# Introduction to Current Moral and Social Issues

# 50:730:105, Fall 2022

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# *Description*

In this course, we will study the writings of authors who offer a variety of perspectives on moral issues related to many aspects of society, possibly including but not limited to abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia, freedom of speech, animal rights, the environment, discrimination, and terrorism.

# *Rationale*

To what values do we commit ourselves when we make claims about right and wrong? What kind of people do we become by acting on those views? Answering these questions requires the ability to relate theory to practice, to identify connections between cases, and to recognize inconsistencies between ideas and actions. Developing these abilities will be one of the primary goals of our course.

To do so, we will study the writings of many authors who offer responses to important ethical problems of our time. Studying the works of respected thinkers on these matters will afford students an opportunity to think more thoroughly and systematically about these issues than would otherwise be likely.

# *My Teaching Philosophy*

My goal is not to convince you that any of the authors we will study have “the right answer.” It is to help you understand their thoughts so that critical reflection on them can play a meaningful role in forming your own. This requires cultivating a habit of examining the assumptions on which moral and social arguments are based rather than accepting or rejecting them for superficial reasons. For regardless of context, ethical values are not best served by unwavering commitment to unexamined ideas.

# *Required Text*

*Ethics In Practice, 5*th Edition, by Hugh LaFollette (New Jersey: Wiley Blackwell, 2020)

# *Course Goals*

By the end of this course, successful students will be those who are able to:   
  
1) Identify key concepts in arguments on topics like abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia, freedom of speech, animal rights, the environment, discrimination, and terrorism.

2) Correctly explain a variety of arguments on those same topics.

3) Correctly demonstrate the implications of acceptance of a variety of those arguments would dictate as moral judgments in particular cases.

4) Identify strengths and weaknesses of arguments on these topics regardless of whether they agree with the arguments’ conclusions, including evaluations of any implicit assumptions on which they may be based.  
5) Take positions these issues based on reflection on these arguments, possibly recognizing weaknesses in ideas the student had taken for granted, as well as strong points in views the student had not considered before.

## ***Related General Education Goals***

In serving the above course goals, this course serves the general educational goals of providing foundations for lifelong learning related to:

1. *Intellectual and practical skills*, including inquiry and analysis, critical and creative thinking, and written communication.
2. *Civic Engagement and Ethics,* which includes understanding ethical reasoning and social responsibility.

Within those general goals, this course focuses on the category of goals related to *Ethics and Values*, including:

1. Interpreting, explaining, and comparing systems and theories of ethics and/or values.
2. Analyzing ethical debates in terms of their underlying assumptions and implications.
3. Recognizing the ethical values at stake in practical, concrete, and/or everyday situations.
4. Formulating, communicating, and evaluating effective ethical arguments.

## ***Course Calendar***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Topic | Time Frame | Readings | Forum Dates | Quiz Dates | Paper Due |
| Introduction | 9/6-11 | Documents posted in “Getting Started” module | N/A | Until 9/11 | N/A |
| Ethical Theories | 9/12-18 | Documents posted in “Ethical Theory” module | N/A | Until 9/18 | 12/17 |
| Euthanasia | 9/19-10/2 | Text, Part 2:  Life & Death  *(Articles 5-9)* | 9/19-30  *(First post due 9/23)* | 10/1-2 | 10/8 |
| Abortion | 10/3-16 | Text, Part 2:  Life & Death  *(Articles 10-14)* | 10/3-10/14  *(First post due 10/7)* | 10/15-16 | 10/22 |
| Free Speech | 10/17-30 | Text, Part 4:  Liberty & Equality  *(Articles 27, 32-36)* | 10/17-28  *(First post due 10/21)* | 10/29-30 | 11/5 |
| Discrimination | 10/31-11/13 | Text, Part 4:  Liberty & Equality  *(Articles 37-43)* | 10/31-11/11  *(First post due 11/4)* | 11/12-13 | 11/19 |
| War & Torture | 11/14-12/4  *(Thanksgiving break 11/24-11/27)* | Text, Part 5: Justice  *(Articles 64-68)* | 11/14-12/2  *(First post due 11/18)* | 12/3-4 | 12/10 |

