Philosophy 393: Contemporary Ethics

David Sobel

M, W 2:15 pm- 3:35 pm
Spring, 2026
101 Huntington Hall

Office: 534 Hall of Languages
Office hours: Wednesday, 12:30-2 pm and by appointment. While I hope to talk with you about the course outside of class, I prefer to meet by appointment.
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THERE IS ANOTHER DAVID SOBEL ON CAMPUS. BE SURE TO USE THE ABOVE E-MAIL ADDRESS.

This is an introduction to Contemporary Ethics. We will be considering timeless abstract questions about ethics such as what makes actions right or wrong, can there be an objectively true morality that applies to everyone, why should people do what morality tells them to do, and what is the connection between God and morality. We will also consider less abstract and more contemporary moral issues about mass incarceration, racism, economic inequality, abortion, eating meat, the legalization of drugs, and the extent of our duties to the worst off around the world.

Required text: There is no required textbook. All readings will be made available on Blackboard.

Grades: Grades will be determined by a mid-term exam, a final exam, and 5 in class pop quizzes on that day's reading. The mid-term will count for 30 percent of one's grade, the final 35%, and the 5 pop quizzes 35%. The final exam will cover the second half of the class and will not be cumulative over the entire class. No extra credit assignments will be given.

You are allowed 3 excused absences without providing any justification for the absence. These can be used by e-mailing me prior to the start of class and explaining that you are using one of your excused absences. (E-mails that arrive after the start of class will not excuse you from that class.) YOU MUST

SAY YOU ARE USING AN EXCUSED ABSENSE IN THE E-MAIL. MERELY TELLING ME YOU WILL MISS CLASS WILL NOT EXCUSE YOU FROM THE DAY'S QUIZ. Quizzes will be offered at the beginning of class. Lateness therefore may result in missing the exam or having less time for it. Missed pop quizzes on days when you do not have an excused absence will result in a failing grade for that quiz. Excuses for missed classes where you did not use an excused absence must be documented and will be subject to strict scrutiny. Electronics of any kind (unless you have an accommodation) as well as the use of AI during quizzes or exams is not permitted. However, you may use hard copies of notes that you yourself have written during quizzes and exams. You will have to turn in your notes.

Course readings: All readings will be made available on Blackboard.
Final Exam: The final exam and the mid-term exam are not yet scheduled.

Class Rules:

The use of cell phones or lap top computers is generally not permitted during class time. However, if you feel you have special reasons that require the use a lap top computer, contact me and explain why you need to do so.

The penalty for cheating (which includes plagiarism) will be failure for the course and possible other penalties**.** Presenting the work of others, or artificial intelligence, as if it were one's own is plagiarism.

Course learning outcomes:
After this course, students should be able to:
(a) Explain the core content of some major moral theories.
(b) Display a firm understanding of central ethical concepts and distinctions.
(c) Apply the critical tools of philosophical analysis to effectively question prevailing social norms and moral ideas, and to critique existing moral theories and arguments.
(d) Display a facility for independently grappling with urgent ethical issues in an organized, articulate and informed manner, including clearly presenting their own arguments for moral conclusions.
(e) Engage in constructive debate about important moral issues with their peers.

Students should also show an increased ability to:

(f) Distill the central argument of a text to its essentials, making clear its basic argumentative structure.
(g) Interpret texts charitably in order to understand a view in its most cogent form before subjecting it to criticism.

Readings:

All readings will be made available through Blackboard.

You should complete each reading *before* class. This will make it easier for you to follow lectures, participate in discussions, and to draw your own conclusions about the material.

Many of the readings are difficult and require a lot of thought to digest properly. Do not expect to understand everything on a breezy first read. The readings are, in almost all cases, intended to not merely express the author's point of view, but rather to argue that you are rationally required to share their point of view. If you do not understand how the author aims to rationally require you to share their point of view, you have not yet understood the central aspect of the paper and have not understood what I will be testing your understanding of. You may have to return to the text several times to understand what it is saying. This will help you to hone your critical reading skills, and to develop the ability to clearly analyze the arguments in a text. The lectures and discussion sections will also help you to understand the readings better.

University Required Text:

As a pre-eminent and inclusive student-focused research institution, Syracuse University considers academic integrity at the forefront of learning, serving as a core value and guiding pillar of education. Syracuse University's Academic Integrity Policy provides students with the necessary guidelines to complete academic work with integrity throughout their studies. Students are required to uphold both course-specific and university-wide academic integrity expectations such as crediting your sources, doing your own work, communicating honestly, and supporting academic integrity. The full Syracuse University Academic Integrity Policy can be found by visiting class.syr/edu, selecting, "Academic Integrity," and "Expectations and Policy."

Upholding Academic Integrity includes the protection of faculty's intellectual property. Students should not upload, distribute, or share instructors' course materials, including presentations, assignments, exams, or other evaluative materials without permission. Using websites that charge fees or require uploading of course material (e.g., Chegg, Course Hero) to obtain exam solutions or assignments completed by others, which are then presented as your own violates academic integrity expectations in this course and may be classified as a Level 3 violation. All academic integrity expectations that apply to in-person assignments, quizzes, and exams also apply online.

