

Philosophy 105: Current Moral and Social Issues

Taught by Justin Kalef at Rutgers University, Fall 2020

Purpose and approach: This course will teach you how to think and talk productively about some current moral and social issues in a principled, reasonable and open-minded manner. You will also learn the fundamentals of philosophical thought and conversation.

Far too many people approach sociopolitical issues in a way that is completely inappropriate for a democratic society. They take only one side of an issue seriously – conveniently, the same side that matches their prior sociopolitical convictions and those of their circle of friends. They consume one-sided reports and opinion pieces that effectively tell them what to think and even what phrases to use when talking about the issues. They never take the time to consider the other side of the issue seriously. When they do hear anything from the other side, it's a (usually very distorted) version their own side gives them, or else it's in words they're not even listening to from one of the rare people they meet who disagrees with them, as they prepare to recite some of their glib 'talking points' to 'educate' the other person. When this fails, they decide that this only shows that everyone on the other side is evil, deluded, or uninformed, and that conversation is not even worthwhile.

It doesn't take a genius to figure out where this kind of approach, if taken on both sides, will lead: ignorance on both sides, and conflicts that can only be resolved through political and physical force. This is a loss for everyone.

Fortunately, there is another option. It involves stepping back for long enough to get a wider perspective on what is going on, listening respectfully to others and learning from them, thinking things through with them critically and self-critically, and trying to reach the most reasonable decision. The future of society depends on their being enough people who have those skills and habits. I offer this course in the hope that you might be one of those people. If you are, then this is the course for you.

I designed this course over the past three months. As far as I know, it is different from any other course on the same subject taught anywhere else in the world. The topics will be approached using somewhat radical active learning strategies. You will go beyond just reading about the issues and the philosophical work done on them: *you yourselves* will work collaboratively with people who disagree with you, and create new work on these topics. **Active learning strategies have been repeatedly demonstrated to be the most effective at getting students to learn, but it has also been found that many students incorrectly believe that they learn less with these techniques even when there is excellent evidence to the contrary.** Please make sure that this

is the sort of course you're interested in taking!

(Online) meeting places and confidentiality: Most university students who take courses such as this one are eager to expand their horizons and have mutually respectful conversations with their fellow students. However, some students have told me in recent years that the fear of possible bad actors in class keeps them from contributing freely to class discussions, so that they censor themselves. This inhibits the practice and teaching of philosophy, but it is not always easy to dismiss the concerns of the self-censoring students. Especially in a big online course, the threat of a political mob might genuinely make a discussion forum unsafe.

To get around this problem, I have chosen to make all our discussions pseudonymous. Each student in the course will select a pseudonym of his or her own choosing, and let me know about it privately. I will keep everyone's pseudonym a secret. Since there is no function on Canvas that permits this, this course will use two websites: a Canvas site for course information, materials, lectures, and the recording of grades, and a Slack channel for class discussions, teamwork, and the final exam.

To get on to **our Slack site**, please do the following:

1. Come up with a secret pseudonym you would like to use for the course. Don't tell anyone but me which pseudonym you have chosen. Then,
2. Get an email account to go with your pseudonym – an email account that nobody will associate with you, since it will be possible for those looking at your Slack profile to see the email address you have used to register. (You can easily get a secret email address for this purpose at mail.com or protonmail.com).
3. Send me an email at jkalef@philosophy.rutgers.edu to let me know your secret pseudonym and email address. I will then send a Slack invitation to that email address, and you will be able to gain admission to the Slack site.

How much work this course will require

Any reasonably serious student in a serious university course should plan to spend 2-3 hours outside of class for every hour of official class credit, in addition to the indicated meeting hours. Since this is a 3-credit course, the total number of time you should plan to spend on this course each week is 9-12 hours.

Office hours: I will be available for consultation every Tuesday from noon to 3pm, on the Slack. If you are not available then, I am also available for consultation by email at jkalef@philosophy.rutgers.edu .

Text: The text for this course is Bob Fischer's *Ethics, Left and Right: The Moral Issues That Divide Us*. This is a required text, which (of course!) means that you should not expect to pass the course if you do not obtain a copy and cannot get access to it.

Grading: You can earn up to 100 points in this course. That will make it easy for you to calculate, at any time, how many more points you need to achieve a given grade. My grade conversions are a little unusual.

