

Moral Issues

Philosophy 150, TR, 2:00pm-3:15pm, Candelaria 1220
UNC Syllabus – Spring 2024

INSTRUCTOR INFORMATION:

Instructor: Josh Brekel (He/Him/His)

Office: McKee 318

Email: josh.brekel@unco.edu

Office Hours: Tuesdays—11am-Noon, Thursdays—1pm-1:50pm, and by appointment.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

LaFollette, Hugh. *Ethics in Practice: An Anthology*, 5th Edition.

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course aims to analyze relevant moral issues in the service of introducing students to the academic study of philosophy. The course will begin with an overview of philosophical methods. Then, we will consider some popular ethical theories, which will provide students with the tools needed to contemplate the nature of key moral issues. Finally, we will apply philosophical methods and ethical theories to various moral issues, with the goal of understanding the nuances of the debates around those moral issues. It is my hope that careful analysis of these issues can provide students with the ability to contemplate the moral issues that arise in their lives.

DIVERSITY & RESPECT OF OTHERS:

To provide the most benefit possible, philosophical inquiry requires diversity in perspectives. In this class, the perspective of each student matters, regardless of the student's race, gender, sexual orientation, abilities, ancestry, and religious or political views. Not only is it your right to be passionate about the issues considered in this course, but it can be philosophically commendable to approach these issues with some degree of intensity. However, philosophical contemplation requires open-mindedness. As your instructor, part of my job is to help you consider the value in the opinions with which you disagree. By considering ways in which your long-held, passionate opinions might be mistaken, you will (hopefully) gain more respect for the gravity of the issues, the perspectives of others, as well as a better understanding of the ways to support your own views.

Disagreements are welcome in this class, but always keep your fellow *classmates* in mind and engage in disagreements in a respectful manner. You are welcome to fervently disagree with others, but it is **never** acceptable to disrespect the *people* who hold those opinions. If something I or another student says offends you, then let me know so that we can work together to resolve the issue.

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

Students will examine the details of various ethical issues, all of which are relevant to their lives (in some way). Furthermore, students will develop an understanding of the nature of the philosophical arguments in favor of various positions on those ethical issues. Study of academic philosophy cultivates other valuable skills as well. During every class session this semester, we will carefully examine philosophical arguments and texts. By engaging in close-reading of complex works, students will hone their ability to retain information and gain understanding via reading. Throughout the semester, students will also practice the craft of argumentative writing. Many of the course assignments give students the opportunity to refine their ability to write in a clear, charitable, and persuasive manner. The three overarching goals of this course are to:

1. Improve student reading comprehension,
2. Improve student argumentative writing,
3. Demonstrate the value provided by close study of philosophy and philosophical ethics.

EXPECTATIONS:

Academic credits are expected to meet the federal credit hour definition of **2-3 hours** (minimum) of work outside of class **for every hour** of time spent in class. For a 3-credit course such as this, that means that you should expect to be spending a minimum of **5-7 hours per week** working on this course (outside of regular class time). To get the most out of that time, meet these class expectations:

- Carefully read the listed readings *prior* to class,
- Come to class and take handwritten notes on the material presented in class,
- Engage in class discussion, and
- Complete listed assignments by the listed due dates.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:

Academic integrity is taken seriously in this course. It is expected that students will maintain a high standard of academic integrity—cheating will not be tolerated. This course will adhere to the UNC Academic Integrity Policy and the BEAR Code found in Section 3-2-211 of the UNC Student Code of Conduct. Unless written permission is given by the instructor, the use of ChatGPT, Google Bard, or other Large-Language Models (LLM) is strictly prohibited and will be treated as academic misconduct. At an absolute minimum, instances of academic misconduct will result in a substantial grade penalty on the assignment. Often, academic misconduct provides grounds for a failing grade in the course. Talk to the instructor if you have questions about academic integrity.

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS:

All course assignments are outlined in the table below.

