PHI 192 - Introduction to Moral Theory

Instructor: Victor Sholl

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Office Hours: Tuesday 2:30-3:30 PM, location TBD, or by appointment

Course Description:

This course will provide an introduction to moral theory from a mostly contemporary perspective. We will also read, however, classic texts from philosophers such as Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, and J. S. Mill. We will cover the topic of well-being and the main sub-areas of philosophical ethics/moral theory: metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics. Here is a sample of questions we'll explore in the class, with their respective unit in parentheses: "what types of things are ultimately good for us?", "what makes us thrive and live good lives?" (*Well-being*); "Are there such things as moral facts? If so, are they absolute or relative?" (*Metaethics*); "What are the principles of a moral theory?", "Are some types of acts always wrong? Or can any act be morally required, depending on its consequences?" (*Normative ethics*); "Is there anything morally wrong with abortion?", "Must we be vegan out of respect for animals?", "What, if anything, should we change in our lifestyle because of climate change?" (*Applied ethics*). In addition, students will vote to select some of the topics in applied ethics that will be covered in the class.

Learning Objectives:

In this class, students will learn:

- The central features of the theories examined, as well as concepts and examples associated with them.
- How to interpret and critically engage with philosophical texts.
- How to create an argument map diagram for a given argument.
- How to write an argumentative essay.

Important Dates:

Deadline to attempt Level 1: Sep. 24th (Tuesday, by 5 PM)

Midterm exam (in class): Oct. 9th

Final exam (in class): TBD

Schedule: This is a tentative schedule, which is subject to change. Please pay attention to announcements and always refer to the most updated version of the schedule.

Date	Topic	Readings	Assignment
08/26	Intro.	Course syllabus	
08/28	Why be moral?, Arguments	Nielsen, "Why should I be moral?"	
09/02	**Labor Day – No Class**		
09/04	Intro. to Well-being, Hedonism	Heathwood, "Subjective theories of well-being" Nozick, "The experience machine" (excerpt)	
09/09	Desire Satisfaction theories	Heathwood, "Subjective theories of well-being" (continued)	Quiz 1
09/11	Objective list theories	Fletcher, "Objective List Theories"	
09/16	Perfectionism	Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (excerpt) Bradford, "Perfectionism"	Quiz 2
09/18	Intro. to metaethics, Moral Relativism	Gensler, "Cultural Relativism"	
09/23	Realism	Enoch, "Why I am an objectivist about ethics (and why you are, too)"	Quiz 3
09/24 (Tue.)	**Deadline to attempt Level 1**		Level 1
09/25	Realism (cont.)	No new reading	
09/30	Error Theory	Joyce, "Error theory"	Quiz 4
10/02	Noncognitivism	Schroeder, "The noncognitivst turn"	
10/07	Review Session for the Midterm Exam		
10/09	**Midterm Exam**		
10/14	**Fall Break (No class)**		
10/16	Intro. to normative ethics, Consequentialism (utilitarianism)	Mill, *Utilitarianism* (excerpt) Shafer-Landau, "Consequentialism: its nature and attractions"	
10/21	Consequentialism (utilitarianism) cont.	Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" LeGuin, "The ones who walk away from Omelas"	Quiz 5
10/23	Deontology, Kantian Ethics	Shaffer-Landau, "The Kantian Perspective" Kant, *Groundwork* (excerpt)	
10/28	Deontology, Kantian Ethics (cont.)	O'Neill, "A simplified account of Kant's Ethics"	Quiz 6
10/30	Virtue Ethics	Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (excerpt) Annas, "Virtue Ethics"	

11/04	Affirmative Action and Justice	Boxill & Boxill, "Affirmative Action"	Quiz 7
11/06	A.I. Development & Its Risks	Bales, D'Alessandro, & Kirk-Giannini, "Artificial Intelligence: Arguments for Catastrophic Risk"	
11/11	Abortion I	Thomson, "A defense of abortion"	Quiz 8
11/13	Abortion II	Marquis, "Why abortion is immoral"	
11/18	Animals & Veganism	Huemer, "Dialogues on Ethical Vegetarianism"	Quiz 9
11/20	Environment & the weight of individual actions	McKinnon, "Climate Change: Against Despair" Nefsky, "Collective harm and the inefficacy problem" (excerpt)	
11/24 to 12/01	**Thanksgiving Break (No Classes)**		
12/02	TBD (Applied ethics topics elected by the students)	TBD	Quiz 10
12/04	TBD (Applied ethics topics elected by the students)	TBD	
12/09	Review for the Final Exam		
TBD	**Final Exam**		

Readings: All readings will be posted on Blackboard. It is **very important** to see my announcements prior to each reading, as I will tell you what parts to read (we'll read only parts of some of the texts) and what things you should pay special attention to. You will be expected to attend class having read the assigned text(s) for that day.