A grade of **A** is meant to indicate **outstanding** achievement. 85 points are needed for an A.

A grade of **B+** is meant to indicate **very good** achievement. 80 points are needed for a B+.

A grade of **B** is meant to indicate **good** achievement. 70 points are needed for a B.

A grade of **C+** is meant to indicate **fair** achievement. 65 points are needed for a C+.

A grade of **C** is meant to indicate **satisfactory** achievement. 55 points are needed for a C.

A grade of **D** is meant to indicate **barely acceptable** achievement. 50 points are needed for a D.

A grade of **F** is meant to indicate **failing** achievement. Anything below 50 points earns an F.

Points will be distributed as follows:

Introductory activities	10 points
Response pairs (with peer distribution).....	2 x 10 = 20 points
Discussion participation	40 points
Final exam	25 points
Syllabus and rules score	5 points
(Optional) Questions forum work.....	8 bonus points
(Possible) Leaderboard bonus.....	5 bonus points

Explanation of Assignments

Introductory activities: During the first two weeks, please

a. come up with a pseudonym and an email address that others won't associate with you, and send me both of them an email (2 points if you do this by Sept. 4th, 1.5 points if you do it by Sept. 7th, 1 point if you do it by Sept. 9th, half a point if you do it by noon on Sept. 11th);

b. Take my **survey on our** Canvas site (2 points if you do this by Sept. 4th, 1.5 points if you do it by Sept. 7th, 1 point if you do it by Sept. 9th, half a point if you do it by noon on Sept. 11th);

c. Watch the leaderboard videos and complete the leaderboard activities as quickly as possible

(2 points if you get them all done by September 11th, 1 point if you get all but one of them done by then, and a half point if you are still missing two of them by then); and

d. Watch all the video lectures posted by Wednesday the 9th and take the quiz that will be posted on Friday the 11th (4 points)

(Anyone choosing to join the course late should try to catch up as quickly as possible and make up the few lost points, if any, by taking advantage of the Questions Forum bonus option. There is, unfortunately, no other way to make up the lost points).

Response pairs: You will be assigned to two different teams during our class meeting times: one in the first half of the course, and one in the second half. Every week, the class will read four pieces on the given issue: someone's argument for a position on the left of the issue, someone's argument for a position on the right of the issue, and then responses by both philosophers to the opposing argument. On the two times your team will be selected to provide a response pair for the rest of the class, your team will have to work together in advance to create two more replies – one responding to the reply from the right, and one responding to the reply from the left. For this, and for your team's defense of your pair of responses later that week, your team will earn up to ten points each time.

Your team's score will *not* automatically become the score of every team member. I have a system for helping to ensure the points are distributed fairly on the basis of who contributed the most to the team's work.

The pairs of responses are always **due by noon on the Friday before the week the readings will be covered**. They can be sent to me at jkalef@philosophy.rutgers.edu or by direct message on the Slack, as you like.

I will inform you of your team's score on the Monday *after* your topic was discussed. You will then have until the next day (Tuesday) **to submit your anonymous peer evaluations (as will be explained later)**.

Discussion participation: Every Monday morning starting on September 21st, you will be able to see the new pairs of responses on Slack. In preparation for that time, you should also have done all that week's readings from the text quite carefully. You will then be ready to participate in a class discussion there on the Slack. The first week we do this – the week of September 21st – you may try to submit work for Level 1 credit. If you fail to achieve the Level 1 credit standard (which I will make clear to you in advance), you will get feedback explaining why not and should try again the next week to achieve Level 1 credit. You may try as many times as you like. However, if you ever manage to achieve Level 1 credit, your work in the following week should

aim instead at earning Level 2 credit. This same pattern continues: if you get Level 2 credit one week, you will try for Level 3 credit the following week; if you try but fail to get Level 2 credit, you may just try again for Level 2 the following week.

There are four levels in all, and you may try to achieve this sort of credit on ten different weeks (every week you didn't make a team contribution).

Those who earn Level 4 credit at some point before the end of the semester will get 40 points out of 40. Those who earn only Level 3 credit will get 30 points. Those who earn only Level 2 credit will get 20 points, those who earn only Level 1 credit will get 10 points, and those who never earn Level 1 credit cannot earn any points. Skipping levels is not permitted, so please start this work in the first week available to you!

