

PHI 209 Contemporary Moral Issues

Syllabus

Fall 2022

Dr. Joseph M. Forte

This course is an examination of the moral and legal ramifications of various prominent contemporary issues worked out against the background provided by ethical theory. Topics for consideration include: abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, war and peace, terrorism, violence, sexuality, discrimination, animal rights, world hunger, and the environment. In each course unit, students will be challenged to discern both the nuances and seriousness involved in modern ethical decision making. Students will also be challenged to notice the immediate relevance of every issue discussed.

Learning Outcomes:

1. Students will engage in the discovery of (a.) ethical nuance, (b.) both the difficulty and the possibility of applying ethical theory to practice, and (c.) the importance of such application.
2. Students will demonstrate the development of their ability to solve real-world problems by reading, writing about, and discussing the great books of this course.
3. Students will demonstrate that the course has prompted them to live more reflectively; to give in to fewer snap judgments and ideologies.
4. Students will begin to engage in a life-long commitment to understanding self, others, and the world.
5. Students will demonstrate the ability to identify weaknesses in ad hoc opinions and fallacious reasoning, beginning to see how the aforementioned denigrates society. Students will develop and begin to use tools to resist poor reasoning and its effects.
6. Students will begin to discern the value in collaborative learning, will begin developing a deep love of self and connection to something larger. They will be provoked to take risks and effect change.
7. Students will demonstrate the development of writing and oral communication skills, active reading, critical thinking, and creative thinking skills.
8. Students will demonstrate the honing and development of their thoughts and opinions about humanity's greatest, most fundamental questions, including: How shall we live? What is the good life? How are ethical theories best applied to the moral problems of today? What is the relationship between man's political life and man's ethical life? What is the relationship between sexuality and ethics? Between friendship and ethics? Why is human life so valuable?

Office Hours: MW: 4-5:30PM, TR 2-4PM, either by video chat or in-person in my office; Be sure to sign up on the shared Google doc (https://docs.google.com/document/d/1_k1r8pIFEQDd3-TdFn2Y82NmolkB0a5qt2tB-T2V-tl/edit?usp=sharing) before your desired meeting time so that I know to expect you. If you sign up right before the time during which we are to meet (within 2 hrs), that's fine, but just please shoot me an email so that I can know to expect you. There is a Zoom link within the Google doc above.

Class Meeting Time:

PHI 209A: TR 11-12:15 AM, EST

PHI 209B: TR 4-5:15PM EST

Required Book:

Moral Issues and Movies: An Introduction to Ethical Theories and Issues through the Lens of Film, by Forte (2021): <https://he.kendallhunt.com/product/moral-issues-and-movies-introduction-ethical-theories-and-issues-through-lens-film>

Note: Either the electronic or print version is permissible. Students' assignments in the book will begin during the second week of classes and we will use the text in class at least once/week. It is recommended that you order the book directly from the publisher, by using the link above. That way will most likely be faster and less expensive than the bookstore.

Assignments and Grading: Course Requirements:

1. Regular reading assignments specified on the schedule below, as well as regular class attendance and participation
2. 2 graded, synchronous in-class discussions
3. 1 journal, submitted 2X for grading
4. 2 CLAIM papers (2 pgs each)
5. 2 Tests
6. 1 final exam
7. One PEP (Public Engagement Project), done with a small group

Grading (total of 1000 points):

- 200 points (20%): Regular class participation
- 200 points (20%): CLAIM Papers (2 x 100 pts each)
- 100 points (10%): Final Exam
- 100 points (10%): Final Project (PEP)
- 100 points (10%): Graded discussions (2 x 50 pts each)
- 100 points (10%): Journal, final submission
- 100 points (10%): Tests (2 x 50 pts each)
- 50 points (5%): Class Attendance
- 50 points (5%): Journal up to mid-term

Policies:

Film Viewing Policies:

This course uses mainstream recent films as a vehicle for understanding ethical theories and issues. It is the student's responsibility to obtain and view the films assigned. The textbook includes links to websites that list all of the streaming services on which each film is available (justwatch.com is very good for this).

