

PHL 154: Moral Foundations

Syllabus for Spring 2024

Dr. Róbert Mátyási

- Email: rmatyasi@sju.edu
- Office hours: MWF 9am to 10am in B/L 260.
- Email policy: Feel free to email me about practical and administrative matters related to the course. Please come to my office hours with anything else, including questions about the contents of our lectures, readings, and assignments.
- Course materials and assignments will be available through Canvas. It is your responsibility to check the Canvas page for this course on a regular basis.

About the course

Welcome to *Moral Foundations*!

In this course, you will be learning basic skills related to philosophically engaging with moral issues. We will first focus on reasoning and good arguments. Then we will cover some of the most influential schools of moral philosophy, including utilitarianism, deontology, and the natural law tradition. We will face mind-numbing moral puzzles that bother and inspire philosophers to this day. Lastly, we will apply our new understanding to engage with concrete issues that is of interest to any human being in 2024, including global justice, markets vs. democratic institutions, and social issues related to gender and race.

Most importantly, this course is about the power of moral reflection and its limits. It is the most natural thing to feel elevated or upset about things people do, let them be our family members, our friends, complete strangers, or even ourselves. Of course, it is equally natural to face disagreement and have doubts about such feelings. And we often vacillate in situations in which we recognize that we must do the right thing, yet we don't know what would be the right thing to do. To be clear, our aim is not to reduce such emotions with logical tools. (If only it was that easy!) Rather, among other things, we will aim to understand the relevance of our emotions and opinions about such matters. We will aim to learn how to organize our thoughts to help us see through the mess that seems inevitable wherever questions of right and wrong emerge. The more we understand about morality, including the roots of our feelings and opinions about it, the more we understand ourselves and others.

And so, during this course, we will put ideas about morality to the tests of reason and compassion. At the end, we are better equipped to live a happy and fulfilling life once we are able to take a step back from time to time to have a clearer look on our inner life and social interactions.

Learning outcomes

By the end of this course, students should be able to demonstrate:

- basic skills in reasoning and argument assessment;
- an awareness of key philosophical issues concerning morality;
- the ability to interpret philosophical texts;
- the ability to engage respectfully in discussions about concrete moral issues;
- and the ability to capture philosophical thoughts in clear and organized writing.

Assignments and exams

- In-class midterm assignment: March 1st (20%)
- Short writing assignment: due April 2nd (20%)

350-500 words.

This assignment will consist in a reconstruction of an argument from an excerpt selected by me from the readings covered at that point.

- Longer writing assignment: due May 3rd (30%)

750-1000 words.

This assignment will consist in a (i) reconstruction and (ii) brief critical evaluation of an argument from an excerpt selected by me from the readings covered at that point.

- Participation (10%)

Questions or relevant comments during lectures or office hours.

- Final exam: in the final exam period (20%)

Readings

We will use the following textbook:

- *The Elements of Philosophy: Readings From Past and Present*. Szabó Gendler, Tamar; Siegel, Susanna & M. Cahn, Steven (eds.), 2007. Oxford University Press.

In addition, I will post articles and course materials on Canvas.

You are responsible for consulting the reading schedule on Canvas. Read the relevant texts at least one time before coming to lecture. In addition, I expect you to do the readings closely and attentively *at some time*—e.g., you may find it helpful to skim them first and read them in detail multiple times after the lectures.

As a general rule, you should aim to read everything closely and attentively at least three times before exams and assignments.

Topics and Reading Schedule

This is a tentative schedule, subject to change as we progress. I will keep you up-to-date on Canvas about the weekly topics and readings.

