

PHIL 121: Philosophy and Morality

King 123, Tu/Th 1:30 – 2:45

Professor Amy Berg

Email: aberg@oberlin.edu

Office: King 120A

Office Hours: Tuesdays 11-1 (or on Zoom by request); other times by appointment

Course Prerequisite: None

Zoom for office hours: <https://oberlin.zoom.us/j/84559948719> (passcode: office)

What this course is about

During this semester, we will use philosophical tools to think about how our lives should go: about whether we should have children, about the meaning of our lives, about how those lives should end. We will go chronologically, from before birth to the moment of death, investigating some major moral and political theories along our way. The main topics we will cover are:

- **The ethics of birth:** We start before birth, looking at the questions surrounding reproduction. Is it ever okay to have children? If it is, should you adopt rather than having biological children? If it's permissible to have biological children, what about abortion or the genetic enhancement of fetuses? In this section, we'll also discuss some influential moral theories.
- **Justice and the family:** Next, we talk about how the family should be organized. If you have children, can you favor them over strangers? As an adult, what should your relationship with your parents be like? What marriages should the state recognize, and should issues of gender justice affect how we organize those marriages? Considering these questions will take us into work on political theories of justice.
- **The end of life:** Finally, we'll end the course by considering end-of-life issues. What counts as a "good death"? Should you be allowed to have the choice to end your own life? And when you look back on your life, will it have been meaningful?

By the end of this course, you will be able to

- Explain how philosophers think about common moral issues
- Assess the arguments for and against different moral theories and positions
- Argue, in discussion and in writing, for what you believe to be the correct answers to moral questions

Course policies

What you'll need to have

- You'll need to have the readings. Complete each day's assigned reading before coming to class, and bring your **hard copy** of the reading with you to class. We will be using one book and some other readings:
 - The book is *Exploring Moral Problems: An Introductory Anthology* (eds. Steven M. Cahn and Andrew Forcehimes, Oxford University Press 2017, ISBN 978-0-19-067029-0). The book is available to rent or buy at the Bookstore and elsewhere, and you must get it as a hard copy (not an e-book). There are many textbooks with similar names; **please make sure you have the correct textbook!**
 - The rest of the readings you will need are available in a packet; pick this packet up during business hours at my office during the first week of the semester.

- If you are having difficulty getting your own copy of the book (for any reason, including cost), please let me know as soon as possible, so I can make sure you have the resources you need to be successful in this class.
- You will also need access to Blackboard:
 - It's where I will post the most current version of the syllabus.
 - It's also where you can find links to the materials we will be using in class—handouts, assignment instructions, and so on.
 - I encourage you to send me videos, articles, and anything else you come across that's relevant to our course, and I may post them to Blackboard so other students can see them too.

What you'll need to do

Assignments and assessment

There are ten assignments (and one office-hours visit) in this course:

- **Nine weekly assignments:** In these assignments, you will practice a variety of skills you need in order to write philosophy well: defining terms, summarizing others' views, developing objections to those views, and so on. These assignments are **due by the start of class most Thursdays**; the first one will be assigned on Thursday, October 7, and the last will be due on Thursday, January 6. Because these assignments are due weekly, it will be hard to stay on top of your work if you turn them in late. It is for this reason that, unless you are in extraordinary circumstances, **I will not accept weekly assignments that are turned in more than one week late.** I will drop your lowest assignment grade.
- **Final paper:** In this paper, you will bring together the skills you've practiced in the weekly assignments in order to present your own views about some of the issues we've discussed in this course. This paper is due **by 11 am on Thursday, January 20.**
- **Office-hours visit:** You are required to visit my office hours once during the first five weeks of the course (that is, **no later than Tuesday, November 9**). This is so I can get to know you, find out your interests, and answer any questions you have about the course
- All assignments will be graded anonymously; you should put your T number, *not* your name, on them. Bring each assignment to class the day it's due. Before you submit any assignments, you must sign and return the Honor Pledge.
- **Extension policy for written work:** Assignments must be turned in at the time and date they are due. I am happy to consider requests for extensions if you ask me before the assignment is due. I generally approve extensions due to unforeseeable events (for example, a family or medical emergency) that significantly affect your ability to complete assignments on time; I generally do not approve extensions due to foreseeable events (for example, work in other courses or extracurricular activities). If you turn in an assignment late, and you have not made prior arrangements with me, I will deduct three percent of your grade if that assignment is turned in late on the day it's due and three percent for each day after that (so, for example, an assignment that would have gotten 100% if it were turned in on time on Tuesday would get 91% if turned in on Thursday).
- In this course, **your writing is a public act.** I will occasionally use anonymized and (sometimes) edited versions of your work in class and in future courses in order to generate discussion, share viewpoints, ask questions, and so on.