## Notes:

1. All topics, parts, and articles referenced here are found in the LaFollette text, required for this course. Please note that each part of the text includes writings on a number topics related to the theme indicated in the title of that part. However, the reading assignment for each unit includes all and only the articles on that *topic*, not all the articles from that *part*.
2. The “hello” forum is not graded. It is just a chance to get acquainted!
3. The syllabus quiz is not required; it is an opportunity to check your understanding of course requirements. If you take it by the indicated due date, the points you earn will be extra credit. You may take it as many times as you like, and only the highest score will be kept. Be aware that since the questions are drawn at random from a pool, multiple quiz attempts may not involve the same questions.
4. The quiz on ethical theories is not required, but familiarity with those theories will be helpful in understanding the assigned readings, many of which reference those theories. So the quiz is an opportunity to check your understanding, and if you take it by the indicated due date, the points you earn will be extra credit. This could be especially important since the final extra credit opportunity will require writing about one of these theories. See “Extra Credit Essay” below for details.
5. Quizzes expire the day after they open. Once expired, the answers will be made available, so there can be no makeups.

# Course Requirements, Explanations, & Guidelines

***Summary:***

Each module/session that corresponds to a chapter in the text is worth a maximum of 200 points, for a total of 1200 points for the whole course. Within each session, you may earn up to 100 points via *discussion forum posts*, and up to 100 points on the *quiz*. If you are unable to earn your target total by those means, up to 100 additional points are available if you write a *case study paper* on that topic (not to exceed 200 total points for that session). Each of these serves specific course goals, as will be indicated below, along with details on the requirements and guidelines for fulfilling them effectively.

## ***Rationale:***

Different people are better at engaging with our course concepts in different ways. Because of that, I offer a variety of ways to participate in and demonstrate mastery of the material we study, and this is what (in my mind) justifies combining the scores of the different types of assignment so that you don’t have to be good at all of them to do well in the course.

The discussion forums offer participation in the exchange of thoughts about the ideas we are studying. Being part of an ongoing conversation about our ideas affords an opportunity to clarify understanding and critically evaluate our course concepts as well as to consider each other’s perspectives on those concepts. But since everyone feels completely comfortable in a conversation where others might disagree with their contributions, there are quizzes and papers as well.

The quizzes, by contrast, require correctly identifying course concepts, conceptual relations between course concepts, and criticisms of those course concepts. Given the nature of our subject matter, the wording of those quiz items has to be much more carefully and technically chosen than in many other areas of study. For some students, that can be an obstacle to a good performance.

Those students, who may have difficulty correctly identifying course concepts in the words I use to describe them, are always much better at expressing their understanding in their own words. The papers provide that opportunity.

Hopefully, sharing this little slice of my teaching philosophy and the rationale behind my course requirements will give everyone a clearer idea of how to do well in this course.

# *Explanations & Guidelines*

# *Discussion Forums:*

The discussion forums offer opportunities for conversational interaction about your reactions to the ideas we are studying. This activity supports course goals #1 and #3-5, as well as all four of the general education goals from the category of *ethics and values.*

These forums will play a role similar to what would have been our day-to-day conversation if we were meeting in a classroom. So an informal conversational tone will be fine. During the time frame specified for each forum, eligible posts are worth 20 points each, up to a maximum of 100 points per forum. Not more than two posts per day can earn credit. Here is how to earn all 100 of those points:

The first 20 points are for making your first post by the due date indicated in the course calendar. You will only be able to see your classmates’ posts after you have made your first post, so this post will be a response to one of the prompt questions provided.

The remaining 80 points (4 posts @ 20 points each) can be earned by posts which fit any of the following descriptions:

1. Up to two posts can earn credit as responses to additional prompt questions. *Posts which are intended to serve this function should be labeled “Prompt Question Response.”*
2. Up to two posts can earn credit for raising critical reactions to issues that go beyond the content of the prompt questions—as long as they are still about the assigned readings. *Posts which are intended to serve this function should be labeled “A Step Beyond.”*
3. Up to two posts can earn credit for offering additional support for a view expressed by a classmate. (Please note that while there is nothing wrong with a simple agreement, this does not constitute “additional support.” Reasons must be given.) *Posts which are intended to serve this function should be labeled “Additional Support.”*
4. Up to two posts can earn credit for playing “devil’s advocate,” meaning a friendly challenge to classmate’s post that prompts them to reconsider their assertions based on additional evidence, from an alternative perspective, etc. (Posting a reply to a classmate who has challenged you in this way is also eligible for credit.) *Posts which are intended to serve this function should be labeled “Devil’s Advocate.”*
5. Questions asking your instructor (me!) for clarification of any aspect of the assigned reading are also eligible for credit. But please note that you will need to be specific. “What are they basically saying?” is too vague for me to know where to start. It would be much more productive to cite a passage you find confusing. *Posts which are intended to serve this function should be labeled “Clarification.”*
6. You can also earn credit for up to one post that offers a relevant website reference. But offer a reason why you found it helpful. “Here’s a good one on determinism” is not enough. Add a few sentences explaining why you think it is so good. That could be a real contribution to the conversation. *Posts which are intended to serve this function should be labeled “Website.”*