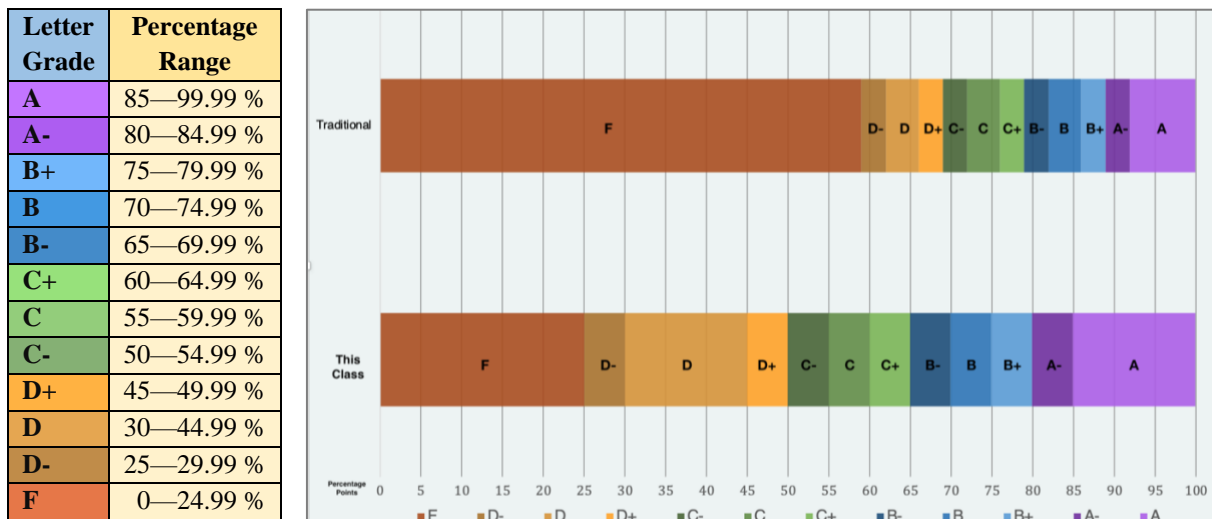
Category	Description	Overall Course Grade Allocation
Skill-Building Assignments	5 low-stakes assignments designed to build philosophical skills. Each skill-building assignment (SBA) is worth 4% of the overall course grade.	20%
Reading Questions	<p>Prior to each class with an assigned reading, students are expected to complete a Reading Question Assignment (see Canvas for detailed RQA instructions). Reading Question Assignments will be collected 10 times randomly throughout the semester.</p> <p>Individual Reading Question Assignment Grading Criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ⊗ : No submission. • ✓ : Inadequate submission indicating a lack of effort or failure to engage with and/or complete the reading. • ✓✓ : Satisfactory submission demonstrating thoughtful engagement with the material. <p>Semester-long RQA performance is assessed out of 150 points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0-9 ✓s: 0 points (Non-existent reading engagement) • 10 ✓s: 25 points (Poor reading engagement) • 11-12 ✓s: 50 points (Minimal reading engagement) • 13-14 ✓s: 100 points (Satisfactory reading engagement) • 15+ ✓s: 150 points (High-quality reading engagement) <p>Reading Question Assignments are an integral part of your overall course grade. <u><i>Be prepared for the ROAs to be collected at the beginning of any given class day.</i></u></p>	15%
Papers	<p>2 short papers. Each paper is worth 15% of the overall course grade.</p> <p>The paper topics will be given out approximately two weeks before the paper's due date. Papers focus on clear and accurate presentation of class readings. Papers are graded by assigning a letter grade that corresponds to the quality of the submitted work.</p>	30%
Exams	<p>One closed-book midterm exam which will count for 15% of the overall course grade. One closed-book, cumulative final exam, which will count for 20% of the overall course grade.</p> <p>There is a chance that there will be small extra credit opportunities on the exam(s). All extra credit opportunities are up to the instructor's discretion.</p>	35%

With the exception of the randomly assigned Reading Question Assignments, all other assignment due dates are provided in the table below:

Assignment	Due Date
SBA #1 (Syllabus Quiz)	1/16/24
SBA #2 (Paper Writing)	2/6/24
Paper #1	2/14/24
SBA #3 (Exam Studying)	2/29/24
Midterm Exam	3/5/24
SBA #4 (Paper Writing)	4/5/24
Paper #2	4/12/24
SBA #5 (Semester Reflection)	4/26/24
Final Exam	5/2/24, 10:45am-1:15pm

GRADING SCHEME:

This course uses letter grades corresponding to the grading scheme specified in the table to the bottom left. For the sake of clarity, I also created a graphic that contrasts this course’s grading scale with the grading scale you are (probably) most familiar with. I titled the grading scale that you are used to “Traditional” and I titled this course’s grading scale “This Class” in the chart below.



