

PHIL237 — CONTEMPORARY MORAL ISSUES

Summer 2024

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Classes: M/T/W/R from 11:05 am to 01:25 pm (Leacock 14)

Office hours: Monday, 1:30 PM to 3:30 PM

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will touch on a few critical contemporary moral issues with a strong social dimension. We will begin with a quick crash course on mainstream normative ethical theories (consequentialism, deontology, virtue ethics.) After that, we will reflect primarily on perhaps the most urgent crisis of our era: climate change. However, this will also lead us to discuss two connected issues. The first is the prevalence of fake news online, which hinders our ability to tackle such an important issue. The second pertains to the moral consideration for the non-human animals, who are also strongly impacted by climate change. Here's a preview of some of the questions we will be considering:

- What collective duties do countries have to achieve justice at the international level for climate change?
- How should the interests of future generations impact our climate policy decisions?
- Can future generations blame us for contributing to climate change?
- What individual duties do we have concerning future generations and climate change?
- Do we be morally blamed for failing to believe experts on climate change?
- What is the moral status of non-human animals, and how do we understand it in relation to the moral status of human beings?
- Under what circumstances (if any) is it morally permissible to eat meat?

Assignments & Grading

Assignment	Due Date	Weight	Description
Participation	August 1 11:59 PM	15%	Participation involves reading the assigned papers, attending class, participating in polling, class discussions, and small group discussions, and making constructive and respectful comments on other students' presentations and objections. Participation will be self-assessed and justified by the students themselves. I reevaluate the assessment.
Oral Presentation (Groups of 4)	Starting from July 15	20%	Starting from July 15, there will be an oral presentation by 4 students during each class. The presentation will last 20 minutes, followed by a short discussion.
Mid-Term Paper	June 23, 11:59 PM	30%	A short argumentative paper. The available topics will be announced on July 18 th . The total word count must be at most 900 words.
Final Paper	August 6, 11:59 PM	35%	A short argumentative paper. The available topics will be announced on August 1 st . The total word count must be at most 1200 words.

Date	Lecture Topic	Required Readings
Section 1: Crash course on mainstream normative ethical theories		
July 8	Intro to the course	Course Syllabus Louis P. Pojman. "What is Moral Philosophy?"
July 9	Consequentialism	William H. Shaw. "Consequentialism" Optional: Utilitarianism: Crash Course
July 10	Deontological Ethics	David McNaughton & Piers Rawling. "Deontology" Ursula Le Guin. "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" Optional: Kant & Categorical Imperatives: Crash Course
Section 2: The Ethics of Climate Change		
July 11	The facts and challenges of climate change	Guess speaker, no readings!
July 15	Climate change and international wealth inequality	Byron Williston. <i>The Ethics of Climate Change</i> , ch. 4 "International justice"
July 16	What do we owe to future generations?	Byron Williston. <i>The Ethics of Climate Change</i> , ch. 5 "Intergenerational justice"
July 17	Individual Climatic Duties	Byron Williston. <i>The Ethics of Climate Change</i> , ch. 8 "Individual duties"
July 18	Environmental Civil Disobedience	Jennifer Welchman. "Environmental Civil Disobedience"
July 22	Ecoterrorism	Ned Hettinger. "Lawbreaking and Ecoterrorism"
July 23	Climate change denialism and fake news (1/2)	C. Thi Nguyen. "Escape the Echo Chamber" Mid-term take-home exam due date
July 24	Climate change denialism and fake news (2/2)	Helen De Cruz. "Believing to Belong: Addressing the Novice-Expert Problem in Polarized Scientific Communication"
Section 3: The status of non-human animal		
July 25	Speciesism and the moral status of non-human animals	Peter Singer. <i>Practical Ethics</i> , ch. 3 "Equality for animals?"
July 29	In favor of veganism	Tristram McPherson. "Why I Am a Vegan (and You Should Be One Too)"
July 30	In favor of omnivorism	Terence Cuneo. "Conscientious Omnivorism"
July 31	Are there moral reasons to eat meat?	Christopher Bobier. "What Would the Virtuous Person Eat? The Case for Virtuous Omnivorism"
August 1	Is it immoral to own pets?	Clare Palmer and T. J. Kasperbauer. "Companion Animals"
August 5	Buffer / TBD	
August 6	Buffer / TBD	Final take-home exam due date

COURSE GOALS

Our primary goal in this course is to improve your critical thinking skills, especially concerning contemporary ethical issues. More specifically, you will (1) explain different views or arguments concerning these ethical issues, (2) critically evaluate those views and arguments, and (3) explain and defend your position in a way that's clear and that demonstrates comprehension of the material.

Lectures

Attending lectures is critical for success in this course, and I will use McGill's web-based polling system, Slido, during lectures to gauge student understanding and prompt discussion. The lecture slides will be posted to myCourses (under Content).

Instructions for participation in polling:

- During lectures, you will respond to polling questions from the instructor from a personal device (smartphone, tablet, or laptop).
- **Your level of participation in polling will partially inform my assessment of your participation self-evaluation grade.**
- Students should come to class with their devices charged and [connected to the Internet](#).
- Polling will be available through www.mcgill.ca/polling.
- To participate in a Polling session, you will be provided with a QR code that can be scanned or a Slido code that can be entered [here](#). If you are asked to log in with SSO (Single Sign-On), enter your McGill credentials and follow any Two-Factor Authentication prompts. For more information, please visit the **Getting Started for Students** section at www.mcgill.ca/polling.

myCourses

Everything for this course is accessible through myCourses, including the readings (there is no textbook for the course), the assignments, lecture slides, and the instructor's contact information. We will also be using myCourses to post announcements, return feedback on written work, post grades, etc. It's your responsibility to ensure that myCourses has your correct email so you receive announcements and notifications.

LATE WORK POLICY

Late work will not be accepted for credit unless you are given an extension (e.g., under circumstances of serious (mental or physical) illness, a death in the family, or something of equal seriousness). Extension requests for the two take-home must be made at least 24 hours before the respective due dates.

LANGUAGE POLICY

In accordance with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit any written work to be graded in English or French. The conferences must be done in English.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism, and other academic offenses under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures.

The use of generative AI (such as Chat-GPT) is **strongly discouraged** when writing papers for this course. If an essay is primarily the work of an AI, then it is not the work of the person whose name is on it. That misrepresentation is not acceptable even if it is not plagiarism (because there is no particular person whose work is being presented as one's own). For this course, our practice will be that every essay must include a brief appendix indicating whether you used an AI tool, which tool it was, and a detailed description of how you used it. Writers will have to decide what they consider an appropriate use of AI tools. I will agree or disagree and grade your work accordingly.