

Current Moral and Social Issues

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TAs: Rebecca Carlson, Laura Gurskey, Madiha Hamdi
Class meetings: TuTh 12:30-1:50pm PST
Office Hours: Weds 12:00-2:00pm 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 topics of substantial moral and social importance. The course has three Units, each devoted to one current event: the COVID-19 pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the 2020 U.S. general election. My hope is that the course will enable students to use philosophical ideas 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.

In light of the global pandemic, and since there are 150 students enrolled in this course, our class meetings will be entirely online. I will give synchronous lectures twice a week via Zoom, which will incorporate a variety of activities and opportunities for student interaction, and all of which will be recorded. We will also have two “guest lectures”, 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 thought 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 REQUIREMENTS

This course has seven components: discussion board prompts (15%), discussion forum comments (15%), personal journal (10%), philosophical paper (25%), section leader grade (20%), exam question submissions (5%), and the final exam itself (10%).

- *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 5. In the second week of each unit, all students will post a “Philosophy in the news” discussion prompt for their group. In the third week of the unit, all students will discuss all five prompts. We will go over guidelines and grading standards for initial prompts and for comments together in class.

- *Personal Journal*

Blackboard allows each student to set up a personal “journal”. Part of what it is to do well in this class is to reflect on the readings, on lectures, on discussions, 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 record all of these reflections; you are expected to use it at least twice a week, to take notes on the readings, and are encouraged to use it more frequently. Your journal grade depends entirely on how much use you’ve made of your personal journal, and not at all on how polished your writing is, so you should use this space to try out ideas without worrying about whether you’re getting it right.

- *Philosophical paper*

In this class paper-writing works on what is known as a “mastery model”. There are three paper hand-in days; these are opportunities to submit writing that counts toward your paper grade. There are five “levels”, and you may attempt to move up 1-2 levels on each paper hand-in day. Your final paper grade depends on what level you have reached by the end of the class, as follows:

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.

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.

ZOOM

Our class lectures will be conducted live via Zoom. All lectures will be recorded for the benefit of students in far-off timezones, but I will design lectures to incorporate “active learning” components and allow for discussion between students, so you will learn a lot more by participating live than by watching recordings. Students are strongly encouraged to keep their cameras on throughout, but to mute their mics (except for when they are participating in an interactive activity). See Dornsife’s [“netiquette” guidelines here](#).

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.

CAMPUS MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

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 web-based counselling and mental health services at [this link](#).

SCHEDULE & READINGS

Week 1: INTRODUCTION

- August 18: *no readings*
- August 20:
 - Watch: [Julianne Chung on Truth and Validity](#)
 - Watch: [Kelley Schiffman on Implicit Premises](#)
 - Watch: [Matthew Harris on Affirming the Consequent](#)
 - Watch: [Matthew Harris on Begging the Question](#)
 - Watch: [Joseph Wu on Equivocation](#)
 - Watch: [Laurie Santos on Loss Aversion](#)

UNIT 1: COVID-19

Week 2: PATERNALISM

- August 25:
 - Read: Sarah Conly, “Justifying Coercive Paternalism”
- August 27:
 - Read: Jessica Flanigan, “Seat Belt Mandates and Paternalism”

Week 3: HEALTHCARE RATIONING

- September 1:
 - Read: Alastair Norcross, “How Death Can Be Outweighed by Headaches”
 - Listen: [Myisha Cherry interviews Yolonda Wilson](#) on health disparities
- September 3:
 - Read: Johann Frick, “Treatment Vs. Prevention”

Week 4: HYDROXYCHLOROQUINE

- September 8:
 - Read: Elizabeth Anderson, “Democracy and Lay Assessments of Scientific Testimony”
- September 10:
 - Read: Cailin O’Connor and James Owen Weatherall, “[Hydroxychloroquine and the Political Polarization of Science](#)”

Week 5: ECHO CHAMBERS 1

- September 15:
 - Read: Regina Rini, “[Fake News and Partisan Epistemology](#)”
- September 17:
 - Read: Daniela C. Manzi, “[Managing the Misinformation Marketplace](#)”

DEADLINE FOR DISCUSSION BOARD INITIAL POSTS: SEPTEMBER 6

COMMENTS: SEPTEMBER 6 – SEPTEMBER 13

SEPTEMBER 20: FIRST PAPER HAND-IN DAY

UNIT 2: BLACK LIVES MATTER

Week 6: WHITE IGNORANCE

- September 22:
 - Read: Charles Mills, “White Ignorance”
- September 24:
 - Read: Michele M. Moody-Adams, “Culture, Responsibility, and Affected Ignorance”

Week 7: RACIAL PROFILING

- September 29:
 - Read: Paul Bou-Habib, “Racial Profiling and Background Injustice”
- October 1:
 - Read: Natalia Washington and Daniel Kelly, “[Who’s Responsible for This?](#)”

Weeks 8-9: ANGER, PROTEST, AND CRIMINALITY

- October 6:
 - Read: Audre Lorde, “[The Uses of Anger](#)”
 - Read: Amia Srinivasan, “The Aptness of Anger”
- October 8:
 - Listen: [Myisha Cherry interviews Tommie Shelby](#) on “dark ghettos”
- October 13:
 - Read: Chris Lewis, “Inequality, Incentives, Criminality, and Blame”
- October 15: Special guest visit with Prof. Lewis (no readings)

DEADLINE FOR DISCUSSION BOARD INITIAL POSTS: OCTOBER 4

COMMENTS: OCTOBER 5 – OCTOBER 11

OCTOBER 18: SECOND PAPER HAND-IN DAY

UNIT 3: ‘ELECTION SPECIAL’ ON ECHO CHAMBERS AND THE VALUE OF DEMOCRACY

Week 11: WHAT IS THE POINT OF DEMOCRACY?

- October 20:
 - Read: Shelly Kagan, “Do I Make a Difference?”
 - Watch: [Geoff Sayre-McCord on Reasons to Vote](#)
- October 22:
 - Read: Alex Guerrero, “The Paradox of Voting and the Ethics of Political Representation”

Weeks 12-13: ECHO CHAMBERS 2

- October 27:
 - Read: Read: C. Thi Nyugen, "[Escape the Echo Chamber](#)"
- October 29:
 - Read: Jennifer Saul, "[Racial Figleaves, the Shifting Boundaries of the Permissible, and the Rise of Donald Trump](#)"
- November 3 (election day!):
 - Read: Cailin O'Connor and James Owen Weatherall, "[The Social Media Problem is Worse Than You Think](#)"
- November 5: Special guest visit with Prof. O'Connor (no readings)

Week 14: DISTRUST AND HOPE

- November 10:
 - Read: Meena Krishnamurthy, "On the Democratic Value of Distrust"
- November 12:
 - Read: Ryan Preston-Roedder, "Faith in Humanity"

DEADLINE FOR DISCUSSION BOARD INITIAL POSTS: NOVEMBER 1

COMMENTS: NOVEMBER 2 – NOVEMBER 8

NOVEMBER 17: THIRD PAPER HAND-IN DAY

NOVEMBER 18: DEADLINE TO SUBMIT FINAL EXAM QUESTIONS

NOVEMBER 23: FINAL EXAM