

# PHIL 140.01 – Contemporary Moral Issues: Questions of Life and Death

TuTh 12.30-1.20, Francis Scott Key 0106 + Friday sections

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## **1. Course Outline**

This course aims to help students think critically and constructively about a range of practical moral issues and dilemmas surrounding life and death. (These include: killing in war, terrorism, suicide, euthanasia, abortion, capital punishment, the rights of animals, famine, and others.) The course will examine various arguments advanced by moral philosophers on either side of each of these topics, and (to a lesser extent) the ways in which these arguments depend upon background moral theories. Students will be encouraged to think seriously about the writers' views, to understand and evaluate the arguments on both sides, and to develop and defend their own views. The course will largely be approached from a secular perspective.

Required Textbook: C.W. Morris (ed.), *Questions of Life and Death: Readings in Practical Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

Almost all readings for the course will be drawn from this text (plus one online chapter).

## **2. Expectations of Students**

The plenary Tuesday/Thursday sessions will mostly involve lecturing, with some opportunity for questions and discussion. The Friday sections will involve a mixture of discussion, group work, and debate. Students are expected to attend regularly, and to be actively involved throughout.

All laptops, cellphones, and other electronic devices will need to be turned off during all classes. This is both to facilitate active learning and as a courtesy to other learners.

Students need to study the readings for each week in advance of attending Friday sections, and should bring the textbook with them to section.

### **3. Course Requirements**

Assessment for the course will involve a number of components, described below.

- (a) Weekly quizzes (14% of the overall grade [best 12 of 13 quizzes]).

In each Friday section, beginning February 1, there will be a short quiz issued at the start of class. (Do not be late!) The quiz will cover some of the main points from that week's readings. (Sometimes the answers might be available from one of the lectures that week, sometimes not.)

- (b) Three group debates (12% each; 36% of the overall grade).

Groups will be assigned to speak for or against 3 of the 9 debate topics listed below on a rolling basis. The debates will occupy no more than 20 minutes of the 50 minutes available in the section, with the remainder devoted to the quiz and discussion of that week's readings.

Feb 22 — (1) Motion: "Killing is wrong because it infringes autonomy."

Mar 1 — (2) Motion: "Failing to give to famine relief is almost as bad as murder."

Mar 8 — (3) Motion: "Intentional killing of innocents in wartime is wrong."

Mar 15 — (4) Motion: "Capital punishment is wrong."

Mar 29 — (5) Motion: "Animals have moral standing."

Apr 12 — (6) Motion: "Suicide is wrong."

Apr 19 — (7) Motion: "Euthanasia is a moral right."

Apr 27 — (8) Motion: "If the fetus has full moral standing, then abortion is never permissible."

May 3 — (9) Motion: "The human fetus has moral standing from the moment of conception."

Groups will need to collaborate to produce a written text setting out their arguments. Group space will be made available in ELMS to help facilitate this.

Debate texts will need to be printed and handed to the TA after class, and will form the main basis for evaluating the group performance in the debate. (There will also be an opportunity to rebut the other side's arguments. Good points made here may have a positive influence on the grade.) The written debates will be evaluated for clarity of organization and expression, for knowledge and understanding of the main issues involved, and for quality of argument. Group members will be asked to evaluate the extent and quality of the contributions of other members of the group along these dimensions (*not* the fluency or extent of verbal contributions to the debate itself), and individual grades will be adjusted accordingly.

The texts should be between 1500 and 2000 words in length. Pack in as many good

arguments as you can, trying to anticipate your opponents' likely arguments. Do not resort to rhetorical tricks: strength of argument is what matters.

Each team will have no more than 2 minutes to present the main points of their argument. (Debate texts should *not* be read aloud. Rather, pick out the main points and designate a team member to present them.) Thereafter the opposing team will have 1 minute for a brief response, and then discussion will be open to everyone.

(c) One term paper, due on **Friday April 5** (20% of the grade).

Papers should be between 2,000 and 3,000 words in length. They should be submitted to your TA by email attachment (Word or pdf) before 10 am. Late submissions will be penalized at a rate of one full letter grade per day. (Note that emails are time-stamped.) Papers should be written on any one of the first three debate topics (#s 1-3 in (b) above), arguing either for or against. You may use arguments drawn from your own group's debate contribution if you wish. But the views expressed should be your own, and the paper should be written in your own words.

(d) Final exam, on **Thursday May 16, 1.30-3.30 pm** (30% of the grade).

The exam will only cover topics from capital punishment onwards (i.e., excluding the first three debate topics). It will require you to write 4 essays (of 3-4 pages each) selected from a larger number of questions.

The final exam will be pre-released in the final regular class of term (Wednesday May 8). This will give you a full week to prepare your answers in advance. You may not, however, bring any papers or books into the exam.

Exam answers will be graded anonymously (by folding back the cover sheet and shuffling).

**Note:** If you are experiencing difficulties in keeping up with the academic demands of this course, contact the Learning Assistance Service, 2202 Shoemaker Building, 301-314-7693. Their educational counselors can help with time management, reading, learning-skills, note-taking, and exam preparation skills. All their services are free to UMD students.