Two Further Points:

1. When commenting on classmates’ posts, confine your comments to agreements or disagreements regarding the ideas. Personal attacks will not be tolerated. I will lower the course grade of any student who violates basic courtesy requirements.
2. Points are assigned according to the number of posts made with appropriate content. No post will earn more than 20 points. Posts which address multiple topics will not earn additional points, so please put your comments on different questions/topics into different posts.

# *Quizzes*

Each topic/unit includes a quiz consisting of 20 true/false & multiple choice questions, to assess your ability to differentiate between correct and incorrect statements of the views expressed in the assigned readings. 55 minutes (one standard class hour) is allotted for each. Strong performance on these quizzes requires competence regarding course goals 1, 2, and 3, as well as goals 2 & 3 from the general education category *Ethics and Values*.

You may use your text and/or notes as study aids during the quizzes, but be advised that due to time limitations, it will be important to be prepared. Do not expect to have time to double check, let alone look up, the answers to very many questions. I suggest you answer all the questions first, and use the remaining time to confirm the ones you feel least confident about.

Quizzes will only be available online, and only during the dates specified. Since answers to the questions will be made available once the quiz closes, here can be no make-ups. If you miss one (or don’t do as well as you hoped), writing the paper is your opportunity to make up the points.

# *Extra Credit Opportunities: Syllabus Quiz & Theory Quiz*

**The quiz in the “Getting Started/Course Essentials” module is based on this syllabus. It is not required, but if you take it by the due date indicated in the course calendar, the points will count as extra credit. This is my way of rewarding those who take the time to understand what is expected in this course. You may take it as many times as you wish, but be aware that you will probably not get quite the same set of questions on multiple attempts.**

**Also, since many of our authors reference ethical theories, studying them can be very helpful in understanding our readings. So the quiz in the “Ethical Theory” module is about those theories. I have offered explanations and links to video lectures and original sources in that same module. It is not required, but if you take it by the due date indicated in the course calendar, the points will count as extra credit. Since the final extra credit paper requires writing about an ethical theory, this can be useful preparation for that opportunity as well.**

# *Case Study Papers: The Basic Idea*

Papers are optional assignments, worth up to 100 points, which can be used to supplement the points you have scored on the quiz, forum posts, and other assignments to help you reach your target score for the unit.

These papers are strongly focused on course goal #4, proper treatment of which requires satisfying goals 1-3 as well. Properly done, they will also demonstrate competency with respect to all five goals from the general education category of *Ethics and Values*.

The basic idea of this assignment is to demonstrate that you can 1) correctly explain at least one of our author’s ideas, and also 2) correctly show how those ideas would apply to a specific example which A) that author did not discuss and which B) your reader could independently fact check. In addition, I will expect you to offer your views on whether those ideas are good ideas and why. Links to videos with material that can serve as case studies will be provided in each module.

# *Case Study Papers: How the Scoring Works*

After the forum and quiz scores are established, there may be as-yet unearned points remaining for the topic/module. If you write a paper for that topic, the paper’s rubric score will determine the percentage of those points that will be added to your score (not to exceed 100).

If you scored 150/200 points by means of the forum and quiz, that is 75%, which would be a “C” for the session if you do nothing further.

But you have 50 points left you could potentially earn by writing the paper. Let’s say you write a paper, and it earns an 80% rubric score. Then you will earn 40/50, for a total of 190/200, which is an “A!”

*(It would be possible to skip either the forum or the quiz entirely and still do well, but I do not recommend this. Prudence suggests that “banking” at least some points via the forum and quiz will take the pressure off of how strong the essay needs to be to get your overall score into your target grade range.)*

But please note that I will not reward students who waste my time by turning in junk just to “take a shot” because they feel they have nothing to lose. I may not assign any credit to a paper which does not demonstrate a good faith effort at fulfilling the basic goals indicated above*.* If you feel at all uncertain about how to fulfill those goals, read on.

# *Case Study Paper Writing Guidelines:*

There is more than one way to write a good essay. If you have a lot of writing experience, the guidelines offered here may not be necessary. But if you do not have a lot of writing experience (and most who are taking this course don’t!) these general guidelines will provide a template which, if followed, make it almost impossible to go wrong, regardless of your topic!