In some cases, there might be a cost involved in obtaining access to a film, depending on the streaming services students have subscriptions to. In the event that there is a cost, it is students' responsibility to either obtain the necessary funds, split the funds with classmates (to watch the film on the same account), or watch the film on a classmate's account.

In some cases, assigned films may be too disturbing for highly sensitive people to watch. Therefore, if you are fearful of being disturbed by a film, and/or if you typically avoid such films, I highly recommend considering the ratings, advisories, and reviews of a film before viewing it. This information is readily available on the IMDB page for each film. If you think it will be psychologically problematic for you to watch it, please don't watch it. Instead, it is your responsibility either to watch a censored version of the film, read a written version of the film (especially if it was a book before becoming a film), or to find and watch a substitute film about similar philosophical themes or issues. Wikipedia is a great source for the latter, as it contains thorough listing of films on many topics. As long as I am notified, I will be sure to find ways to include in class discussions students who are doing the aforementioned substitutes.

Class Participation:

The overall participation grade is composed of grades given on a class-by-class basis, explained below. Students will receive an A for a session of participation that is very good or excellent. This involves being consistently attentive--indicated mainly by some question-asking and answering, participating actively in small group breakout sessions, and also by simply maintaining an attentive demeanor and at least occasionally taking notes (if remote: Zoom video and audio both turned on).

Students receive a B for a session in which they attended but neither contributed anything substantive to class proceedings nor detracted from class proceedings in any way.

Students will receive a D for poor participation, which includes but is not limited to class disruptions.

Class disruptions include any activity that detracts from the order of class proceedings and especially includes the sounds of phone calls, texts, speaking out of turn, etc. Excessively long departures from class sessions (including a blacked out Zoom screen) are also disruptive, as is falling asleep, having sidebar conversations, playing with one's phone, etc.

Remote students who are experiencing unusual circumstances beyond their control that make it a hardship to have both the audio and video of the Zoom session turned on may request that they be allowed not to show themselves, free from penalty. It is always acceptable to use an artificial background image.

Poor participation grades will also be given to students whose demeanor is clearly not attentive and engaged, as well as for students whose efforts in class (or lack thereof) clearly indicate that they have not done the assigned reading, or have not completed it well enough to be able to contribute insightfully.

Students will not be penalized for wrong answers (unless it is clearly evident that the student hasn't done the reading), asking questions that may seem obvious to some but not to others (There are no dumb questions!...Kind of!), or for lightening the mood with humor (provided it is relevant and funny!).

There are also no deductions for standing up to stretch or for consuming a non-messy, non-smelly, non-alcoholic refreshment in order to help stay alert.

Students receive an F for classes in which they are not in attendance.

The lowest 4 participation grades, in addition to F's for excused absences after the 4th, will be dropped before the instructor calculates the final grade. See below for more information about excusals from attendance.

In addition to excusals for class attendance, students may request to be excused from participation for a session if they are experiencing severe circumstances making it unfairly difficult to participate. If the request is granted, there would be no participation grade given for that particular day.

However, even for students facing persistently extreme and difficult circumstances beyond their control, the instructor cannot grant an unlimited number of excusals. A student who is either absent or who requests an excusal for participation in more than half of the class sessions that took place, for instance, could not receive a passing participation grade, regardless of circumstances.

Class attendance:

Attendance is taken at the start of each class. If a student misses the roll call, it is their responsibility to let the instructor know they were present: either through an email or simply a verbal confirmation at the end of class. Please do not interrupt class to let the instructor know you are present.

Full credit (100 points) will be awarded to students who accrue 4 absences or fewer and who are generally punctual.

Each unexcused absence after the 4th results in a 10-point deduction (whole grade level) from the overall attendance grade.

Each time a student is more than 10 minutes late to class or who leaves more than 10 minutes early, 3 points will be deducted—unless the student has requested and been granted an excusal.

Students who know they will be late or will be leaving early should notify the instructor if the student thinks an excusal is warranted.