#### **4. Assessment policy**

Grades will be assigned in accordance with the following criteria. There are six broad dimensions of assessment:

1. *Presentation, literacy, and organization* (including spelling, grammar, and punctuation;

answers should have a beginning, middle, and end, and should work towards a clear goal in a systematic fashion);

2. *clarity* (ideas and arguments should be explained clearly and fully);
3. *relevance* (all and only material relevant to answering the question should be included);
4. *knowledge and understanding* (how much you know about the subject matter and how carefully you have studied the readings; a good understanding of the material under discussion also needs to be displayed);
5. *quality of argument* (give strong arguments, and avoid invalidity);
6. *independence, critical stance, and creativity* (the extent to which you evaluate and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the ideas under discussion for yourself).

For purposes of averaging and calculating final grades, the following conversion will be used:

**A+: 98, A: 95, A-: 92, B+: 88, B: 85, B-: 82, C+: 78, C: 75, C-: 72, D+: 68, D: 65, D-: 62, F: 55**

You should note that undergraduate grades at the University of Maryland have recently followed roughly the following distribution:

**A: ±45%    B: ±30%    C: ±15%    Other (D, F, W): ±10%**

This normal distribution will be borne in mind when assigning the grades for this course.

Once grades for all the components of the course have been assigned, the instructor reserves the right to make adjustments before grades are submitted to UMEG. This may be to correct for a skew in the overall distribution of grades, for example, or to credit someone who has shown dramatic improvement through the course.

## **5. Schedule and readings**

In general, you should read the editor's introduction to the relevant section of the textbook (which is usually quite brief), in addition to the chapters listed below.

1. Week ending Jan 25 — Course introduction & wrongness of killing  
Reading: editor's introduction to Part I of the textbook
2. Week ending Feb 1 — The badness of death  
Reading: textbook chs. 9, 10, & 13  
**Quiz # 1 in Friday sections**
3. Week ending Feb 8 — The good life  
Reading: textbook chs. 8 & 15  
**Quiz #2 in Friday sections**
4. Week ending Feb 15 — The wrongness of killing

Reading: textbook chs. 6 & Carruthers “Contractualism and Utilitarianism” [online]

**Quiz #3 in Friday sections**

5. Week ending Feb 22 — Famine

Reading: textbook chs. 17 & 18

**Quiz #4 & Debate #1 in Friday sections**

6. Week ending Mar 1 — Killing in war

Reading: textbook chs. 23 & 24

**Quiz #5 & Debate #2 in Friday sections**

7. Week ending Mar 8 — Capital punishment

Reading: textbook chs. 37 & 39

**Quiz #6 & Debate #3 in Friday sections**

8. Week ending Mar 15 — The moral status of animals

Reading: textbook chs. 42 & 43

**Quiz #7 & Debate #4 in Friday sections**

**SPRING BREAK**

9. Week ending Mar 29 — Terrorism

Reading: textbook chs. 30 & 32

**Quiz #8 & Debate #5 in Friday sections**

10. Week ending Apr 5 — Suicide

Reading: textbook chs. 46, & 47

**Quiz #9 in Friday sections & Term paper due before 10 am [no debate]**

11. Week ending Apr 12 — Euthanasia

Reading: textbook chs. 49 & 51

**Quiz #10 & Debate #6 in Friday sections**

12. Week ending Apr 19 — Abortion I (assuming the fetus has standing)

Reading: textbook chs. 57 & 62

**Quiz #11 & Debate #7 in Friday sections**

13. Week ending Apr 26 — Abortion II (the question of moral standing)

Reading: textbook chs. 58 & 59

**Quiz #12 & Debate #8 in Friday sections**

14. Week ending May 3 — Cloning

Reading: textbook chs. 63 & 65

**Quiz #13 & Debate #9 in Friday sections**

15. Week ending May 9 — Future generations

(note: May 9 is a Thursday; there will be no Friday sections)

Reading: textbook ch. 66

Final exam issued in class on Thursday May 9

**Final exam 1.30-3.30 pm on Thursday May 16**

**6. Students with Disabilities**

If you have a disability of any sort that requires an accommodation to be made in the arrangements for the course, you should inform the TA at the start of the course, who will then consult with the University's Disability Support Service.

**7. Religious Observances and other Absences**

It is the student's responsibility to inform the instructor of any intended absences for religious observances *in advance*.

Students who need to be absent for personal reasons should seek permission *in advance* from the instructor.

For every medically necessary absence from class, a reasonable effort should be made to notify the instructor in advance of the class. When returning to class, students must bring a note identifying the date of and reason for the absence, and acknowledging that the information in the note is accurate.

If a student is absent more than twice, the instructor may require documentation signed by a health care professional.

If a student is absent on days when work is due for submission he or she is required to notify the instructor in advance, and upon returning to class, bring documentation of the illness, signed by a health care professional.

**8. Academic Integrity**

All students are expected to comply with the University's code of academic integrity. Academic dishonesty of any kind will automatically result in a grade of XF for the course.

The following statement is from the University:

The University of Maryland, College Park has a nationally recognized Code of Academic Integrity, administered by the Student Honor Council. This Code sets standards for academic integrity at Maryland for all undergraduate and graduate students. As a student you are responsible for upholding these standards for this course. It is very important for you to be aware of the consequences of cheating, fabrication, facilitation, and plagiarism. For more information on the Code of Academic Integrity or the Student Honor Council, please visit:

<http://www.studenthonorcouncil.umd.edu/whatis.html>