

## Philosophy 106: Philosophy and Current Issues

(First version as of 1/7/15 - may be revised later)

The class will focus on a number of ethical topics of current interest, in particular world hunger, war, economic inequality, rights to sexual privacy, gay rights and marriage. Each of these issues presents various choices between different and even conflicting individual and social policies. The class will focus on reasons for and against adopting various courses of action, and will explore the cogency of the reasons offered. Students will work out their own positions and hopefully, come to better understand opposing views.

In the course of examining these reasons, we will become more familiar with a very general distinction between various forms of ethical justification - the distinction between consequentialist justifications and non-consequentialist justifications. We will explore how various of the positions with respect to the above issues are amenable to either form of justification.

Readings for the class will encompass both classic texts and current articles from philosophy journals. These will sometimes be quite dense, and require some work to understand. ***You may need to read them twice, once before and once after the lecture.***

**Professor:** Mark van Roojen, 1005 Oldfather Hall, 472-2428; email: [mvr@unl.edu](mailto:mvr@unl.edu), Office Hours: Mondays and Wednesdays 10:15 – 11:15 AM.

### Teaching Assistants:

Joseph Dante, 1023 Oldfather Hall, 472-4386; [Joeydante@gmail.com](mailto:Joeydante@gmail.com) .

“Alfred” Cheng Chang Tu, 1036 Oldfather Hall, 472-4388; [alfredego6@hotmail.com](mailto:alfredego6@hotmail.com) .

**Class Times:** This class meets twice a week in a large lecture section. Each student is also registered for a discussion/recitation section which is primarily for discussion and exercises aimed at helping you do the major assignments. These will be run by the teaching assistants and they meet every week. Discussion sections are at least as important as the lectures.

**Coursework:** One mid-semester written exam, one final exam, two short papers (5-6 pages each), a mostly clicker based lecture participation component (which may include occasional written homework), as well as participation in discussion sections. Students will be responsible for knowledge of all of the reading and some of the clicker questions will be designed to check that. Both exams will involve essays, the topics of which you will know ahead of time. We will be using the plagiarism catching software, SafeAssign that UNL has a license to use on assignments.

**Grading:** The exams and papers will each count for 22% of the course grade, and the homework/clicker exercises will count for 12%. Most clicker questions won't have unique correct answers so will be counted as correct however you answer. Some will be based on the readings and these will be graded according to their accuracy. Discussion section participation and even useful comments in lecture may be taken into account in borderline cases to raise a grade and also to lower it where students regularly miss sections. Due dates for the first test and first paper are listed in the schedule below. The second paper due date will be during the last 3 weeks or so of classes with the exact due date depending on which topic you choose to address. The final exam will be at the regularly scheduled final exam time for this class which is May 6 at 10 am.

**Difficulty:** This course is an introductory course in the sense that it presupposes no specialized background knowledge. But even philosophy texts that presuppose no background information require college level reading ability. None of the readings for this class are dumbed down and this can be daunting at first. **Many students will find the reading and the work assignments somewhat difficult. Usually it gets less difficult with practice over time.** The readings have been chosen from classic sources, court opinions, and articles by professional philosophers writing for other adults of similar ability. On average (and assuming college-level reading and writing abilities), this class should take you *six hours outside of class* on average per week though weeks in which major assignments are due should take more and other weeks will take somewhat less. Both the tests and the papers will require you to write coherent and well-reasoned essays. You are encouraged to take advantage of our office hours to ask questions and get help.

**Readings:** Readings will be from the electronic reserves at the library at <http://0-cors0812.unl.edu.library.unl.edu/ereserves/contents/phil106/phil106.html> (There should also be a link in Blackboard) and from available sites on the web where I could find them. This is to save you money (and partly also to make up for asking you to buy or borrow a clicker for the class). We expect you to download the materials so

that you have them available to consult in class. (You can print them or have them on a laptop whichever works for you.) I have listed URLs for the readings not on reserve at the relevant points in the schedule below, and I will put a copy of this syllabus on the web at <http://www.mvr1.com/106stuff/106SylS2015.pdf> so that you can click on links to make things easier. There is always a possibility that URLs may change so it makes sense to download and save the readings early in the semester. Should a link change it is your responsibility to find alternate locations to obtain the materials for yourselves. But let me know and I will try to help.

#### SCHEDULE OF ASSIGNMENTS:

1/13/15 Introduction

1/15/15 Philosophical Argument, Ethical Arguments, and Reading Philosophy.

**World Hunger:** What, if any, obligation or reason do we have to help feed the thousands and thousands of people starving in the world today? We will notice that people can have different ideas about what to do either because they disagree about the moral principles which give us obligations to others, **or** because they disagree about what the results of various policies would be.