Excusals for absences, latenesses, and early departures will be granted on a case-by-case basis for students facing extraordinary mitigating circumstances beyond their control such as a serious illness, or a demanding university activity like being a student-athlete. In the latter case, documentation is required. In the former, some proof or convincing explanation is required. As a result of this policy, **students need not contact the instructor about absences at all, unless 4 have already been accrued and the student is facing an extraordinary circumstance that may merit an exception to the policy.**

Even for students facing persistently extreme and difficult circumstances beyond their control, the instructor cannot grant an unlimited number of excusals. A student who is in attendance for fewer than half of the class sessions that took place, for instance, could not possibly receive a passing attendance grade, regardless of circumstances.

Special Note: The instructor typically does not notify students when their attendance or participation grade is being affected by their performance, except at the time when mid-term grades and final grades are being calculated and posted. Therefore, it is the students' responsibility to monitor these portions of their grade by periodically checking in with the instructor by e-mail, if they so wish.

Zoom Etiquette (aka "Zetiquette"):

If it should happen that one or more students participate remotely, those who do so should take care to do so from a socially appropriate place. Being on or in one's bed, in a bathroom, or driving a car, for instance, are inappropriate. Bedrooms in and of themselves are not inappropriate settings from which to participate remotely in class.

Readings:

Students are expected to have each assigned reading prepared before the class for which it is assigned, which means that students must not only read the reading at least once in its entirety, but must read thoughtfully and critically.

This means that students are expected to take notes on the readings while reading them, or at least mark passages that are especially interesting, that seem to be especially important, as well as those that provoke confusion and/or criticism.

Some prefer to read the text twice in order to achieve a full understanding of it, for example, by reading it through quickly once and then more slowly a second time, taking more notes during the second reading. Others prefer to read very slowly, taking careful notes, the first time around.

This class is designed to reward those who complete the required reading well and view the required films attentively on a regular basis.

Reading philosophical texts well is a skill that results in a particular type of rigorous, stimulating learning, for which there is no substitute.

Papers:

Late papers will be marked down one whole letter grade (A to B, B to C, etc.) as soon as they are late, and then another letter grade for each week they are late after that. No papers will be accepted after the final exam date. Unpenalized extensions may be granted if the student requests the extension at least one day prior to the due date (unless mitigating circumstances do not allow), and if the instructor deems the extension warranted.

Make-up assessments: Make-up graded discussions and tests are permitted only for serious reasons beyond the student's control, and only if the make-up is discussed with the instructor at least one day prior to the assessment (this includes special cases like medical issues and student-athletes). For instance, missing an assessment due to oversleeping would not warrant a make-up, but rather, would warrant a score of zero on that particular assessment. On the other hand, a serious medical issue, or a student-athlete having a game, would warrant a make-up, if that student discussed this with the instructor at least one day prior to the assessment.

The journal:

Beginning in the first class, all students will regularly contribute to a journal that will be graded twice throughout the term: at mid-term and just before finals week. *It must be submitted as a doc, docx, or PDF file. The instructor cannot read or grade any other file types.*

The journal will consist of notes that students take when (1) doing assigned readings, (2) watching or listening to content on Canvas, and (3) attending class.

Question: What should you write while watching videos and films and listening to class discussions?

Answer: Anything you find interesting, notable, surprising, concerning, controversial, confusing, and/or worthy of further discussion (perhaps with the instructor one-on-one). Also anything you think you'd want to have written down in order to study effectively for the final exam. Also, of course, take notes on any "mini-lectures" the instructor gives. Another possible course of action here is to write a few lines of reflection every time one completes a reading and/or a session of class. This could be helpful in "digesting" and internalizing the content.

Question: How long does the journal need to be and how will it be graded?

Answer: Roughly, at least 2 pages (double spaced, size 12 font, 1 inch margins; roughly 500 words) is expected each week. In total, students should have at least 12 pages by mid-term and another 12 by finals week. Students will not be graded on grammar or the quality of their writing style. Rather, students will be graded on (1) thoroughness and care, (2) Organization and structure, (3) coherence, (4) originality, and (5) accuracy. It will only be collected and graded twice, via Canvas submission. Regarding (1), see above about length. Regarding (2), be sure to use headings and sub-headings. Be sure also to label each entry clearly. Regarding originality (4), no more than 20% of a student's journal may match content for which they are not the author. This includes notes copied from other students, Power Point presentations, internet sources, etc. Students are advised to check their Turnitin originality report before submitting.