Participation

Philosophy is a collaborative, discussion-based discipline. Your writing and thinking will benefit from considering others' views, reactions to the readings, and experiences. And your classmates and I will benefit from hearing your take.

- I want you to come to class and participate, but it's more important for you to stay safe and healthy. **Do not come to class if you feel even a little bit sick!**
- That said, this class is discussion-based, and it's important to attend whenever you're able to and to participate when you attend. Your first **two absences** are free: you can miss those classes for any reason, and you don't have to let me know what that reason is. If you're absent more than twice, I'll apply the same policy as for late work. If you miss class because of an unforeseeable event, and you communicate with me about that absence, I will generally excuse that absence; absences due to foreseeable events, or absences you don't communicate with me about in a timely way, will generally not be excused. **Absences because you're sick never count against you**, as long as you communicate with me in a timely way. You count as absent if you are not present when I take attendance, even if you show up later in the class period; you also count as absent if you leave early without checking in with me. You'll lose two percentage points from your participation grade for each unexcused absence (beyond your first two). If at any point in the semester, you believe you are in a situation for which I should make an exception to this policy, please talk with me outside of class.
- In order to receive the highest participation grade you can, come ready to make active, serious, charitable contributions to class discussion. To make sure our discussion is productive and includes a wide variety of voices, I may sometimes call on students at random. To help guide your participation, I will give you an evaluation at midsemester (separate from your midterm grade) of how you've done so far. When I grade participation, here's what I'm looking for:
 - *A range:* Your comments demonstrate that you've done the reading, you actively and positively participate in all group activities, you ask questions or offer comments at every class session, you listen to and respond to others, and/or you come to office hours at least a couple of times. You are never a distraction.
 - *B range:* Your comments demonstrate that you've usually done the reading, you participate in most group activities, you ask questions or offer comments sporadically, and/or you generally listen and respond to others. You are never a distraction.
 - *C range:* Your comments demonstrate a lack of familiarity with the reading, you do not participate very actively in class (or else are a distraction), you talk over others, and/or you never come to office hours.
 - *D or F range:* You either do not participate or are an active distraction in class, and you never come to office hours or communicate with me via email.
- Because philosophy is done best when it's done collaboratively, my goal is to create a space where productive conversations can happen. Research on classrooms and workplaces consistently supports the conclusion that, for most people, technology is a barrier to these productive conversations. (Ask me if you're curious about this research!) For that reason, **electronic devices (laptops, tablets, phones, etc.) are generally not allowed in class.** I will ask you to put these devices in your bag at the beginning of class and leave them there until the end of class. There are, however, exceptions to this rule. **If you need an electronic device in order to be successful in this course (because of a disability, a life situation, or some other reason), please speak with me during the first two weeks of the course.** If I give you permission to use technology, it's your responsibility to work to minimize your distractions to other students (a good way to do this is to sit in the back or to the side of the classroom, so that your screen will not be visible to others).

