

# PHL 115: CONTEMPORARY MORAL ISSUES

Univ. of Alabama at Birmingham | Spring 2014

## 1. BASIC COURSE INFO

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### Prof. Information:

**Prof:** Dr. Joshua May

**Office:** Humanities Bldg. Rm. 425

**Email:** [joshmay@uab.edu](mailto:joshmay@uab.edu)

**Website:** [www.joshdmay.com](http://www.joshdmay.com)

**Office Hours:** TR 2-3pm (& by appt.)

### Lecture Info:

**Section 2B:** TR 9:30am – 10:45am

**Location:** HB 309

**Section 2D:** TR 12:30pm – 1:45pm

**Location:** BEC 215

**Course Website:** Blackboard

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will focus on thinking critically about today's moral problems and dilemmas, as well as elementary methods and concepts in ethical theory (e.g. utilitarianism, deontology). We'll study and evaluate famous arguments on the following topics: cloning, genetic enhancement, abortion, racism, affirmative action, homosexuality, animal rights, moral emotions, and responsibility. (*Warning:* Some of these topics are sensitive and sacred to some people. If you are uncomfortable considering reasons for and against the beliefs you may have on these topics, you may want to reconsider taking this class.)

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- (1) Develop an understanding of some of the major moral issues of our time.
- (2) Learn some basic moral theories and concepts.
- (3) Hone the ability to explicate and critically assess moral arguments.
- (4) Facilitate the skill of evaluating and justifying one's moral beliefs.

### REQUIRED TEXTS

- (1) *Disputed Moral Issues*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, ed. by M. Timmons (Oxford University Press, 2014). ISBN-13: 978-0199946792. (Available at local university bookstores as well as various online retailers. Don't use the previous edition, as the readings have changed.)
- (2) Additional readings will be provided electronically (on *Blackboard*).

### COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1. <b>Participation</b>	(in class)	10% of grade	(Due: N/A)	[weekly]
2. <b>Quizzes (x6)</b>	(in class)	20% of grade	(See Schedule)	[≈biweekly]
3. <b>Mid-Term</b>	(in class)	30% of grade	(Date: Feb. 18)	[week 7]
4. <b>Final Exam</b>	(in class)	40% of grade	(Date: Apr. 24)	[week 15]

*Note:* These due dates are pretty firm, but they are subject to minor changes.

### MATERIAL COVERED

We will be discussing material primarily from the text. However, we may not cover everything in the assigned reading, and quite often material will be brought up in lecture that is not in the readings. So it's crucial that you come to class. Likewise, there may be some material in the readings you'll be accountable for that we don't discuss in great detail in lecture.

**UPDATES**

Important announcements and updates will be made occasionally on the Blackboard site. So do check the site frequently.

**HANDOUTS/SLIDES**

There will be some handouts and slides from time to time, and they will be available on the course Blackboard site. These are to help students catch up who miss class for legitimate reasons. I'm also doing this so students don't have to take such copious notes during class. Keep in mind, though, the handouts/slides will be rather *bare*. You'll need to supplement them with your own *notes* from class.

**BUDDY SYSTEM**

Early in the semester, I'll set aside time for you to exchange contact information with some fellow classmates. When needed (e.g. if you have to miss class), get in touch with them to share notes or discuss the course material.

**2. ASSIGNMENTS**

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**PARTICIPATION & ATTENDANCE**

*Students are expected to attend all class meetings and to do so on time.* I will do roll call and track attendance (this isn't just part of your grade; it's also for me to learn names). More than about 5 minutes late for class will be counted "absent," although that shouldn't discourage you from coming that day.

Your Participation grade will primarily be determined by absences. We'll have about 26 class meetings and your grade will largely be determined by the proportion of lectures you attend. For example, if you attend 75% of lectures, then you will likely receive around a C grade. However, I will reward those who consistently participate in class and penalize those who consistently cause problems. Ultimately, acquiring a few unexcused absences isn't very detrimental, provided you aren't disruptive in class. But do note that I'd say missing a number of classes would likely make it difficult for you to do well in the course overall, simply because you will miss important material.

*Excused absences:* These require proper documentation for either jury duty (note from the court), military service (note from military superior), or required university-sponsored activities (documentation from UAB official or supervisor). Remember, students with excused absences are still required to complete work and readings by the required due dates.

*Participate in class discussion:* I'm very interested in what you think of our readings and any light you may have to shed on their meaning. This will be left fairly open, to be determined at my discretion. Attendance, tardiness, contribution to class discussion, and so on may all be factored in to some extent.