University-Wide Policies:

Rivier Academic Integrity Policy –

<https://catalog.rivier.edu/content.php?catoid=114&navoid=2089#:~:text=of%20Professional%20Conduct.-Academic%20Integrity,-Academic%20integrity%20involves>

Culture of Respect: Sexual Misconduct, Harassment and Gender-Based Violence Policies – Link to

Policy: [Sexual- Misconduct-Policy-FINAL-4-14-21.pdf](#) (rivier.edu)

Emergency/Inclement Weather Closing Policy -

<https://catalog.rivier.edu/content.php?catoid=114&navoid=2089&hl=inclement&returnto=search#:~:text=31%20or%2033.-Emergency/Inclement%20Weather%20Closing%20Policy,-Rivier%20University%20communicates>

STATEMENT ON REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS

Rivier University is committed to providing reasonable accommodations for all persons with disabilities. The syllabus is available in alternate formats upon request. If you need course adaptations or accommodations due to disability, or if you need to make special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please make an appointment with the Office of Disability Services as soon as possible. Students that receive accommodation letters, please meet with me to discuss the provision of those accommodations as soon as possible. The Office of Disability Services (ODS) is the designated department responsible for approving and coordinating reasonable accommodations and services for students with disabilities. ODS will help you understand your rights and responsibilities under the Americans with Disabilities Act and provide you further assistance with requesting and arranging accommodations.

Office of Disability Services

Learning
Commons, room
115
disabilityservices@rivier.edu

CANVAS AND LEARNING TECHNOLOGY INFORMATION

Technical Requirements -

<https://www.rivier.edu/academics/online/> Email, Canvas, and

Technical Issues Information

- Please take time to become familiar with Canvas prior to class. While it may be only a few months since you have worked with Canvas, there are continuing updates.
- Rivier University email will be the primary mode of communication.
- If you need assistance on any IT related issues, below are some helpful methods of gaining assistance:
 - Rivier IT Support: (603) 897-8469 and itsupport@rivier.edu
 - Canvas Tech Support: (877) 469-0137
 - Canvas Student Guide - <https://guides.instructure.com/m/4212>
 - Canvas Help Guides - <https://community.canvaslms.com/>

University Grading Scale

A	100-93	4.000 GPA
A-	92-90	3.667 GPA
B+	89-87	3.333 GPA
B	86-83	3.000 GPA
B-	82-80	2.667 GPA
C+	79-77	2.333 GPA
C	76-73	2.000 GPA
C-	72-70	1.667 GPA
D+	69-67	1.333 GPA
D	66-63	1.000 GPA
F	62 and below	0.000 GPA

Notes to students:

Obviously, in order for students to benefit from the full potential of this course, they must put forth effort to complete the assignments. Putting forth such effort will often not result in complete understanding of the assigned content. THIS IS OKAY. Part of the aforementioned course goal is improving students' ability to learn, including their learning about learning. Real learning is often incremental, painstaking, fraught with failure and setbacks, difficult to reify, intangible, and assessable in long term rather than short term results. This is the way much of the learning in this course will take place.

Regularly doing your best on the assignments both in and out of class WILL RESULT IN A PASSING GRADE, at least. I promise.

Those who clearly make an effort consistently, from weeks 1-14, will likely earn A's. F's and D's will likely be earned not by those who fall short of full understanding, but who show a repeated pattern of giving up.

Some Epigrams to Consider:

Active reading means writing.

Active reading means re-reading.

Active reading needs context; needs a frame of reference, but also needs to be understood without bias, in its own right, and on its own terms.

On participation and writing: When certain, reconsider; Be decisive, yet open.

Good participation means taking notes whenever possible.

Good participation means asking questions as they arise.

Good participation means responding, in some way, to questions when asked. Good participation is active, not passive.

