

# PHIL 121: Philosophy and Morality

King 227, MWF 9:00-9:50 am

**Professor Amy Berg**

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**Office:** King 120A

**Office Hours:** Wednesdays 2:30-4:30 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; **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.
- 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 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.
  - Advice from students who have been successful in this course in the past is posted in 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 Fridays**; the first one will be assigned on Friday, February 3, and the last will be due on Friday, April 21. 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, May 11.**
- **Office-hours visit:** You are required to visit my office once during the first three weeks of the course (that is, **no later than Friday, February 17**). 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. At the end of each assignment, type or handwrite the Honor Pledge 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 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 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, 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. 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*: 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 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:** 48% (6% per assignment, based on your eight highest scores)
- **Final paper:** 37%
- **Office-hours visit (by Monday, February 20):** 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](mailto: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.

(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.)

### 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, 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, 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>).
- 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 1/30	Introduction	None			
W 2/1	Having children	***LaFollette, "Licensing Parents Revisited"***			
F 2/3	Having children	None	1		
M 2/6	Having children	***Rulli, "Preferring a Genetically-Related Child"***			
W 2/8	Having children	Purdy, "Can Having Children Be Immoral?"			

F 2/10	Having children	None	2	1	
M 2/13	Having children	Vehmas, "Parents and Genetic Information"			
W 2/15	Moral theories	Mill, "Utilitarianism"			
F 2/17	Moral theories	No reading	3	2	1
M 2/20	Abortion	Marquis, "An Argument that Abortion Is Wrong"			
W 2/22	CLASS CANCELED				
F 2/24	CLASS CANCELED				
M 2/27	Abortion	Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion"			
W 3/1	Moral theories	Kant, "Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals"			
F 3/3	Moral theories	No reading	4	3	2
M 3/6	Selection and enhancement	Savulescu, "Procreative Beneficence"			
W 3/8	Selection and enhancement	Sandel, "The Case against Perfection"			
F 3/10	Selection and enhancement	No reading	5	4	3
M 3/13	Moral theories	Driver, "Virtue Ethics"			
W 3/15	Parents and children	***MacFarquhar, "The Children of Strangers"***			
F 3/17	Parents and children	No reading	6	5	4
M 3/20	SPRING BREAK				
W 3/22	SPRING BREAK				
F 3/24	SPRING BREAK				
M 3/27	Parents and children	***Rachels, "Morality, Parents, and Children"***			
W 3/29	Parents and children	English, "What Do Grown Children Owe Their Parents?"			
F 3/31	Parents and children	No reading	7	6	5
M 4/3	Parents and children	Keller, "Four Theories of Filial Duty"			
W 4/5	Marriage	Brake, "Minimal Marriage"			
F 4/7	Marriage	No reading	8	7	6
M 4/10	Marriage	Wedgwood, "Is Civil Marriage Illiberal?"			
W 4/12	Marriage	***Perez, "The Long Friday"***			
F 4/14	Marriage	No reading	9	8	7
F 4/14	4:30 pm Elizabeth Brake lecture—attendance required unless excused				

M 4/17	Marriage	***Kleingeld and Anderson, "Justice as a Family Value"***			
W 4/19	End of life	***Gawande, "Letting Go"***			
F 4/21	End of life	No reading	Final paper	9	8
M 4/24	End of life	***Singer, "Justifying Voluntary Euthanasia"***			
W 4/26	End of life	***Longmore, "The Resistance: The Disability Rights Movement and Assisted Suicide"***			
F 4/28	End of life	No reading			9
M 5/1	Meaning in life	Taylor, "The Meaning of Life"			
W 5/3	Meaning in life	Wolf, "Meaning of Life"			
F 5/5	Meaning in life	Vitrano, "Meaningful Lives"			
T 5/11	Final paper due by 11 am				