

PHIL 121: Philosophy and Morality

King 127, MW 3:00-4:15 pm

Professor Amy Berg

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Office: King 120A (go through the door marked King 120 and turn left)

Office Hours: Mondays 12:30-2:30 pm (Zoom by request) or by appointment

Course Prerequisite: None

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 genetic enhancement? 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 views
- 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

- 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; **make sure you get the right one!**
 - The rest of the readings you will need are available in a packet; pick this packet up as soon as you decide to stay in this course. You can get it from the table outside my office door whenever King is open.

- 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.
- If you don't bring the hard copy of the reading with you to class, you will not be prepared for class. This is not a reason for me to make an exception to the course's technology policy (below).
- 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, Zoom for remote office hours, and so on.
 - I love it when you send me videos, articles, and anything else you come across that's relevant to our course, and I'll post them to the Miscellaneous tab of Blackboard so other students can see them too.
 - Advice from students who have been successful in this course in the past is posted to the Miscellaneous tab.

What you'll need to do

Assignments and assessment

There are ten written 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 Wednesdays**; the first one will be assigned on Wednesday, September 13, and the last will be due on Wednesday, November 29.
 - 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 past the original due date and time.**
 - You must turn in at least five of the nine weekly assignments in order to pass the course. 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 Wednesday, December 20**. You must turn in the final paper in order to pass the course.
- **Office-hours visit:** Your first assignment is to visit my office once during the first four weeks of the course (**no later than Wednesday, September 27**). 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; put your T number, *not* your name, on them. At the end of each assignment, type or handwrite the Honor Pledge ("I have adhered to the Honor Code in this assignment") and type or handwrite your T number; do not type or sign your name.
- **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 Monday would get 91% if turned in on Wednesday). Turn in late work by emailing it to me (as a PDF or Word document *only*).

- 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 and others to stay safe and healthy. **Do not come to class if you feel even a little bit sick!** Please follow ObieSafe rules whenever you're in this course.
- 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 that significantly affects your ability to come to class, and you communicate with me about that absence, I will generally excuse that absence; absences due to foreseeable events, or absences you don't discuss with me 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, and as long as you do not miss more than ten classes (five in either half of the course).
 - If you're absent more than ten times (including more than five absences in either the first or the second half of the semester), you will not be able to pass the course.
 - 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 three 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 a participation evaluation at midsemester (separate from your midterm grade). When I grade participation, here's what I'm looking for:
 - *A range:* You take on at least your fair share of the responsibility for making sure discussion is productive, both in class discussion and in smaller groups. You frequently volunteer to speak, even when others are not. Your comments demonstrate that you've done the reading carefully (this is *not* the same thing as understanding the reading—questions count!). At the same time, you don't dominate; you listen carefully to and engage with what others are saying, and you balance taking an active role in

discussion and group activities with making sure others have a chance to speak. You are never a distraction.

- *B range:* You speak up in most but not all classes or group activities, contributing but not quite doing your fair share to make discussion productive. Your comments generally demonstrate that you've done the reading. You may have a tendency to dominate discussion, and/or your comments may not demonstrate that you're carefully listening to and engaging with others. You are never or rarely a distraction.
- *C range:* You speak up only occasionally (less often than once per class meeting on average), doing well below your fair share to make discussion productive. Your comments demonstrate a lack of familiarity with the reading. Your comments don't do much to engage with others in the course, and/or you talk over others. You may sometimes be a distraction.
- *D or F range:* You never or almost never speak up in class discussion and/or group activities. You may frequently be a distraction.
- 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 before you enter the classroom and keep them there until you leave. 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 as soon as possible.** 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).

Beyond the minimum requirements (turning in at least five of the nine weekly assignments, missing no more than ten class meetings, and turning in the final paper), here's how the work in this course contributes to your final grade:

- **Weekly assignments:** 48% (6% per assignment, based on your eight highest scores)
- **Final paper:** 37%
- **Office-hours visit (by Wednesday, September 27):** 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%		

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, check in about what you've missed if you have to miss class, and so on. Office hours are in person by default, but I'm also happy to meet over Zoom—just let me know ahead of time.

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 the Office for Disability and Access 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 (including discussing the assignment instructions), or submit the same work for multiple classes or assignments without the prior approval of all instructors involved. This also means that you will not use artificial intelligence software or other related programs to create or assist with assignments unless otherwise specified by me and/or the Office of Disability & Access. 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, include the Honor Pledge and your T number at the bottom of each assignment. 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>). Any assignment which the Student Honor Committee finds has violated the Honor Code will receive a grade of 0, and you will not be allowed to redo it.

- I encourage you to use the Writing Center (<https://www.oberlin.edu/arts-and-sciences/resources-and-support/wap>) 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
M 9/4	LABOR DAY				
W 9/6	Introduction	None			
M 9/11	Having children	***LaFollette, "Licensing Parents Revisited"***			
W 9/13	Having children	***Rulli, "Preferring a Genetically-Related Child"***	1		
M 9/18	Having children	Purdy, "Can Having Children Be Immoral?"			
W 9/20	CLASS CANCELED				
M 9/25	YOM KIPPUR				
W 9/27	Having children	Vehmas, "Parents and Genetic Information"	2	1	
M 10/2	Moral theories	Mill, "Utilitarianism"			
W 10/4	Abortion	Marquis, "An Argument that Abortion Is Wrong"	3	2	1
M 10/9	Abortion	Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion"			
W 10/11	Moral theories	Kant, "Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals"	4	3	2
M 10/16	FALL BREAK				
W 10/18	FALL BREAK				
M 10/23	Selection and enhancement	Savulescu, "Procreative Beneficence"			
W 10/25	Selection and enhancement	Sandel, "The Case against Perfection"	5	4	3
M 10/30	Moral theories	Driver, "Virtue Ethics"			
W 11/1 REMOTE	Parents and children	***MacFarquhar, "The Children of Strangers"***	6	5	4
M 11/6	Parents and children	English, "What Do Grown Children Owe Their Parents?"			

W 11/8	Parents and children	Keller, "Four Theories of Filial Duty"	7	6	5
M 11/13	Marriage	Brake, "Minimal Marriage"			
W 11/15	Marriage	Wedgwood, "Is Civil Marriage Illiberal?"	8	7	6
M 11/20	Marriage	***Perez, "The Long Friday"***			
W 11/22	Marriage	***Kleingeld and Anderson, "Justice as a Family Value"***	9/final paper	8	7
M 11/27	End of life	***Gawande, "Letting Go"***			
W 11/29	End of life	***Singer, "Justifying Voluntary Euthanasia"***		9	8
M 12/4	End of life	***Longmore, "The Resistance: The Disability Rights Movement and Assisted Suicide"***			
W 12/6	Meaning in life	Taylor, "The Meaning of Life"			9
M 12/11	Meaning in life	Wolf, "Meaning of Life" AND Vitrano, "Meaningful Lives"			
W 12/20	Final paper due by 11 am				