The readings were selected to be accessible, but some are easier to follow than others. I'll do my best to explain the central points during class, but it's perfectly normal if you feel like you don't understand some of the readings. If that happens, please ask questions in class and come to my office hours!

Contact and Office Hours: I will hold my office hours in person on Tuesdays, 2:30-3:30 PM (location TBD), or by appointment at other times.
Make use of the office hours! Here's a non-exhaustive list of things I can help you with during office hours: help you understand a reading you found challenging, answer questions that are longer than what I can address in an email, help you build an argument map, and give you more detailed feedback on an assignment.

I can answer brief questions via email. I will normally reply within 24 hours during the week. If you have something longer or more complex to discuss, please come to my office hours. Please note that I will not check my emails during the weekends.

Attendance: You will get 5 free absences during the semester. You can use them for whatever reason: if you are sick, traveling, don't feel like coming to class, etc. Each absence above 5 will deduct 1% of your final grade, down to a maximum of 5%. Notice that (i) after you have used your 5 absences, there will be no extra, excused absences (with the exception of documented sports travels and things such as hospitalizations) and (ii) missing a class on a quiz day means you will get a 0 for that quiz. There will be no possibility of making up a missed quiz.

Course Requirements:

This is how the final grade will be calculated:

Exams: Midterm 20% and Final exam 20%

Quiz average (your two lowest scores will not count): 10%

Levels System grade: 50%

There will be **no extra credit**!

Exams: there will be two in-class exams, a midterm and a final. There will be a study guide for each exam. The exam component of your final grade will be a simple arithmetic mean of your exam grades.

Quizzes: there will be 10 in-class short quizzes in total, always on Mondays (see schedule). The number of questions will vary, but will be around 4-5 questions per quiz. The quizzes will be straightforward, accessible, and low stakes, but will require familiarity with the readings. They will predominantly cover the topics of the **previous week**, with some eventual 'flashback' questions from past weeks. Your two lowest quiz scores will not be considered when calculating your final quiz average. There will be no possibility of making up a missed quiz.

Levels System: While the exams and quizzes will mostly measure the content aspect of your learning, the levels system will mostly focus on argumentative skills. It is a flexible type of assignment that you can approach at your own pace.[1]
The levels system works like a video game in which you only progress to the next level once you have completed enough of the previous level. In our case, you will start with Level 1 as an assignment, and will only move to the next level if you accomplish the task to a high enough degree, getting to try again (up to a limit) if you don't succeed at first. Levels 1 and 2 involve building argument map diagrams, which is something I will teach how to do in class[2]. I will also always be open to help you with questions about argument maps during my office hours.

There are 3 levels in total (see descriptions below). They will be posted as assignments on the Blackboard page of the class, and attempts must be submitted **only** via Turnitin through the appropriate assignment page on Blackboard (I will not accept submissions via email, for example). Once you complete a level, the assignment for the next level will be unlocked on Blackboard.

[1] My implementation of the Levels system is inspired by Josh Hunt's implementation in his class of PHI 373 – Introduction to Philosophy of Science (Fall 2023).
[2] There is evidence that suggests that teaching argument mapping improves student's critical thinking skills.

As stated above, if you don't complete the task of a level on your first try, you can try again. However, for any new attempt, you must choose an option from the list that you haven't chosen in a prior attempt (so, for example, if you chose sample A for your first attempt, you cannot choose sample A for your second attempt; if you then chose sample C for your second attempt, you can choose neither sample A nor C for a third attempt).
With the exception of level 1 (see below), you will get at most **3** attempts per level and at most **6** attempts total (considering all attempts on all levels). Attempts will receive a qualitative grade out of these three options, together with written feedback: 'Complete', 'Almost', and 'Not yet'. Only a grade of 'Complete' lets you move to the next level.

