

Current Moral and Social Issues

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TAs: Megha Devraj, Sean Donahue, Kin San

Class meetings: TuTh 12:30-1:50pm PST, Mudd Hall (MHP) room 101

Office Hours: TuTh 1:50-2:50pm PST

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Philosophy is not just about interpreting the world, but also about changing it.

In this course, we will study work in ethics, epistemology, and political philosophy, and will consider some ways in which philosophical tools developed for understanding more abstract topics can illuminate issues of substantial moral and social importance. The course has three Units, each devoted to one current issue: the COVID-19 pandemic, contemporary movements for racial justice, and fake news and echo chambers. My goal is for the course to enable students to use philosophical theories and skills to make sense of what is going on in the world around them, think critically about it, and decide how to act within it.

Our class is currently scheduled to meet in-person, but, due to the unpredictability of the pandemic, we may at some point have to switch to online instruction. If that happens, I will continue to give synchronous lectures twice a week, via Zoom, and will record lectures and post them to Blackboard. Either way, we will also have two Zoom “guest visits”, in which philosophers whose works we are reading will join our class for a Q&A session about their research. In addition, your TA will run small discussion sections each week.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this class, students will have developed the following knowledge and skills:

- Detailed knowledge of some philosophical questions pertaining to the three current events listed above, of some possible answers to those questions, and of some advantages and drawbacks of these answers.
- The ability to *identify cases in which philosophical theories apply to topics in the news*, by explaining the topic and explaining what one (or more!) of the philosophers that we have studied would say about it.
- The ability to *analyze a complex moral and social issue*, by identifying various morally significant factors, explaining the import of each one, and comparing the various factors to draw an overall conclusion about what should be done.
- The ability to *identify the structure of arguments* – including their central premises, conclusion/s, and the ways in which the premises are supposed to provide support for the conclusion/s – and to give a formal presentation of this structure.
- The ability to *present focused objections to arguments*, which concentrate on either a particular premise or a particular inference in the argument’s structure and suggest reasons to be dubious of it.
- The ability to *defend a view on what should be done about a complex moral or social issue*, by arguing for each of the view’s central tenets, and then identifying and responding to potential objections to it.

COURSE COMPONENTS

This course has six components: discussion board prompts (15%), discussion board comments (20%), philosophical papers (30%), section leader grade (20%), final exam question submissions (5%), and the final exam itself (10%). There is also an opportunity to earn extra credit by using your “journal”.

- *Discussion board prompts and comments*

This class will be more collaborative than the average Philosophy class, in two ways. The first way is that we will actively help each other to think through complex current moral and social issues and to think about how philosophical theories apply to these issues. We will use discussion boards on Blackboard for this. Students will be placed into groups of 4 or 5. In the third week of each unit, all students will post a “Philosophy in the news” discussion prompt for their group. In the fourth and fifth weeks of the unit, all students in the group will discuss all five prompts. We will go over guidelines and grading standards for initial prompts and for comments together in class.

- *Philosophical papers*

In this class we teach paper-writing on what is known as a “mastery model”. There are five paper hand-in days – opportunities to submit writing that counts toward your papers grade. There are five “levels”, and you may attempt to move up 1-3 levels on each paper hand-in day, starting with level 1. You are not required to submit writing on any paper hand-in day; you can choose whatever works for you. Your final paper grade depends on the level you reach by the end of the course:

Level 1	Summarize a bit of theory that we have studied.	C grade
Level 2	Summarize a current moral or social issue and explain how the bit of theory applies to the issue.	
Level 3	Give a possible criticism of the theory and respond to the criticism.	B grade
Level 4	Suggest what should be done about the issue, drawing on the theory.	
Level 5	Write a structured paper whose thesis is a view about what should be done about a current moral or social issue, which explains and draws on bits of philosophical theory to support the author’s thesis.	A grade

- *Section leader grade*

20% of your final grade is left to the discretion of your section leader. They will tell you what they want you to do to determine your section grade.