1/21/15 Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol 1, No. 3, (Spring 1972) pp. 229-243, posted on web at: <http://www.utilitarian.net/singer/by/1972----.htm> and at <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.unl.edu/stable/2265052>.

1/26/15 Garrett Hardin, "Living on a Lifeboat," *Bioscience* (1975) pp.561-568 by the American Institute of Biological Sciences, posted on web at: [http://www.garretthardinsociety.org/articles/art\\_living\\_on\\_a\\_lifeboat.html](http://www.garretthardinsociety.org/articles/art_living_on_a_lifeboat.html).

1/28/15 Onora O'Neill, "Lifeboat Earth," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol 4, No. 3, (Spring 1975) pp. 273-292, available at the UNL library website via JSTOR at <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.unl.edu/stable/2265086>.

2/2/15 Scarce resources and the empirical world - no reading, but start the Bentham & Mill.

**Moral Theories: Utilitarianism, Consequentialism, and varieties of Non-consequentialism:** This is the most theoretical portion of the class, in which we look at general theoretical approaches to ethical issues. We will look at two kinds of general moral theory. One kind, those theories that are consequentialist, requires us *always* to bring about as much impartial good as possible. By impartial good, we mean good whose value does not change depending on the agent's relation to the outcome brought about. Non-consequentialist theories, on the other hand, say that we should *not always* bring about as much impartial good as possible, either because we sometimes have personal obligations which put constraints on what we can do to bring about overall good, or because the notion of impartial good does not always make sense. Utilitarianism is one kind of consequentialist view. It says that happiness or pleasure is the only impartial good, and that we should all do our best to bring as much happiness into being as possible. So we will start by looking at two classical formulations of utilitarian theories.

2/4/15 Excerpt from Jeremy Bentham's, excerpts from *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789) ( the first and fourth chapters - The principle of utility and Value of a Lot of Pleasure or Pain, How to be measured.)) available on the web at <http://www.econlib.org/library/Bentham/bnthPML.html> . Read chapters 1 & 4. John Stuart Mill, chapter 2 of *Utilitarianism* (1861) . This one is available on the web at [https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/m/mill/john\\_stuart/m645u/](https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/m/mill/john_stuart/m645u/).

2/9/15 Bernard Williams, excerpt from *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1973). On electronic reserve at UNL library.

2/11/15 Robert Nozick, Excerpt from *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York; Basic Books, 1974). On electronic reserve at UNL library.

- 2/16/15 Phillipa Foot, "Utilitarianism and the Virtues," Mind 94 (1985) pp. 196-209, available through UNL library JSTOR database at: <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.unl.edu/stable/2254745>.
- 2/18/15 W. D. Ross, The Right and the Good, chapter 2, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930) pp. 16-22. On electronic reserve at UNL library.

**War:** Are there situations in which entering or starting a war is just, and if so what criteria would have to be met before entering or starting a war is justified? Students will write a paper discussing a particular war and arguing whether our participation in it was or is justified or not.

- 2/23/15 No reading/ lecture on wars and on Pacifism.
- 2/25/15 **First Exam** - on hunger/resources and moral theory topics.
- 3/2/15 Jonathan Glover, chapter 19 of Causing Death and Saving Lives, (Penguin, 1977) pp. 251-269. On electronic reserve at UNL Library.
- 3/4/15 Jeffrie G. Murphy, "The Killing of the Innocent," The Monist 57, no. 4 (1973), on the web at: <http://www.ditext.com/murphy/innocent.html>.
- 3/9/15 Elizabeth Anscombe, "War and Murder," in Nuclear Weapons: A Catholic Response, ed. by Walter Stein, (Merlin Press Ltd.) 1961 pp.45-62. On electronic reserve at UNL library.
- 3/11/15 James F. Childress, "Just War Theories," Theological Studies, 39, (1978) pp.427-445, you can get this from a database at UNL library. The link I got is as follows, but you may need to do a search for the particular article to get the right page:  
<http://0-search.proquest.com.library.unl.edu/pao/docview/1297090645/fulltextPDF/142BF79D90F54A827E4/7?accountid=8116> .
- 3/16/15 Michael Walzer, "Supreme Emergency," chapter 16 of Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations, (Basic Books, 1977) pp. 251-268. On electronic reserve at UNL library.

**Economic Inequality:** The distribution of wealth and income in this country is fairly unequal relative to many other countries and also relative to past distributions in this country. Some people think there are reasons to lament these patterns whereas others think they pose no problem. We'll look at some arguments on both sides of this debate. The reading list for this section provisional and may change as I have just added it to respond to current concerns about these issues and I may want to tweak it.