Important: If you attempt a level more than once, you **must** include in your new attempt a brief summary (~100 words max) of my feedback on the previous attempt (so a second attempt should summarize the feedback on the first attempt and a third attempt should summarize the feedback on the second one). Notice that this becomes part of the prompt for the new attempt. Failing to do so would automatically make the attempt unable to count as complete.

You can only submit one attempt per week (so if you don't complete a level in a given attempt, you have at least a week to try again), and **only on Tuesdays**, from **midnight to 5 PM**. Note that this implies that, if you manage to do it, you can complete all levels and get an A for that component of your grade in as little as 3 weeks.

The final grade for the level's component will be the best grade out of your attempts at the last level you reached. This translates to percentage and letter grades according to this scale:

Level 3: Complete: A (100%), Almost: A- (92%), Not Yet: B+ (89%)

Level 2: Complete: B (86%), Almost: B- (82%), Not Yet: C+ (79%)

Level 1: Complete: C (76%), Almost: C- (72%), Not Yet: D (65%)

No attempt: F (0%)

Here is the description of what each level consists in:

Level 1: you will build an argument map diagram from a selected passage. There will be a handful of selected passages from which you can choose. Your submission will consist of a picture of the diagram for that argument (either hand-drawn or digitally generated, as long as it is legible).

Important exception that applies only to Level 1: I will let you proceed to Level 2 after 2 attempts at Level 1, even if you do not get a grade of 'Complete' on either attempt. I will impose a deadline for attempting Level 1 on Tue., Sep. 24th, to make sure students keep a minimal pace at the levels system.

Level 2: this time, there are 2 parts. First, you will once again build an argument map diagram from a selected passage (different pool of samples). In the second part, you must offer a brief explanation of the argument in your own words in a short paragraph. In another short paragraph, you will offer an objection to that argument. The second part should be no longer than **400** words (so, on average, ~200 words per paragraph).

Level 3: The task this time is to write a short (**800** words max) argumentative essay. The text should have at least 5 separate paragraphs: one for the introduction, one for the argument, one for the objection, one for the reply, and one for the conclusion. You must write a short introduction with a roadmap and thesis statement (I'll teach how to do these in class). The conclusion will be a summary of the essay. You will have two options for the essay: either to offer an argument *for* a view or *against* a view (there will be a list of views/theses to choose from). In either case, you must consider a plausible objection to your argument, that is, something someone resisting their argument could defensibly say. You can run the objection by me beforehand to check if it is plausible enough. You will then reply to that objection in favour of your argument.

Grading scale:

A 93-100

A- 90-92

B+ 87-89

B 83-86

B- 80-82

C+ 77-79

C 73-76

C- 70-72

D 60-69

F 0-59

All fractions will be rounded up for the final grade.

Disability 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.

Academic Integrity:

Syracuse University's Academic Integrity Policy reflects the high value that we, as a university community, place on honesty in academic work. The policy holds students accountable for the integrity of all work they submit and for upholding course-specific, as well as university-wide, academic integrity expectations. The policy governs citation and use of sources, the integrity of work submitted in exams and assignments, and truthfulness in all academic matters, including course attendance and participation.

All generative-AI tools are prohibited in this course because their use inhibits achievement of the course learning objectives. This policy applies to all stages of project and writing processes including researching, brainstorming, outlining, organizing, and polishing. Do not use Generative-AI tools to create any content (i.e., images and video, audio, text, code, etc.). If you have any questions about a feature and whether it is considered Generative-AI, ask your instructor.

In this course, the minimum penalty for an academic integrity violation is a zero on the assignment or exam in question – in the case of the Levels System, the penalty is a zero on the whole Levels System component of your grade. A letter will also be sent to the dean of students.

Technology in the classroom policy: I will allow the use of tablets and laptops (but not phones) for class-related purposes in the classroom. This policy might be revised, however, if I find that students are using these devices in a way that goes against our learning environment. I count on your common sense and collaboration.

Mental Health:

Mental health and overall well-being are significant predictors of academic success. As such it is essential that during your college experience you develop the skills and resources effectively to navigate stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health concerns. Please familiarize yourself with the range of resources the Barnes Center provides (https://ese.syr.edu/bewell/) and seek out support for mental health concerns as needed. Counseling services are available 24/7, 365 days, at 315-443-8000.

Faith Tradition Observances:

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.