Here's how the work in this course contributes to your final grade:

- **Weekly assignments:** 40% (5% per assignment, based on your eight highest scores)
- **Final paper:** 45%

- **Office-hours visit (by Tuesday, November 9): 2%**
- **Participation: 13%**

The grade scale is:

	A: 93-100%	A-: 90-92%
B+: 87-89%	B: 83-86%	B-: 80-82%
C+: 77-79%	C: 73-76%	C-: 70-72%
D+: 67-69%	D: 60-63%	D-: 60-62%
F: below 60%		

COVID-19 policies

- Stay healthy and keep others healthy! Follow the ObieSafe requirements at all times, inside and outside our classroom. **Do not come to class if you feel even a little bit sick.**
- Please wear your mask in the classroom at all times, unless and until Oberlin changes the mask policy.
- If you have to miss class for illness, I'll work with you to figure out what's best on a case-by-case basis. This may include joining our class meetings via Zoom, receiving extensions on your assignments, or even being excused from some assignments altogether.
- Some material and images in this course may be considered sensitive or interpreted as illegal outside of the United States (US). These materials are being presented and distributed for purposes of educational use in the US. They do not represent the views of Oberlin College and Conservatory. Materials in this course, including but not limited to PDFs and images of any kind, may not be downloaded, displayed, distributed, reproduced, published, transmitted, or broadcast (including and especially via any social media) outside of the educational framework of this course, without prior written permission of the faculty member. Class lectures and discussions may not be recorded or reproduced in any way (including screenshots), unless necessary to comply with approved accommodations.

What I'll need to do

My responsibilities in this course include:

- Making sure our discussions are productive. If at any point you're not feeling that our discussions are respectful and charitable, please come talk to me.
- Grading your work quickly and fairly. I will return all graded work no later than two weeks from the day you turn it in.
- Communicating with you over email.
 - My responsibility is to email you whenever there are time-sensitive announcements about this course; your responsibility is to check your Oberlin email (including your spam folder) every day.
 - I use Blackboard when I need to send announcements to the entire class. Replies to emails I send through Blackboard do not go to me, and I have no way to see them. **If you need to contact me over email, please make sure you're emailing my email address, aberg@oberlin.edu.**
 - Our emails to each other in this course are professional documents, and it is my and your responsibility to write them professionally. For tips on how to write a professional email, check the email rubric posted to Blackboard. I will respond to your email no later than 5 pm on the next business day; in the rare case I do not, please feel free to follow up with me after that.
- Holding office hours, which you can use to fulfill your office-hours assignment, talk to me about course content, what you've missed if you have to miss class, and so on. (This semester, office hours will be in person by default, but I'm also happy to meet over Zoom—just let me

know ahead of time.) I'm happy to discuss questions about assignments and to provide feedback on your work before you turn it in; if you want me to read a complete draft of an assignment, send it to me at least one week before it's due.

Some ways to succeed in this course

- I am committed to making sure that you can succeed in this course, regardless of whether you have a disability (visible or invisible). If you have a disability that may impact your work in this class and for which you may require accommodations, please see me and Disability Resources at the Center for Academic Success so that we may arrange appropriate accommodations. If you have questions, or if you need an accommodation of another type (athletic, religious, etc.), please let me know as soon as possible.
- **Every student is expected to adhere to the honor code.** This means in very general terms that you only submit work that is yours. More specifically, it means that you will not plagiarize; that is, you will not appropriate the work or ideas of someone else—whether written or not—without acknowledgement, using the conventionally agreed-on scholarly practices for quoting and citation, and that you will not cheat, fabricate, collaborate on a project that is meant to be done individually, or submit the same work for multiple classes or assignments without the prior approval of all instructors involved. While you are allowed and encouraged to ask for advice and help from the instructor, librarians, or official writing tutors, you are, in the end, to submit work produced by you. Some assignments may be collaborative in nature; those will be clearly identified as such. Everyone in the campus community is required to report all suspected violations of the honor code to the student honors committee. Following college-wide policy, you will sign a statement at the beginning of the semester to certify that you will adhere to the honor code. For more information, see the Academic Integrity section of the Dean of Students website (<https://www.oberlin.edu/dean-of-students/student-conduct/academic-integrity>).
- I encourage you to use the Writing Center (<https://www.oberlin.edu/arts-and-sciences/resources-and-support/wap>; appointments available at <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1dGrwegHC1Q0dkfxF228cdBB6zOviTLtjuOn910IU-RA/edit>) as you work on your assignments in this course.
- You are welcome and encouraged to come to my office hours or make an appointment with me whenever you want to talk about the course material, your assignments, or any other philosophy-related concerns you have.