For the final overall course grade, the instructor will calculate each student’s average letter grade weighted by the assignments listed in Course Assignments section. Then, the instructor will report the nearest allowed letter grade to the UNC Registrar’s Office. Note that the University only records letter grades for use on Transcripts and GPA calculations. For that reason, receiving a 67.5% in this course (a B-) is no different (from the perspective of the University) from receiving an 81% (a B-) in a course that uses a “Traditional” grading scale. You should not infer your letter grade from the percentage you see in Canvas—doing so will mislead you. Canvas will also display letter grades based on the grading scale above. Rely on the letter grade to determine your standing in the course.

Note that most philosophical work is best graded using qualitative assessment of the work. For that reason, percentages are not utilized while grading papers—instead, the percentages are there

to provide a mechanism for translating a qualitative assessment of work (i.e., the letter grade) into a quantitative assessment of work (i.e., the percentage grade). Please do not email the instructor asking why they took off X number of “points” on a paper. Unfortunately, Canvas requires instructors to use points/percentages to some degree, but note that I typically assess work by assigning letter grades. For reference, an A paper is typically a paper where I think, "This is an excellent paper overall, but I could nitpick it to find ways to improve it," while a B- paper is usually what I consider to be an “average” paper.

LATE-WORK AND EXTENSIONS POLICIES:

Except for Reading Question Assignments, all late work will be subject to penalty of **5% per day late** for 14 days after the assignment is due. After **14 calendar days**, late assignments will no longer be accepted. Reading Question Assignments will not be accepted late. No assignments will be accepted after the Wednesday of Finals Week.

Assignment extensions will not be granted unless: The student provides official documentation (from the university or a legitimate medical institution) that sufficiently explains why the assignment must be turned in late. Note that pictures of at-home COVID-19 (or similar) diagnostic tests do not count as official documentation. Extensions can be granted after the assignment due date (within reason), provided that the student offers sufficient justification for the lack of prior notice.

There are **no exceptions** to these policies. This course uses a generous grading scheme and late policy in recognition of the difficulty of balancing college with other aspects of life. However, success in college requires a certain level of dedication and commitment from students. For those reasons, official documentation is the only way to avoid being penalized for late work. It is the student’s responsibility to take the initiative to make-up missed work in a timely fashion.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE & PAPER ASSIGNMENTS:

For **paper assignments**, a genuine honor pledge must be included in the student’s submission. The honor pledge must specify whether generative artificial intelligence (AI; i.e., large-language models such as ChatGPT) was used in the process of writing the paper.

- If a student chooses to use AI on their paper (strongly not advised), then the student must obtain ***approval*** from the instructor ***in writing*** before submitting the paper. In this case, the student must also provide all AI conversations to demonstrate that they used the tool in the proper manner.

- If a student chooses not to use AI on their paper (strongly advised), then the student should specify in their honor pledge that AI was not used in the writing process.

If a student's paper does not include an honor pledge, then **the paper will not be graded until one is provided**. If a student's honor pledge is provided late, then that student's paper is considered late and thus will receive the late penalty specified in the syllabus. If a student's honor pledge (on a paper assignment) fails to mention AI, then that paper submission will receive a full letter grade penalty. If a student used AI and did not follow the steps mentioned above, then they will receive a failing grade in the course. The instructor reserves the right to use oral exams to test whether students used AI.

ATTENDANCE POLICY:

Attendance is **expected** for this class. You must attend class to submit any Reading Question Assignments or to take in-class exams. **What to do if you miss class:** do not email the instructor. If you are worried about what you missed, please contact a classmate for assistance.