**QUIZZES/IN-CLASS WRITING**

These will be either *multiple choice, short answer, or short essay* (or some combination), depending on the week. I'll mix it up so there are a number of different testing methods used. So these may involve some essay-style writing, albeit in-class. The quizzes for each will be at the beginning of the week listed below in the Schedule (so Tuesdays) at the end of lecture. In the end, I'll drop your lowest quiz score (so they the grading will be out of 5 quizzes). Thus, you can

miss one quiz without any penalty. No quizzes can be made up without very special circumstances.

### **EXAMS**

Both the midterm and final exams will involve short-answer questions (e.g. multiple-choice, fill in the blank, define terms) and short essays. In advance of each of the exams, you will be given a handout on the exam format and sample questions. The exams won't have trick questions or obscure identifications.

### **NO LAPTOPS, PHONES, ETC.**

During class, turn off and put away all computers, phones, and other electronic devices. Texting, instant messaging, web surfing, message checking, e-mailing, are all distractions to you and your fellow classmates. It's becoming so rampant that the best option at this point seems to ban it all during lecture. Think of the class meetings as a "philosophy retreat" where you focus on only philosophy. That's not too much to ask. (If you have a special need for some such device, talk with me and of course we can make exceptions as needed.)

Penalties: If I catch you during class, I'll ask you to put the device away and you won't be marked as present for that lecture. If the problem persists, you will need to leave.

### **LATE & MAKE-UP ASSIGNMENTS**

*In-class assignments (e.g. exams):* You can make up such assignments only if you have very extenuating circumstances (e.g. medical, military, jury duty) that you can document. Make sure you let me know *as soon as such special circumstances arise*; otherwise I might not be able to work something out with you. Moreover, make-ups are conditional on our being able to schedule a mutually convenient time for it and a time that is either soon before or after the original assignment occurred. For example, don't expect to be able to take an exam two weeks after (or before) the rest of the class takes it.

### **CHEATING (INCLUDING PLAGIARISM)**

Don't cheat. I warn against this at the beginning of every semester, and still nearly every time at least one person gets caught! *I take this extremely seriously.* I will give all cheaters a failing grade and report the incidents to the university.

Note that if you cut something from a Web document and paste it into your paper, you are plagiarizing (even if you mix up the wording a bit). The papers you will be asked to write are *not research papers* in that there is no need to look to outside sources (including anything on the Internet); you just need to read the material required for class, attend the lectures, and take your time thinking it all through. But if you do poke around the Web, you must of course diligently cite and quote all consulted sources.

Furthermore, it's *your responsibility* to make sure that your work doesn't violate university policies about plagiarism and other academic cheating. (Compare: Ignorance of the law does not excuse.) If you need any help in understanding these standards or are in any doubt about whether your work for this course violates them, check with me. For your convenience, here is the link to UAB's page on academic integrity:

<https://www.uab.edu/students/academics/honor-code>

All UAB students are expected to be familiar with the *UAB Academic Honor Code*, as well as any honor codes that are specific to their schools or disciplines. The code represents a

commitment to integrity in the academic community and a respect for an individual's educational endeavors:

*I have read and, by choosing to become a member of the UAB academic community, accept the UAB Academic Honor Code. I understand that violation of this code will result in penalties as severe as expulsion from the university. I promise and confirm that I will not, at any time and under any circumstances, involve myself with abetting, cheating, plagiarism, fabrication, or misrepresentation while enrolled as a student at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.*

### **CALCULATING YOUR GRADE**

All scores will be out of 100 (in other words, a percentage). To calculate your grade, multiply the percentage weight for each assignment by your score (out of 100) for that assignment, then add up the results for each assignment. Finally, convert that total score for the course into a letter grade using standard conversions (e.g. 92%=A, 87%=B, etc.). The following chart is an example to help illustrate how to do the calculation.

	<b>Score</b>	<b>Multiplier</b>	<b>Result</b>
<b>Participation</b>	85	.15	12.3
<b>Midterm</b>	72	.25	18
<b>Paper</b>	77	.25	19.25
<b>Final Exam</b>	87	.35	30.45
	<i>Total:</i>		80% (B)

Note well: For final grades, UAB only uses A, B, C, D, F (no +/-).

## **3. STUDENT SUPPORT**

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### **OFFICE HOURS**

I encourage you all to *talk with me outside of class* (e.g. in office hours). If you are unable to see me during my regular slot or talk to me before or after class, I'm happy to schedule a mutually convenient time. Talking to me about the material, especially in preparation for an upcoming assignment, is not just for those who fear failing the course; it's also for those who want to secure an "A" (or whatever your goal is).

### **EMAILING ME**

I'm available to contact by email. I can even answer relatively short and specific questions that way. If you have a more detailed and lengthy question, talk to me in person.

