy of an assigned reading, including highlighting or underlining relevant parts of the text in addition to marginal comments. Annotations are thus an opportunity for students to practice their close reading skills in a non-digital format.

In-Class Exams (50%): Approximately every 2-3 weeks, students will complete an in-class exam (**5 total**). The exams will resemble the in-class handouts. In this regard, students will be presented with passages from previous readings and ultimately tasked with responding to two to five short-form questions for each. The in-class exams thus test reading comprehension and analysis with respect to the course content.

Course Topics, Readings, and Schedule

Topic	Week	Day	Readings	Assignments
Course Introduction	1	1	No Reading	
Unit 1: Why be Moral?				
A Divine Source? The Euthyphro Dilemma	1	2	Plato, *Euthyphro* - Selections	*CR 1*
Self-Interest: The Ring of Gyges	2	3	Plato, *Republic* - Book II, 357a-368b	
Human Nature: Aristotle on Morality and Flourishing	2	4	Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics* - Book I.7-19, II.1-4	
Self-Interest Redux: The Need for Security	3	5	Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* - Chapters 13 and 14	
In-Class Exam 1	3	6	N/A	*Exam 1*
Human Nature Redux: Hume on Moral Dispositions	4	7	David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* - Section IX	
Morality's Limits: Should we be Saints?	4	8	Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints"	*CR 2*
Unit 2: Liberty and Paternalism				
The Value of Liberty: Mill's Harm Principle	5	9	John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* - Selections	*CR 1*

Paternalism: The Basics	5	10	Gerald Dworkin, "Paternalism"	
In-Class Exam 2	6	11	N/A	*Exam 2*
Liberty and Neutrality: Hard Moral Questions	6	12	Michael Sandel, "The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self" - Selections	*Exam 1 Revisions*
Nudging: A Permissible Middle Ground?	7	13	Cass R. Sunstein, "The Ethics of Nudging" - Selections	*CR 2*
Unit 3: Lying and Deceit				
Is Lying Permissible? The Argument Against	7	14	Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy* - Selections	*CR 1*
Is Lying Permissible? The Argument For	8	15	John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* - Chapter 2, Selections	
In-Class Exam 3	8	16	N/A	*Exam 3*
Lying in Politics	9	17	Seana Shiffrin, *Speech Matters* - Chapters 1 and 3, Selections	*Exam 2 Revisions*
Lying in Politics	9	18	Seana Shiffrin, *Speech Matters* (cont.)	*CR 2*
Unit 4: Apologies and Forgiveness				
The Nature of Forgiveness	10	19	Bishop Joseph Butler, *Upon Human Nature, Or Man Considered as a Moral Agent* - Sermons VIII and IX	*CR 1*
The Ethics of Forgiveness	10	20	Luke Maring, "Is There a Right to Be Forgiven?"	

The Ethics of Forgiveness	11	21	Margaret R. Holmgren, "Forgiveness, Self-Respect, and Humility"	
In-Class Exam 4	11	22	N/A	*Exam 4* *Exam 3 Revisions*
Forgiveness in Politics	12	23	Eve Garrard, "Forgiveness and the Holocaust"	
Forgiveness in Politics	12	24	Eve Garrard and David McNaughton, "Forgiving Evil"	*CR 2*
Unit 5: Civil Disobedience				
The Nature of Disobedience	13	25	Henry David Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience"	*CR 1*
The Importance of *Civil* Disobedience	13	26	Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter from Birmingham Jail"	
The Justification of Civil Disobedience	14	27	John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* - Chapter 6, Selections	
In-Class Exam 5	14	28	N/A	*Exam 5* *Exam 4 Revisions*
Uncivil Disobedience	15	29	Candice Delmas, *A Duty to Resist* - Chapters 2 and 3, Selections	
Uncivil Disobedience	15	30	Candice Delmas, *A Duty to Resist* (cont.)	*CR 2*