Week 1 Introduction

- Syllabus
- Plato, “Glaucon’s Challenge” from *The Republic*

Week 2 Reasoning and argument assessment

- Logic primer

Weeks 3 and 4 Consequentialism

- Selections from Mill’s *Utilitarianism*
- Smart, “Extreme and Restricted Utilitarianism”
- Williams, “Utilitarianism, Integrity and Responsibility”

Weeks 5 and 6 Deontology

- Kant, selections from *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*
- O’Neill, “The Moral Perplexities of Famine Relief”

Week 7 Summaries, catch-up time & midterm

Spring Break

Weeks 8 and 9 Puzzles

- Thomson, “Trolley Problem”
- Wolf, “Moral Saints”

Weeks 10 and 11 Natural law and more puzzles

- Selections from Foot, *Natural Goodness*
- Nagel, “Moral Luck”

Week 12 Global justice

- Onora O’Neill, “The Moral Perplexities of Famine Relief”
- Singer, “Rich and Poor”

Week 13 Markets and economy

- Anderson, “The Ethical Limitations of the Market”

Week 14 Gender

- Saul, “Women’s Different Voice”

Week 15 Race

- Selections from Hardimon, *Rethinking Race*

Policies

Grading scale

- 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: 60-66
- F: 0-59

Late work

Late assignments will lose a full letter grade for each calendar day they are late. For example, an A-paper turned in 3 days late will receive a B-.

If you need an extension due to an emergency or illness, please email me at least 48 hours ahead of the deadline. If that's not possible, contact me asap.

Attendance

You are expected to attend lectures on a regular basis. Naturally, you may have unforeseen obligations, therefore you are permitted to miss 4 lectures without penalty. Remember, it is your responsibility to get up-to-date on the contents of a missed lecture.

If you turn sick, please stay home and write me ahead of class so you can be excused from attending for the day. Note that if you are sick for a significant portion of the time, I may require you to provide me with a doctor's note.

Please note that this is a fully in-person course. Barring exceptional circumstances, there is no possibility of attending this course via Zoom.

Participation

Participation amounts to 10% of your final grade, and it will likely be a deciding factor if you are between grades at the end of the course. Keep in mind that the grade will not be determined solely on the amount of comments you make during lectures. Be relevant and concise. If you have trouble speaking in front of the rest of the class, please be aware that questions during my office hours also count towards participation.

During lectures, cell-phone, tablet, and laptop use will not be allowed, unless it is necessary for accessibility reasons (if so, please contact me ahead of time).

Take notes with pen and paper, if necessary, but I encourage you to prioritize paying attention and engaging with the lecture instead of trying to write down every detail.

Respect

I expect you all to be respectful of one another. This means that, at the minimum, you must not interrupt, speak over, or shout down other people in the class. It is our shared duty together in this class to give space to opinions, beliefs, and theories, even if we strongly disagree. And so, please remember to be courteous, humble, and open-minded. Respectful critical evaluation of ideas, arguments, and theories is essential to our subject matter and will be encouraged in this class. Insulting or condescending behaviour will not be tolerated.

Academic honesty

SJU's academic honesty policy will be strictly enforced. The policy is published in the student handbook and on SJU's academic integrity page. If you are not familiar with it already, it is your responsibility to consult one of these sources:

<https://www.sju.edu/academic-integrity/academic-honesty-policy>

<https://www.sju.edu/offices/student-life/community-standards/policies>

Academic honesty violations include, but are not limited to, the following:

- On papers and assignments:
 - Using someone else's ideas or words without appropriate acknowledgement.
 - Submitting your own work in more than one course.
 - Making up sources or facts.
 - Obtaining or providing unauthorized assistance on any assignment. This includes working in groups on assignments that are supposed to be individual work, or turning in assignments fully or partially written by an artificial intelligence.
- On tests and exams:
 - Using or possessing any unauthorized aid, including a cell phone.
 - Looking at someone else's answers.
 - Letting someone else look at your answers.
 - Submitting an altered test for re-grading.

Any violations will result in a grade of F for the entire course, not just for the assignment in question.

If you have any questions about what is or is not permitted in this course, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Recording

In accord with SJU's community standards, audio or video recording of any aspect of this class without both my express consent in writing and the consent of any individuals who are recorded is absolutely forbidden. Please be aware that if you violate this policy, you may be expelled from the university and face other legal consequences.

Accessibility

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. My number one goal is for you to learn, so please let me know as soon as possible if there's anything that needs my attention to achieve this goal. And please be aware that you may also get in touch with Accessibility Services through here: <https://www.sju.edu/accessibility>.