- *Exam question submissions and final exam*

The second way in which this class is more collaborative than the average Philosophy class is that I will invite students to co-create the final exam with me. The final exam will be administered as a quiz on Blackboard and will consist entirely of multiple-choice questions about the readings. All students are required to submit five suggested exam questions. I really will use your questions.

- *Personal Journal*

Blackboard allows each student to set up a personal “journal”. Part of what it is to excel in this class is to critically reflect on the readings, on lectures, on discussion sections, and on what you see and hear in the news, and to think about how they all relate to one another. Your journal is a space to get credit for this intellectual work by keeping a record of your notes, reflections, and ideas; you should use this space to try out ideas without worrying about whether you’re getting it right. You can get up to 5% extra credit for thorough, thoughtful use of your philosophical journal.

COURSE POLICIES

COURSE WEBSITE

There is a website for this course, accessible via Blackboard. All course documents (syllabus, assignments, readings, success criteria for assignments, and some documents with helpful tips for reading and writing Philosophy papers) will be available on this site. Please check it regularly – when I want to send a message to all students, I will do so by posting an announcement on the course website.

ONLINE INTERACTION

Some of our class interaction will take place online, through Blackboard’s discussion boards. In the event of a pandemic uptick, we may be forced to conduct more – perhaps all – of our class interaction online. See Dornsife’s [“netiquette” guidelines here](#); all online interaction should be conducted in accordance with these guidelines.

EMAILS

I receive a *lot* of emails. When emailing me about this class, please write ‘Phil 166’ in the subject line so that I don’t miss it. Emails should maintain a formal tone. I will endeavor to reply to all emails within 48 hours. If I do not manage to do this, it is okay to email again to remind me – but please wait 48 hours first.

PLAGIARISM

You are responsible for making sure that none of your work is plagiarized. You must cite any work that you draw from in your papers, including both direct quotations and paraphrased ideas. You are strongly encouraged to discuss the course material, including your work for assignments, with your classmates, but all written work that you submit must be your own. For more information, see my “Plagiarism” handout on our course website. You should also be familiar with USC’s [policy on academic integrity](#). I will respond to all cases of possible plagiarism in accordance with this policy.

DISABILITY

If you think you need an accommodation for a disability, please let me and your TA know at your earliest convenience. Some aspects of this course, the assignments, the in-class activities, and the way the course is taught can be modified to facilitate your participation and progress. As soon as you make us aware of your needs, we can work with [USC disability services](#) to determine appropriate academic accommodations. Any information that you choose to provide is confidential and will be treated as such.

STUDENT RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

Taking college courses can be mentally and emotionally challenging at the best of times, and they will be even more challenging now that the world is on fire. If you or someone you know is feeling overwhelmed, depressed, or in need of support, lots of services are available. You can find out more about USC’s current counselling and mental health services at [this link](#). The [Office of Equity, Equal Opportunity and Title IX](#) is also available, as are specialist centers and services for [First-Gen and transfer students](#), [Asian and Pacific American students](#), [Black students](#), [Latinx and Chicanx students](#), and [LGBTQ+ students](#).

SCHEDULE AND READINGS

UNIT 1: COVID-19

Week 1: INTRODUCTION

- August 24: *no readings*
- August 26:
 - Watch: [Julianne Chung on Truth and Validity](#)
 - Watch: [Joseph Wu on Equivocation](#)
 - Watch: [Joseph Wu on The Straw Man Fallacy](#)

Week 2: PATERNALISM

- August 31:
 - Read: Sarah Conly, “Justifying Coercive Paternalism”
- September 2:
 - Read: Jessica Flanigan, “Seat Belt Mandates and Paternalism”

Week 3: HEALTHCARE RATIONING

- September 7:
 - Read: Angela Ballantyne, “[ICU Triage: How Many Lives or Whose Lives?](#)”
 - Listen: [Myisha Cherry interviews Yolonda Wilson](#) on health disparities
- September 9:
 - Read: David Wasserman, Govind Persad, and Joseph Millum, “[Setting Priorities Fairly In Response to COVID-19](#)”

