

PROBLEMS OF ETHICS AND SOCIETY

PROFESSOR: Daniel W. Harris (danielwharris@gmail.com)

OFFICE HOURS: Tuesdays, 3:45-4:45 or by appointment

COURSE WEBSITE: danielwharris.com/teaching/250

ABOUT THE COURSE

This course will focus on issues of general ethical and political interest—things like the following:

- Is it okay to kill animals for meat?
- How high should our taxes be?
- When is it okay to lie?
- How much inequality is too much?
- Is the gender wage gap unjust?
- Should you have children?
- What should be our immigration policy?

Our goal will be to approach these issues through ongoing public debates, and then to look at the philosophical issues that are lurking behind them.

EVALUATION

Requirements:

Participation: 20%

Take-Home Midterm: 20%

Term Paper: 30%

Options:

Final Exam: 30%

2-page essays: 10% each (up to 3)

5-minute presentations: 10% each (up to 3)

Have your topic chosen for the end of the semester: 10%

Note: the requirements add up to 70%. You can fill in the other 30% from this menu, as you like. I will add up your grade from these chunks in the way that is most advantageous to you, given what you've done.

SCHEDULE AND WEBSITE

The readings are all available on the course website. Further materials (such as slides) may appear there too. Although you don't need to buy anything for this course, you may want to get a copy of the following book. It's cheap, we'll read several chapters of it, and the PDF I have uploaded isn't very nice:

Michael Sandel, Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do? Farrar, Straus and Giroux. ISBN: 9780374532505

PARTICIPATION

Although the class will involve some lecturing, it is intended to be mainly a discussion course. You are expected to arrive at class having completed the required readings for that day and to ask questions and actively participate in class discussion. Failure to do these things will negatively impact your participation grade.

TAKE-HOME MIDTERM

The midterm will consist of short-essay questions. You will have approximately two weeks to complete it. It will be due on March 22nd.

TERM PAPER

On the term paper, you will apply the philosophical knowledge learned in class to an ethical issue that isn't on the syllabus. The term paper should be about 7-8 pages long.

FINAL EXAM

The final exam will be written in class and will cover content from the whole course.

Note: the final exam is optional. You have other ways to earn these points if you'd prefer.

TWO-PAGE ESSAYS

You can write up to 3 two-page (500 word) essays, each of which will count for 10% of your grade. Each one of these essays should make a concise argument for or against some position that we've discussed in class—an argument that you don't think we adequately discussed during class time. This argument could be based on further research you've done, or it can be an argument that you've come up with on your own. Either way, it should not just be a repetition of something we've already talked about extensively in class. (However, if you make a good, original point during class discussion, I may suggest that you turn it into a 2-page paper or a 5-minute presentation.)

Note: these essays are optional. You have other ways to earn these points if you'd prefer.

FIVE-MINUTE PRESENTATIONS

This is the oral version of the two-page paper. At the beginning of every class, I will ask who would like to speak for five minutes about the topic of the previous session. This will be your chance to give a new argument on the topic of the previous class. You can receive 10 points each for up to three of these presentations over the course of the semester.

Although it is only five minutes, your talk should be carefully organized and well delivered. You can use slide if you want. (Email them to me at least an hour before class.) Or you can bring a 1-page handout to distribute to the students (you'll need to bring 26 copies). Or you can deliver pure oratory. In any case, your presentation should be well thought out and it should include information and arguments that haven't been discussed in class so far. After each presentation, there will be a class discussion about what was presented.

Note: these presentations are optional. You have other ways to earn these points if you'd prefer.

END-OF-SEMESTER TOPICS

The five classes after spring break don't yet have topics. It is up to you to suggest them. More specifically: you can email me to suggest a topic at any time during the semester. At the start of spring break, I will allow everyone in the class to vote on which topics they would most like to study after spring break. The top 2-3 will be chosen. If your topic is chosen, you will get 5 bonus points toward your final grade.

To suggest a topic, email me with a short description of the topic, a link to a possible reading (these can be magazine articles or philosophy papers that you've found), and an argument for why we should study it. This should be no more than 200 words in total. I will post everyone's suggestions and the whole class will vote on topics during spring break.

Note: this is optional.

ACADEMIC DISHONESTY

Hunter College regards acts of academic dishonesty (e.g., plagiarism, cheating on examinations, obtaining unfair advantage, and falsification of records and official documents) as serious offenses against the values of intellectual honesty. The College is committed to enforcing the CUNY Policy on Academic Integrity and will pursue cases of academic dishonesty according to the Hunter College Academic Integrity Procedures.

	TUESDAYS	FRIDAYS
1	(no class)	January 25 Introduction
2	January 29 David Foster Wallace: Consider The Lobster	February 1 Michael Sandel: The Greatest Happiness Principle- Utilitarianism
3	February 5 Elizabeth Harman: The Moral Significance of Animal Pain and Death	February 8 Christine Korsgaard: Getting Animals in View
4	February 12 No Class (Lincoln's Birthday)	February 15 Matthew Yglesias: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is floating a 70 percent top tax rate — here's the research that backs her up Ryan Bourne: No, Economists Don't Agree a 70 Percent Top Marginal Tax Rate Is a Good Idea
5	February 19 Michael Sandel: Do We Own Ourselves? Libertarianism	February 22 Michael Sandel: Hired Help: Markets and Morals
6	February 26 Michael Sandel: What Matters is the Motive / Immanuel Kant	March 1 Larissa MacFarquhar: The Comforting Fictions of Dementia Care
7	March 5 Matthew Yglesias: Everything You Need to Know about Income Inequality Alvin Chang: America's wealth gap is split along racial lines — and it's getting dangerously wider	March 8 Michael Sandel: The Case for Equality / John Rawls
8	March 12 Harry Frankfurt: Equality as a Moral Ideal	March 15 Elizabeth Kolbert: The Psychology of Inequality Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett: The Spirit Level (excerpt)
9	March 19 Martha Nussbaum: Political Equality	March 22 Sarah Kliff: The Truth about the Gender Wage Gap "Pay Gap" Myth Ignores Women's Intentional Job Choices Take-Home Midterm Due
10	March 26 Martha Nussbaum: Adaptive Preferences and Women's Options	March 29 Marilynn Frye: Sexism
11	April 2 David Benetar: Kids? Just Say No	April 5 Rivka Weinberg: The Risk of a Lifetime, ch.3
12	April 9 Rivka Weinberg: The Risk of a Lifetime, ch.4	April 12 Emily Ryo and Ian Peacock: The Landscape of Immigration Detention in the United States Alex Nowrasteh: The 14 Most Common Arguments against Immigration and Why They're Wrong Tyler Cowan: Immigration Policy is Hard
13	April 16 Joseph Carens: Aliens and Citizens: The Case for Open Borders	
April 19-28: Spring Break		
14	April 30 TBD	May 3 TBD
15	May 7 TBD	May 10 TBD
16	May 14 TBD	(Final Exam Date TBD)