TENTATIVE READING AND CLASS MEETING SCHEDULE:

This is an extremely tentative plan for the semester. As the semester proceeds, it may become necessary to check Canvas for updates to the reading schedule. It is the student's responsibility to ensure that they are staying up-to-date with the course readings and assignments.

Week	Date	Class Meeting	Topic	Readings
1	1/9/24	No Class!	No Class—Watch Syllabus Video on Canvas.	Watch Syllabus Video on Canvas
	1/11/24	1	Syllabus, Trolley Problem	Schur, "Introduction" from <i>How to Be Perfect (Canvas)</i>
2	1/16/24	2	The Nature & Danger of Philosophy	Vaughn, <i>Deciding What's Right</i> , pp. 1-9 (Canvas)
	1/18/24	3	Moral Issue: Lying to catch a criminal?	Simon, selection from <i>Homicide: Life on the Killing Streets (Canvas)</i>
3	1/23/24	4	Tools of the Trade: Logic and Reading	Kaplan, "How to Read Philosophy" (Video, Canvas), and Vaughn, <i>Deciding What's Right</i> , pp. 35-52 (Canvas)
	1/25/24	5	Threat 1: Moral Skepticism	Morrow, <i>Moral Reasoning</i> , "Chapter 9: Skepticism, Subjectivism, and Relativism" (Canvas)
4	1/30/24	6	Threat 1: Moral Skepticism	Removed — Reread Morrow
	2/1/24	7	Tools of the Trade: Writing	
5	2/6/24	8	Threat 2: Religion & Morality	Plato, <i>Euthyphro (Canvas)</i>
	2/8/24	9	Threat 2: Religion & Morality	Various Selections on Divine Command Theory (Canvas)

6	2/13/24	10	Tools of the Trade: Consequentialism	Shaw, "Consequentialism" (Anthology#1)
	2/15/24	11	Tools of the Trade: Deontology	McNaughton and Rawling, "Deontology" (A#2)
7	2/20/24	12	Tools of the Trade: Virtue Ethics	Hursthouse, "Virtue Theory" (A#4)
	2/22/24	13	Tools of the Trade: Theory Review	
8	2/27/24	14	Moral Issue: Death Penalty	Pojman, "In Defense of the Death Penalty" (A#51)
	2/29/24	15	Moral Issue: Death Penalty	Reiman, "Against the Death Penalty" (A#52)
9	3/5/24	16	Midterm Exam	
	3/7/24	17	Moral Issue: Euthanasia	Beauchamp, "Justifying Physician-Assisted Deaths" (A#5)
10	3/12/24		Spring Break	
	3/14/24		Spring Break	
11	3/19/24	18	Moral Issue: Euthanasia	Velleman, "Against the Right to Die" (A#6)
	3/21/24	19	Moral Issue: Euthanasia	Hardwig, "Dying at the Right Time: Reflections on (Un)assisted Suicide" (A#8)
12	3/26/24	20	Moral Issue: Abortion	Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion" (A#10)
	3/28/24	21	Moral Issue: Abortion	Marquis, "An Argument that Abortion is Wrong" (A#12)
13	4/2/24	22	Moral Issue: Abortion	Little, "The Moral Permissibility of Abortion" (A#13)
	4/4/24	23	Tools of the Trade: Writing	
14	4/9/24	24	Moral Issue: Animals	Singer, "All Animals Are Equal" (A#15)
	4/11/24	25	Moral Issue: Animals	Regan, "The Case for Animal Rights" (A#17)
15	4/16/24	26	Moral Issue: Environment	Rolston, "Animal Welfare and Environmental Ethics" (Canvas)
	4/18/24	27	Moral Issue: Environment	Gardiner, "A Perfect Moral Storm: Climate Change, Intergenerational Ethics, and the Problem of Moral Corruption" (A#26)
16	4/23/24	28	Moral Issue: Poverty	Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" (A#61)
	4/25/24	29	Review	
Finals Week	5/2/24	30	Final Exam	

UNC COURSE DESCRIPTION:

An introduction to moral reasoning about issues such as drug use, capital punishment, world hunger, animal rights, internet privacy, discrimination and sexual morality.