Schedule of readings and assignments

Complete each day's assigned reading *before* coming to class. Readings *****with asterisks around their names***** are in the packet, which you should pick up at my office (King 120A) as soon as you can; all other readings are in *Exploring Moral Problems*. This schedule is provisional, and you are responsible for learning about any changes we make to it; you can always find the most current syllabus on Blackboard.

Date	Topic	Reading	Assigned	Due	Returned
Tuesday 10/5	What are we doing in this course?	None			
Thursday 10/7	Should you have children?	***Hugh LaFollette, "Licensing Parents Revisited"***	1		
Tuesday 10/12	Should you have children?	***Tina Rulli, "Preferring a Genetically-Related Child"***			

Thursday 10/14	Should you have children?	Laura Purdy, "Can Having Children Be Immoral?"	2	1	
Tuesday 10/19	Should you have children?	Simo Vehmas, "Parents and Genetic Information"			
Thursday 10/21	Introduction to utilitarianism	John Stuart Mill, "Utilitarianism"	3	2	1
Tuesday 10/26	Should anyone ever have an abortion?	Don Marquis, "An Argument that Abortion Is Wrong"			
Thursday 10/28	Should anyone ever have an abortion?	Judith Jarvis Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion"	4	3	2
Tuesday 11/2	Introduction to deontology	Immanuel Kant, "Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals"			
Thursday 11/4	Should you genetically modify your children?	Julian Savulescu, "Procreative Beneficence"	5	4	3
Tuesday 11/9	Should you genetically modify your children?	Michael Sandel, "The Case against Perfection"			
Thursday 11/11	Introduction to virtue ethics	Julia Driver, "Virtue Ethics"	6	5	4
Tuesday 11/16	Should you favor your children over strangers?	***Larissa MacFarquhar, "The Children of Strangers"***			
Thursday 11/18	Should you favor your children over strangers?	***James Rachels, "Morality, Parents, and Children"***		6	5
NO CLASS TUESDAY 11/23 - THURSDAY 11/25: THANKSGIVING BREAK					
Tuesday 11/30	What do you owe your parents?	Jane English, "What Do Grown Children Owe Their Parents?"			
Thursday 12/2	What do you owe your parents?	Simon Keller, "Four Theories of Filial Duty"	7		6
Tuesday 12/7	What marriages should the state recognize?	Elizabeth Brake, "Minimal Marriage"			
Thursday 12/9	What marriages should the state recognize?	Ralph Wedgwood, "Is Civil Marriage Illiberal?"	8	7	
Tuesday 12/14	Should your marriage be gender-just?	***Caroline Criado Perez, "The Long Friday"***			
Thursday 12/16	Should your marriage be gender-just?	***Pauline Kleingeld and Joel Anderson, "Justice as a Family Value"***		8	7
Tuesday 12/21	What is a good death?	***Atul Gawande, "Letting Go"***	Final paper/9		
NO CLASS THURSDAY 12/23 - THURSDAY 12/30: WINTER BREAK					

Tuesday 1/4 ON ZOOM	What is a good death?	***Peter Singer, "Justifying Voluntary Euthanasia"***			
Thursday 1/6 ON ZOOM	What is a good death?	***Paul Longmore, "The Resistance: The Disability Rights Movement and Assisted Suicide"***		9	8
Tuesday 1/11 ON ZOOM	What is the meaning of life?	Richard Taylor, "The Meaning of Life"			
Thursday 1/13 ON ZOOM	What is the meaning of life?	Susan Wolf, "Meaning of Life"			9
Saturday 1/15 ON ZOOM	What is the meaning of life?	Christine Vitrano, "Meaningful Lives"			
Thursday 1/20	Final paper due at 11 am				