Good participation often means leading.

Good participation can be silent, but not distant, let alone absent.

Good participation means having pennies, *at least*, for thoughts.

Good participation is both energizing and exhausting; like a good workout.

Diligent writing means getting feedback before, during, and after.

Diligent writing means taking time to think before, during, and after. Diligent writing means editing, and editing again.

Diligent writing is enjoyable to read.

Learning means getting confused.

Learning means disagreeing.

Learning means taking delight, being amazed, being intrigued, being stimulated. Learning is work, and is also leisure.

Learning has no reward, is its reward, and has its rewards.

Units and Class Schedule:

(See the Canvas modules for further details)

Readings in italics are to be completed *before* the class for which they are assigned.

Week 1:

Thurs 9/8: Introduction.

(add/drop over at 5PM on Tues 9/13)

Unit 1: Ethical Theories

Week 2

9/13: *In Moral Issues and Movies:*

1. *Read sections of appendix on stoics, Rome and the medieval period, Aquinas, Locke, and Kant (pgs 246-254).*

2. *Watch appendix videos on those pages, skipping those on Augustine, the 30 Years War, and the French Revolution. It is not necessary to view the entire playlist on the high middle ages.*
3. *Also read Chapter 3*

9/15: Read appendix p.255, then Read Chapter 4

Unit 2: Bioethics

Week 3

9/20: Students prepare by writing down their thoughts and opinions on the issue of abortion, and then watching the film "Juno"

9/22: Read Chapter 5 on abortion (all)

Week 4

9/27: Read Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion," and Marquis, "Why Abortion is Immoral" (both available on Canvas)

9/29: Watch Million Dollar Baby

Week 5

10/4: Read Chapter 6 on euthanasia and assisted suicide

10/6: Watch An Inconvenient Truth and An Inconvenient Sequel

Week 6

10/11: Watch Cowspiracy and Seaspiracy

Graded Discussion 1, part 1 (Group 1 is assessed)

10/13: Read sections of appendix relevant to Bacon and Descartes (pgs 251-252); Read chapter up to and including 7.4.2

By Friday, 10/14 at 11:59PM, CLAIM Paper 1 is due

Week 7

10/18: Watch "Avatar" (James Cameron version)

Graded Discussion 1, part 2 (Group 2 is assessed)

10/20: Read short bio in appendix on Leopold (p.256) and read 7.4.3-end

By Friday, 10/21 at 11:59PM, the first half of the journal is due

Week 8

10/25: Watch *Food, Inc.*

10/27: Students prepare by watching *Contagion*, taking note of the film's treatment of non-human animals

Week 9

11/1: Read Ch 8

11/3: **Test 1 is class**

Unit 3: Ethics and Politics

Week 10

11/8: Students prepare by viewing *Schindler's List* while being attentive to strategically placed details.

11/10: Students prepare by reading Chapter 9, preceded by the relevant sections of the appendix (pgs 256-258) and watching the 2 videos on communism (p.256).

Week 11

11/15: Watch episode 1 of "The Vietnam War," by Burns and Novick, and any other 2 episodes of your choosing

Graded Discussion 2 (Group 2)

11/17: Read appendix section on Augustine (p247-48) and watch video on his life; Read Chapter 10 on Just War Theory

Week 12:

11/22: Watch *Dead Man Walking*

Graded Discussion 2 (Group 1)

Thanksgiving Break

Week 13

11/29: Read Chapter 11

12/1: **Test 2 is class**

By Friday 12/2 at 11:59PM: The final half of the journal is due.

By Friday, 12/2 at 11:59PM: CLAIM Paper 2 is due

Week 14

12/6: **PEP First Version due in-class**

12/8: **PEP Final Version due at class meeting time**

Final exam:

Section A (meets at 11): Exam is Tues Dec 13, 11AM-1PM EST

Section B (meets at 2:30): Exam is Tues Dec, 13 2-4PM EST

NO LATE ASSIGNMENTS ACCEPTED AFTER: Tues Dec 13 at 11:59PM EST (Penalties apply unless special arrangements have been agreed upon.)