- 3/18/15 Some empirical information about the distribution of wealth and income in the US. No reading for today but you may want to read ahead as you'll be working on your papers for the next class when there is reading.

#### SPRING BREAK

- 3/30/15 **First Papers Due** - at start of class. Handout from Professor Uwe Reinhardt of Princeton University on Benthamite Utilitarianism and the distribution of wealth and income. This can be found at:  
[http://www.princeton.edu/~reinhard/pdfs/100-NEXT\\_HOW\\_ECONOMISTS\\_BASTARDIZED\\_BENTHAMITE\\_UTILITARIANISM.pdf](http://www.princeton.edu/~reinhard/pdfs/100-NEXT_HOW_ECONOMISTS_BASTARDIZED_BENTHAMITE_UTILITARIANISM.pdf)
- 4/1/15 Short excerpt from John Rawls's *Theory of Justice*, (Cambridge; Harvard, 1971) on reserve for this course with the electronic reserves at UNL's library.
- 4/6/15 Excerpts from Robert Nozick's, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, (New York; Basic Books, 1974) on reserve at UNL library e-reserves for this course.
- 4/8/15 Gillens and Page, "Testing Testing Theories of American Politics:Elites, Interest Groups, and

Average Citizens,” forthcoming in *Perspectives on Politics*, Fall 2014.  
<https://www.princeton.edu/~mgilens/Gilens%20homepage%20materials/Gilens%20and%20Page/Gilens%20and%20Page%202014-Testing%20Theories%203-7-14.pdf>

**Privacy Rights/Gay Rights:** Do adults have a right to be free of governmental interference with consensual sexual activities? What could justify such a right? Are there other rights or obligations that affect how the government treats sexuality and ties of affection between adults. Should such rights (if any) include a right to marry a person of one’s choosing? (The consensual sex issue is in many ways parallel to issues concerning the legality of drugs and alcohol and other activities that are allegedly banned because they are harmful to the people who engage in them. We will allow those who write on that topic to use those issues as their focus if they wish.)

- 4/13/15      Bowers v. Hardwick, 106 S. Ct. 2841, 478 US 186 (1986) - US Supreme Court Opinion  
<http://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/478/186> (The site divides the case into seven or eight separate pages which you have to click through, all of which need to be printed out and read to get the whole case.) If that link does not work, try  
[http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC\\_CR\\_0478\\_0186\\_ZS.html](http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC_CR_0478_0186_ZS.html) .
- 4/15/15      John Stewart Mill, On Liberty, Chapter 4, available on the web at: <http://www.bartleby.com/130/> .  
Also review Bentham from beginning of semester.
- 4/20/15      Lord Patrick Devlin, “Morals and the Criminal Law,” from The Enforcement of Morals, (Oxford University Press) 1965. pp. 1-25. This will be on electronic reserve in the library.
- 4/22/15      Ralph Wedgewood, “The Fundamental Argument for Same-Sex Marriage”, Journal of Political Philosophy 7 (1999), 225-242,  
<http://0-onlinelibrary.wiley.com.library.unl.edu/doi/10.1111/1467-9760.00075/pdf> .
- 4/27/15      Jeff Jordan, “Contra Same-Sex Marriage,” in Same Sex Marriage; The Moral And Legal Debate, Baird & Rosenbaum, eds. (2004), 39-52. This will be on electronic reserve in the library.
- 4/29/15      Final Lecture and Last Official Time to hand in Final Paper as determined by University rules for dead week. We will start taking points off when papers are more than two days late.
- Students who want their papers back with comments in time for the final exam should write their papers on the the topic covered during the previous section so that they can hand them in by December 1 or 3 (We’ll let you know which in class.)
- 5/6/15      **Final Exam** at 10 AM in the same room as usual.

**ACE Program Credit Statement:** Successful completion of this course will serve to meet either Student Learning Outcome #8 (Explain ethical principles, civics, and stewardship, and their importance to society) or Student Learning Outcome #9 (Exhibit global awareness or knowledge of human diversity through analysis of an issue) of the ACE general education program of UNL. Explanation and assessment of these outcomes: The principle topics of the course are, as noted above, world hunger, war, economic inequality, rights to sexual privacy, gay rights, and marriage. All of these topics involve application of ethical principles relevant to SLO #8, and the concerns with civic duty and stewardship of social justice also relevant to SLO #8 are specifically addressed through the topics on affirmative action, rights to sexual privacy, gay rights, and marriage. These learning outcomes are assessed by either the final exam and/or the second paper. The topics of world hunger and just war will develop global awareness and knowledge of human diversity through the analysis of not merely one but two important issues, and hence satisfy SLO #9, and these outcomes will be assessed by the first exam and/or the first paper.