

Philosophy 393: Contemporary Ethics

David Sobel

T, Th 2-3:20

HB Crouse Hall 213A

Office: 534 Hall of Languages

Office hours: Tuesday 12-1:30 and by appointment

e-mail: davidsobel3@gmail.com

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.

Grades: Grades will be determined by a mid-term exam, a final exam, and 5 one-page papers. The mid-term will count for 30 percent of one's grade, the final 35%, and the 5 one-page papers 35%. While good class participation and attendance can benefit one's grade, otherwise one's final grade will be based ONLY on the criteria mentioned here. No extra credit assignments will be given.

Textbooks: There are no required books for this course. All readings will be posted on Blackboard.

Final Exam: ???

The following timeline of topics is rough and likely will be adjusted and some readings will likely be added.

COURSE CONTENT:

Week 1: Introduction to Systematic Ethical Thought

Week 2 and 3: Introduction to Two Ethical Theories—Consequentialism and Deontology

Shafter-Landau, *The Fundamentals of Ethics*, chapters 9-12

Week 4: Drugs, Legalization, and the Role of Government

Huemer, “America’s Unjust Drug War”

Husak, “Recreational drugs and paternalism”

Week 5: Duties to Aid Those in Need

Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”

Week 6: Abortion

Thomson, “A Defense of Abortion”

Marquis, “An Argument that Abortion is Wrong”

Week 7: The Ethics of Eating Meat and the Moral Status of Non-Humans

Singer, “All Animals Are Equal”

Mid-Term Exam

Week 8-10: Mass Incarceration, Racism, and Implicit Bias

The 13th

Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (selections)

Appiah, “Racisms”

Brownstein, “Skepticism about Bias”

Wilkerson, *Caste* (selections)

Week 11-13: Economic Inequality

Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (selections)

Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (selections)
G.A. Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?* (selections)
Vonnegut, *Harrison Bergeron*
Pickett and Wilkinson, *The Spirit Level* (selections)

Week 14: Metaethics

God and Morality, Why be Moral?

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 will be failure for the course and possible other penalties. Cheating includes copying or paraphrasing the work of another without attribution.

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:

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. 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.

Late Work Policy: For each day an assignment is late the final grade on the assignment is deducted 1/3 of a letter grade (including weekend days). So, e.g., if an assignment that is due on Friday would've received a B, but is instead turned in 3 days late on Monday, it now receives a C.

Plagiarism: If you present other people's ideas and work as if they were your own, then you have plagiarized. Plagiarism will result in a failing grade for the course and other possible disciplinary actions. DO NOT PLAGARIZE. Using websites that charge fees or require uploading of course material (e.g. Chegg, Course Hero) to obtain assignments completed by others and present the work as your own violates academic integrity expectations in this course. This is plagiarism.