Students found in violation of the policy are subject to grade sanctions determined by the course instructor and non-grade sanctions determined by the School or College where the course is offered. Students may not drop or withdraw from courses in which they face a suspected violation. Any established violation in this course may result in course failure regardless of violation level.

Option 2: Some Artificial intelligence use

Based on the specific learning outcomes and assignments in this course, artificial intelligence is permitted except during pop quizzes and exams. It may not be used during such quizzes and exams. See each assignment, quiz, or exam instructions for more information about what artificial

intelligence tools are permitted and to what extent, as well as citation requirements. If no instructions are provided for a specific assignment, then no use of any artificial intelligence tool is permitted. Any AI use beyond that which is detailed in course assignments is explicitly prohibited except when documented permission is granted.

Academic Integrity Online

For courses that include online assessments (tests, quizzes, etc.), maintaining academic integrity can be a challenge. The Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence (CTLE) and the Center for Learning and Student Success (CLASS) have developed some useful resources to help faculty develop effective online assessments. Some faculty have had success using Zoom as a proctoring tool for timed examinations. University Counsel has determined that using Zoom or other webcam-based proctoring approaches is not a violation of student privacy rights. Please let students know in advance if you plan to use any online proctoring methods. Instructors may wish to supplement the syllabus statement on academic integrity (above) with additional information on the conduct of online assessments. For example:

All academic integrity expectations that apply to in-person quizzes and exams also apply to online quizzes and exams. In this course, all work submitted for quizzes and exams must be yours alone. Discussing quiz or exam questions with anyone during the quiz or exam period violates academic integrity expectations for this course.

Using websites that charge fees or require uploading of course material (e.g., Chegg, Course Hero) to obtain exam solutions or assignments completed by others and present the work as your own violates academic integrity expectations in this course and may be classified as a Level 3 violation, resulting in suspension or expulsion from Syracuse University.

DISABILITY SYLLABUS STATEMENT

Syracuse University values diversity and inclusion; we are committed to a climate of mutual respect and full participation. There may be aspects of the instruction or design of this course that result in barriers to your inclusion and full participation in this course. I invite any student to contact me to discuss strategies and/or accommodations (academic adjustments) that may be essential to your success and to collaborate with the Center for Disability Resources (CDR) in this process.

If you would like to discuss disability-accommodations or register with CDR, please visit Center for Disability Resources. Please call (315) 443-4498 or email disabilityresources@syr.edu for more detailed information.

The CDR is responsible for coordinating disability-related academic accommodations and will work with the student to develop an access plan. Since academic accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact CDR as soon as possible to begin this process.

Furniture may be placed in your classrooms for specific use by students with disabilities. This furniture is generally labelled with signs that request that it is not to be moved per the Center for Disability Resources. Students with disabilities rely on this furniture to remain where it is placed within the classrooms.

Note that some students may be accompanied to classes by a service animal. *Students are not required to provide prior notice of this to the University*. If it is not readily apparent that the student is disabled, students can be asked two questions, do you have this animal due to a disability and what tasks does it perform for you? Emotional Support Animals are different than services animals and are typically only approved to reside in a student's housing location/room.

FAITH TRADITION OBSERVANCES

Syracuse University does not set aside days for any religious holiday. **Students must notify instructors of any religious observances by the academic drop deadline**. For any observances occurring before the academic drop deadline, students must notify faculty at least two academic days in advance. Please remind students in class of their obligations to do so. Students register their observances using MySlice. Suggested syllabus language:

Syracuse University's Religious Observances Policy recognizes the diversity of faiths represented in the campus community and protects the rights of students, faculty, and staff to observe religious holy days according to their traditions. Under the policy, students are given an opportunity to make up any examination, study, or work requirements that may be missed due to a religious observance, provided they notify their instructors no later than the academic drop deadline. For observances occurring before the drop deadline, notification is required at least two academic days in advance. Students may enter their observances in MySlice under Student Services/Enrollment/My Religious Observances/Add a Notification.

Please remind students during the first week of classes about the notification deadline. Instructors may access a list of their students who have submitted a notification in the MySlice Faculty Center. Note that the religious observances icon will not appear unless a student in that class has submitted a notification.

REGISTRATION POLICY

Students may not attend, submit work, audit, or otherwise participate in courses without being officially enrolled. Instructors may not allow students to attend classes or submit work unless they

appear on the official class list or are attending with instructor approval for the purpose of making up an Incomplete (I) grade in a prior term. Check your class roster regularly to ensure that everyone attending is registered for the class. Read the full policy in the Academic Rules section of the Undergraduate Course Catalog.

TRIGGER WARNING

Because of the nature of the topics covered in this class, the course readings or class discussions may generate intellectual and emotional discomfort. These responses are natural parts of intellectual growth. If, however, your emotional response becomes acute psychological distress (triggering), please communicate with me. I invite you to contact me if you have concerns in this regard.