Think of yourself as writing for an audience of reasonably intelligent people who just don’t happen to know much if anything at all about your subject. This means that while they would be capable of understanding a good explanation of the concepts involved, you cannot presume they understand what you do not take the time to explain. Thinking of things that way should help you get into the appropriate level of detail I need to see to demonstrate your understanding.

Your essay should proceed in a step-by-step fashion from the introduction through the main “body” of your argument to culminate in its conclusion, at which point the thesis should be compellingly supported. The following outline details the tasks involved in this process, which are usually best taken in the order presented here. At least a paragraph should be dedicated to each, and some may require more.

1. The introduction must inform the reader of the topic you will address, mention any sources you plan to draw from in making your argument (such as the example of the issue you are writing about and the authors whose ideas you will discuss), and indicate the specific point the essay is intended to support (also known as your “thesis”). It is often good to open with a general statement of an important problem, a rhetorical question, or some sort of dramatic flourish which will attract your reader’s interest before narrowing in on the specifics of the paper.
2. The “body” of your essay should present the relevant details of the example you are using immediately after the introduction.
   1. Note: The video links provided in each module offer material that can serve as your case study if you do not already have an example in mind.
   2. Note: the example may be real or fictional, e.g., taken from a film, but it cannot be a hypothetical of your own invention. It should also not be a personal anecdote, as that leaves a potential reader unable to fact-check your example. Anecdotes are better placed in the concluding section of your paper, where they can put a more personal spin on what has up until then been a more objective presentation.
3. Next, present the ideas of the author which you will use to analyze the example.
4. Show how those ideas apply to your example, indicating what you believe the author would have to say about it and why.
5. Offer your reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with what you presented in step 4.
   1. If you are only writing about one author, this step might turn out to be your conclusion.
6. If you are discussing a second author, step 3 must be repeated with regard to their ideas as well.
7. If you are discussing a second author, step 4 must also be repeated.
   1. Note: if you plan to support one and oppose the other, discuss the one you oppose first. That way, your criticism of that author can serve as the transition to your presentation of the second, showing the importance of turning elsewhere for a better perspective.
8. If you are discussing a second author, step 5 must also be repeated.
   1. If you are discussing two authors, this step may turn out to be your conclusion.
9. If you have additional observations of your own to add, or broader claims to make regarding the point you have shown in this paper, place them in the final paragraph, which will then be your conclusion.

Only papers which successfully demonstrate sufficient knowledge of course concepts, application to examples, and compositional quality will earn good scores. This typically requires 3-5 pages (@900-1200 words). I will offer comments on your work for the sake of improving the quality of future performance and grades.

Keep in mind that since this is a college course, anything affecting the appearance of quality in your work can have an adverse effect on your grade. So attention in the areas of grammar, spelling, composition, and so on, will be important.

# *Extra Credit Opportunity: Ethical Theory Paper*

This is an opportunity to earn extra credit points by revising your lowest scoring paper from earlier in the semester to include a discussion of one of the theories on which I offered commentary and explanation. See the explanation in the module on ethical theory for details and requirements.

# *Policies*

# Academic Dishonesty

Rutgers’ academic integrity policy is spelled out here:

<https://deanofstudents.camden.rutgers.edu/sites/deanofstudents/files/Academic%20Integrity%20Policy.pdf>.

I will pursue penalizing any student who violates academic integrity to the maximum extent allowed by this policy. No exceptions for any reason.

# Assignment Submission

All assignments must be submitted via the means made available on the course website.

Because quiz answers are made available after the quizzes expire, academic integrity issues dictate that they cannot be re-opened for make ups. There are plentiful opportunities to make up the points via extra credit. Take them.

Once the forums close, class conversation has moved on to the next topic. Late posts can therefore no longer serve the goal of participation in that conversation, and will therefore not be permitted.

Papers may be accepted up until one week late, but only if accompanied by documentation that shows timely submission was not possible.

# Course Completion

Incomplete grades will be only be assigned to students who make arrangements with me in advance. Otherwise, unfulfilled course requirements will earn zero scores and final grades will be determined accordingly.

# Final Grade Computation

The quantified aspect of your final grade will be the mathematical mean of all course requirements in the proportions explained in the “Course Requirements” section of this syllabus. The scale for final grade averages is as follows:

>90%      A

>87%      B+

>80%      B

>77%      C+

>70%      C

>60%      D

<60% F

Please note that since I have provided so many extra credit opportunities in this course, I do not “round up.” If you want a better grade, earn it.