Phil 140 Syllabus, Winter 2014

Philosophy 140: Contemporary Moral Issues
Syllabus
Winter 2014
Instructor: Ryan Ogilvie
Email: rogilvie@umd.edu

Course Description:

This course is organized around three big philosophical questions: (1) What is the moral significance of human life? (2) What moral justification do we have for punishing certain individuals? (3) Do animals have moral standing?

Each of these questions raises a host smaller questions. For instance, we typically believe that human life is of utmost importance. Does this mean that doctors should always aim to preserve a human life? Should doctors be able to override a clear-thinking patient’s decision to deny treatment, if the doctor feels the patient is making the wrong decision? What, if anything, is morally objectionable about euthanization? Issues raised by our second question are: Is punishment for “righting certain wrongs,” or is it for deterring future criminal acts? Or, should punishment aim towards rehabilitation? What counts as a “fitting” punishment? The first two topics will introduce a number of theoretical considerations about moral justification. This will allow us to ask whether any of the ethical considerations that apply in the human case also apply in the non-human case. For example, if human life is valuable, might non-human life also be valuable, and to what extent? If animals have moral standing, is it immoral to eat animals?

There is nothing new about these questions; philosophers have been asking them for years. As such, the aim of this course isn’t (necessarily) to definitively answer any of these big questions, but rather, to get clear on what’s at issue, to evaluate previous attempts at answering these questions, to see where we stand on some of the smaller questions, and to reflect on our current moral practices with respect to our current treatment of patients, convicted criminals, and animals.

Evaluation:

5 Quizzes (5% per quiz): 25%
Midterm: 30%
Paper (5-6 pages): 30%
Participation: 15%

For purposes of averaging and calculating final grades, the following conversion will be used:


Texts:

All readings will be made available on Canvas. There is no required text that you must purchase.
Course Mechanics:

This is an online course that will use UMD’s Canvas as an interface. All course content will be posted on Canvas. You will be expected to watch recorded lectures (posted daily on Canvas) and to participate in online discussion. A reading will be assigned for each day. You are expected to have read the reading prior to watching the posted lecture for that day.

Quizzes:

Quizzes will be posted on Canvas periodically. They will be timed. You will have 30 min. to complete the quiz, from the time that you begin the quiz. Further, you must begin the quiz prior to the quiz deadline. (If the quiz is posted on the 12th, you will have until midnight to complete start the quiz.) I call these “Mickey Mouse” quizzes. They are to ensure that you are keeping up with the lectures and readings, and have a good grasp of the basic concepts discussed in the course material. Most of the questions will be multiple-choice, with one or two short answer questions.

Midterm:

The midterm will mirror the structure of the quizzes, but the questions will require a deeper understanding of the course content. There will be a number of multiple-choice questions, and three or four short answer questions.

Online Discussions:

Discussion questions will be posted in a discussion forum on Canvas. The questions will be designed to elicit a conversation among students. The instructor will logon at a particular time each day (the time to be determined) to help generate discussion regarding the posted questions and other course material, as well as to answer any questions that students might have.

Participation in discussion forums is required, and 15% of the students’ grade is awarded on the basis of his or her performance. To obtain the full 15 points, students need only offer thoughtful comments on each day’s discussion questions, and to respond to student and/or instructor comments. Students are allowed two “free passes,” meaning they can fail to post comments on two separate days without penalty, no questions asked. Any further failure to participate will be reflected in the student’s participation grade.

In addition to discussing the course material, certain discussion sessions will be dedicated to paper “brainstorming” and outlining.

Paper:

Students will be assigned a list of possible paper topics and are required to write a 5-6 page paper on a single topic. Students may write on a topic of their own choosing, but they must obtain permission from the instructor prior to writing.

The aim of the paper assignment is to have students apply the various concepts discussed in the course material to a particular issue, to think carefully and critically about the issue, and to take a firm stance on the issue.

Papers will be graded according to a student’s command of the course content, thoughtfulness, creativity, and presentation of the ideas (grammaticalness, clarity of writing, organization).
Religious Observances and other Absences:

Students unable to participate in online discussions or write quizzes or exams because of religious observance must notify the instructor at least two weeks in advance of the observance.

Students who miss a quiz, midterm, or the paper deadline will require a medical note.

Academic Dishonesty Policy:

All students are expected to comply with the University’s code of academic integrity. Academic dishonesty of any kind will automatically result in a grade of XF for the course.

The following statement is from the University:

The University of Maryland, College Park has a nationally recognized Code of Academic Integrity, administered by the Student Honor Council. This Code sets standards for academic integrity at Maryland for all undergraduate and graduate students. As a student you are responsible for upholding these standards for this course. It is very important for you to be aware of the consequences of cheating, fabrication, facilitation, and plagiarism. For more information on the Code of Academic Integrity or the Student Honor Council, please visit:
http://www.studenthonorcouncil.umd.edu/whatish.html

Students With Disabilities

Students that require certain forms of accommodation for their work are asked to inform the instructor and the university’s Disability Support Service to arrange for accommodation.