### **COURSE WEB PAGE**

The web page for this class has some links that may prove useful in the course. (Note: My personal website also has some information and links to several resources for philosophy. However, browse at your own risk. What is particularly useful for this course will be provided on the web page for this course, not my personal website.)

### **WRITING SUPPORT**

I will be expecting you to write *college-level* essays for this course, so I will be expecting few errors in the areas of spelling, grammar, professional academic style, and so on. Furthermore, writing in philosophy is often very different from writing in other disciplines. Since philosophy

requires the clear communication of often difficult and subtle ideas, weak writing renders high level performance impossible. So I encourage you to talk to me about your essays (and exams) before the due date if you have any questions. (More details on requirements for essays will be provided later on in the course.)

~~In general, I am happy to discuss with you drafts of your papers before they are turned in. However, I will not accept emailed or dropped off drafts. Instead, you are welcome and encouraged to bring your drafts into office hours (or make an appointment) to discuss them.~~

### **IF YOU FACE MAJOR DIFFICULTIES**

If for any reason you are struggling—due to medical issues or otherwise—get in touch with me as soon as possible. I'm happy to work with you to find the best course of action and, if possible, to help you complete the course successfully. But you must get in touch as soon as you know there is a problem. Waiting until the last minute, for example, might mean we can't work anything out.

### **STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

If you are registered with Disability Support Services (DSS), please make an appointment as soon as possible to discuss accommodations that may be necessary for this course. If you have a disability but have not yet contacted DSS, please contact them as soon as possible (934-4205) or visit them (at 516 Hill University Center). Remember that special accommodations for students with disabilities are not retroactive. Students must obtain an accommodation letter from DSS at the *beginning* of each semester, get that letter to the instructor, and contact the instructor several days before the accommodation is required. Please see DSS FAQ's at:

<https://www.uab.edu/students/services/disability-support-services>

## **4. READINGS**

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### **WHEN TO READ**

Students are expected to *do the assigned reading*. You should aim for doing the reading *the day it's covered* in class—or at least around that time. The point of this is: *don't give up on the reading*. If you didn't get to it before we covered it in class, make sure you do it after. This is especially important because philosophy involves close examination of often fairly dense arguments. However, you aren't expected to have figured it all out before you walk in the door. That's what we're going to try to do in class. (Notice also that I've provided the page numbers of each reading so you can see the length and plan ahead.)

*Some Advice:* Don't underestimate the power of mental fatigue. When reading, if you find that you can't process it, try reading it again. If you still feel rather lost, it might be that you're getting mentally exhausted. Try putting the book down and coming back to it later, even perhaps the next day. It's quite likely that you'll find it much easier after a break.

### **READING LIST**

The list of readings below is subject to change. All readings are in the course text, unless marked "**PDF**" (in which case I'll make them available to you online). We'll try to go through these articles following this exact schedule, but it is not set in stone. You'll need to come to class to know where we are exactly.

**Topic 1: Biases & Arguments** [1 Week]

1. Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter (2013) "What is Philosophy?" (PDF) [3 pp.]
2. Taylor, Jim (2011) "Understanding Cognitive Bias" (PDF) [3 pp.]
3. May, Joshua (2014) "Rationality and Good Arguments" (PDF) [4 pp.]

**Topic 2: Cloning and Enhancement** [1.5 Weeks]

1. Timmons, Mark (2014) "Cloning and Genetic Enhancement" (pp. 481-8) [7 pp.]
2. Kass, Leon (2001) "Preventing Brave New World" (pp. 488-96) [8 pp.]
3. Pence, Gregory (1998) "Will Cloning Harm People?" (pp. 496-504) [9 pp.]
4. Nussbaum, Martha (2004) "Danger to Human Dignity" (PDF) [6 pp.]

**Topic 3: Moral Theory** [1 Week]

1. Timmons, Mark (2014) "Moral Theory Primer" (pp. 2-20, 31-37) [25 pp.]  
[Note well: Skip sections 2D-G, but 2F might help with understanding Ross.]
2. Ross, W. D. (1930) "What Makes Right Actions Right?" (pp. 67-71) [4 pp.]

**Topic 4: Abortion** [1.5 Weeks]

1. Timmons, Mark (2014) "Abortion" (pp. 423-31) [8 pp.]
2. Warren, Mary Anne (1973) "On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion" (pp. 431-8) [7 pp.]
3. Marquis, Don (1989) "Why Abortion Is Immoral" (pp. 468-73) [5 pp.]
4. Thomson, Judith Jarvis (1971) "A Defense of Abortion" (pp. 438-46) [8 pp.]