SEPTEMBER 12: FIRST PAPER HAND-IN DAY

Week 4: VACCINE HESITANCY

- September 14:
 - Read: Elizabeth Anderson, “Democracy and Lay Assessments of Scientific Testimony”
- September 16:
 - Read: Cailin O’Connor and James Owen Weatherall, “[Hydroxychloroquine and the Political Polarization of Science](#)”

Week 5: QUARANTINE

- September 21:
 - Read: Tom Douglas, “[Flouting Quarantine](#)”
- September 23: *no readings*

DEADLINE FOR UNIT 1 DISCUSSION BOARD INITIAL POSTS: SEPTEMBER 9

DISCUSSION PERIOD: SEPTEMBER 10 – SEPTEMBER 23

UNIT 2: MOVEMENTS FOR RACIAL JUSTICE

Week 6: WHITE IGNORANCE

- September 28:
 - Read: Charles Mills, “White Ignorance”
- September 30:
 - Read: Michele M. Moody-Adams, “Culture, Responsibility, and Affected Ignorance”

OCTOBER 3: SECOND PAPER HAND-IN DAY

Week 7: STEREOTYPING

- October 5:
 - Read: Natalia Washington and Daniel Kelly, “[Who’s Responsible for This?](#)”
- October 7:
 - Read: Robin Zheng, “[Why Yellow Fever Isn’t Flattering](#)”

Week 8: ANGER

- October 12:
 - Read: Audre Lorde, “[The Uses of Anger](#)”
 - Read: Amia Srinivasan, “The Aptness of Anger”
- October 14:
 - NO CLASS (fall recess)

Week 9: OVERPOLICING

- October 19:
 - Read: Paul Bou-Habib, “Racial Profiling and Background Injustice”
 - Listen: [Myisha Cherry interviews Tommie Shelby](#) on “dark ghettos”
- October 21:
 - Read: Christopher Lewis, TBD

OCTOBER 24: THIRD PAPER HAND-IN DAY

Week 10: SPECIAL GUEST VISIT #1

- October 26: Special guest visit with Prof. Lewis
- October 28: *no readings*

DEADLINE FOR UNIT 2 DISCUSSION BOARD INITIAL POSTS: OCTOBER 14

DISCUSSION PERIOD: OCTOBER 15 – OCTOBER 28

UNIT 3: FAKE NEWS, ECHO CHAMBERS, AND THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF RAPE ACCUSATIONS

Week 11: THE ETHICS AND EPISTEMOLOGY OF RAPE ACCUSATIONS

- November 2:
 - Read: Georgi Gardiner, “Banal Skepticism and the Errors of Doubt”
- November 4:
 - Read: Renee Jorgensen Bolinger, “#BelieveWomen and the Ethics of Belief”

Week 12: FAKE NEWS AND ECHO CHAMBERS

- November 9:
 - Read: Regina Rini, “[Fake News and Partisan Epistemology](#)”
- November 11:
 - Read: C. Thi Nyugen, “[Escape the Echo Chamber](#)”

NOVEMBER 14: FOURTH PAPER HAND-IN DAY

Week 13: SPECIAL GUEST VISIT #2

- November 16:
 - Read: Cailin O’Connor and James Owen Weatherall, “[The Social Media Problem is Worse Than You Think](#)”
- November 18: Special guest visit with Prof. O’Connor

Week 14: MANIPULATIVE LANGUAGE

- November 23:
 - Read: Jennifer Saul, “[Racial Figleaves and the Shifting Boundaries of the Permissible](#)”
- November 25:
 - NO CLASS (Thanksgiving)

Week 15: MOVING FORWARD

- November 30:
 - Read: Ryan Preston-Roedder, “Faith in Humanity”
- December 2: *no readings*

DECEMBER 8: FINAL PAPER HAND-IN DAY

DEADLINE FOR UNIT 3 DISCUSSION BOARD INITIAL POSTS: NOVEMBER 18

DISCUSSION PERIOD: NOVEMBER 19 – DECEMBER 2

DEADLINE TO SUBMIT FINAL EXAM QUESTIONS: DECEMBER 3

FINAL EXAM: DECEMBER 10