**Topic 5: Racism and Reparation** [1 Week]

1. Timmons, Mark (2014) "Sexism, Racism, and Reparation" (pp. 224-28) [5 pp.]
2. King, Martin Luther (1963) "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (PDF excerpt) [5 pp.]
3. Hill, Thomas (1991) "The Message of Affirmative Action" (pp. 265-274) [9 pp.]

**Topic 6: Sexual Morality and Marriage** [2 Weeks]

1. Timmons, Mark (2014) "Sexual Morality and Marriage" (pp. 84-9) [5 pp.]
2. Pope Paul VI (1976) "Vatican Declaration on... Sexual Ethics" (pp. 89-94) [6 pp.]
3. Corvino, John (1997) "Why Shouldn't Tommy and Jim Have Sex?" (pp. 95-101) [7 pp.]
4. Gallagher, Maggie (2003) "Normal Marriage: Two Views" (pp. 118-125) [8 pp.]
5. Wolfson, Evan (2003) "Enough Marriage to Share" (pp. 126-30) [5 pp.]

**Topic 7: The Ethical Treatment of Animals** [1.5 Weeks]

1. Timmons, Mark (2014) "The Ethical Treatment of Animals" (pp. 380-3) [3 pp.]
2. Cohen, Carl (1997) "Do Animals Have Rights?" (pp. 398-405) [8 pp.]
3. Warren, Mary Ann (1983) "Human and Animal Rights Compared" (pp. 406-11) [6 pp.]
4. Curnutt, Jordan (1997) "A New Argument for Vegetarianism" (pp. 412-21) [9 pp.]

**Topic 8: Neuroethics: Emotions & Responsibility** [2 Weeks]

1. Roskies, Adina (2002) "Neuroethics for the New Millenium" (PDF) [3 pp.]
2. Singer, Peter (2005) "Ethics and Intuitions" (PDF) [22 pp.]
3. Nahmias, Eddy (2011) "Is Neuroscience the Death of Free Will?" (PDF) [5 pp.]

**SCHEDULE**

(Note: Subject to minor revision. Keep coming to class to know where we are.)

<b>Wk</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Readings*</b>	<b>Key Events</b>
<b>1</b>	1/7	Intro: Cognitive Biases	Sinnott-Armstrong, Taylor	
	1/9	Intro: Good Arguments	Syllabus, May	
<b>2</b>	1/14	Cloning: Repugnance	Timmons, Kass	Quiz 1
	1/16	Cloning: Who's Harmed?	Pence	
<b>3</b>	1/21	Cloning: Against Disgust	Nussbaum	
	1/23	Moral Theory: Varieties	Timmons	
<b>4</b>	1/28	Moral Theory: Duties & Methods	Ross	Quiz 2
	1/30	Abortion: Personhood	Timmons, Warren	
<b>5</b>	2/4	Abortion: Futures Like Ours	Marquis	
	2/6	<i>Special Activity: Analogies</i>	TBA	Away for conf.
<b>6</b>	2/11	Abortion: Beyond Personhood	Thomson	Quiz 3
	2/13	Review for Midterm	N/A	
<b>7</b>	2/18	Midterm	N/A	Midterm
	2/20	Racism: Intro & MLK	Timmons, King	
<b>8</b>	2/25	Racism: Affirmative Action	Hill	
	2/27	Homosexuality: Against	Timmons, Pope	
<b>9</b>	3/4	Homosexuality: For	Corvino	Quiz 4
	3/6	Same-Sex Marriage: Against	Gallagher	
<b>10</b>	3/11	Same-Sex Marriage: For	Wolfson	
	3/13	Animal Rights: Against	Timmons, Cohen	
<b>11</b>	3/18	Animal Rights: Compared	Warren	Quiz 5
	3/20	<i>No class (catch up on reading)</i>	N/A	Away for conf.
<i>Spring Break: 3/24 - 3/28</i>				
<b>12</b>	4/1	Animal Rights: Vegetarianism	Curnutt	
	4/3	Neuroethics: Emotions	Roskies, Singer	Away for conf.
<b>13</b>	4/8	Neuroethics: Emotions	Singer	Quiz 6
	4/10	Neuroethics: Responsibility	Nahmias	
<b>14</b>	4/15	Neuroethics: Responsibility	Nahmias	
	4/17	Review for Final	N/A	Away for conf.
<b>15</b>	4/21 -4/25	<i>Final Exam: Thurs. April 24<sup>th</sup> @ 8-10:30am (Sect. 2B), 10:45am-1:15pm (Sect. 2D)</i>		

\* Read the listed pieces for the corresponding lecture. Readings are identified by authors' last names (match them with the Reading List to find the location of the article).