Grade appeals will only be considered if the student has written out a full explanation of why he or she was misgraded by my grader. If the appeal is successful, I will grant students the ten points and the passing of the level. But if the appeal is not successful, I will **deduct ten points** instead! Please only submit an appeal if you are absolutely sure there is no doubt that you should have earned the credit.

Final exam: As you can see [here](#), our final exam will be held on December 20th or 22nd (the exact date will be worked out later in the course, based on when people are free). The exam will count for 25 points. It will consist of an individual portion and a team portion (points earned on the team portion will be distributed in light of how much each student contributed).

The final exam will cover all the readings taught in the course, plus the summary lectures I will **release on the Sunday or Monday** following each week of discussion.

Syllabus/rules score: This score is the easiest one to earn. In fact, you have already provisionally earned five points out of five! The only challenge now is not to *lose* any of those points.

You are awarded those points for being responsible enough to read the syllabus and watch the videos and updates, and to take note of rules, policies, due dates, and other instructions. If you do that, wonderful: the four points are yours to keep. If, however, you fail to do those things and instead compel me to repeat things to you that were already clearly written in this syllabus

Leaderboard Bonus: In the first week of the course, **six puzzles** will be available for you to solve, each one testing you on a skill you will learn in the **video lectures**. Each time you solve a puzzle correctly, you will discover a secret word or phrase. **Please keep this a secret!** As soon as you

have the secret word or phrase, please enter it into the system as will be indicated. Your **name** will then appear on the leaderboard, indicating that you have completed that puzzle. It will then also be possible for students who are stuck on a puzzle to turn to you for help. If they do so, please find out where they are stuck in the puzzle and give them the **smallest possible hint** they need to help them get past their difficulty on their own. (**But please never, ever, tell them the secret word or phrase, or anything about it! That would be a violation of academic honesty**).

I will award a small bonus to the 25 people with the highest overall scores on the leaderboard. The quickest student to get them all will earn 5 bonus points. The next quickest will earn 4.8 bonus points. The next quickest after that will earn 4.6 points, and so on by intervals of 0.2 points until the 25th quickest, who will earn a fifth of a point.

Questions forum bonus

In addition to our discussions on the Slack, I will maintain a **Questions Forum on our Canvas site**. On this forum, you may ask any *clarifying question* you like about the readings for a given week *before Monday of that week*. By a clarifying question, I mean a question that seeks clarification on what a writer is *saying*, **not** a question that is ultimately about whether what a writer says is *correct*.

You may earn up to two bonus points for any question you ask in that forum, provided that the question is coherent and genuinely clarificator and that there is evidence that you are asking sincerely and that you have already tried to figure out the answer yourself. All such questions must make clear *exactly* where the confusing passage can be found. You may also earn up to two bonus points for any question you *answer* correctly in that forum, but you will only get credit for answering acceptable questions.

The highest score anyone may earn on the Questions forum bonus is 8 points. You may keep asking and answering more questions until you reach this maximum, if you like.

Schedule

Introductory Week

Week 1: September 1st – 4th

Read the syllabus, **watch all lectures**, **do the puzzles**, **enter the answers**, **take the survey**, and send me an email containing your chosen pseudonym from an email address nobody else will

know to associate with you.

Week 2: September 8th - 11th

Read Fischer's 'Note to Students' (xvii – xviii) and pages 1-38 of the text, watch the new videos for the week, and take the [Quiz on Canvas](#). Log in to the Slack site for the first time, with your secret identity. (Please do not disclose any of your personal information to anyone else there).

Week 3: September 14th – 18th

Watch the week's new videos and join the practice discussion on the Slack. Do all your reading carefully for Week 4: the readings should always be completed by Monday morning on the week they will be discussed.

Week 4: September 21st – 25th

Chapter 1: Introduction to Left and Right.

Week 5: September 28th – October 2nd

Chapter 8: Environmental Regulation.

Week 6: October 5th – 9th

Chapter 7: Minimum Wage.

Week 7: October 12th – 16th

Chapter 6: Taxation.

Week 8: October 19th – 23rd

Chapter 4: Immigration.

Week 9: October 26th – 30th

Chapter 12: Religious exemptions.

Week 10: November 2nd – 6th

Chapter 10: Abortion

Week 11: November 9th – 13th

Chapter 14: Privilege.

Week 12: November 16th – 20th

Chapter 15: Feminism.

Week 13: November 23rd – 27th

Chapter 13: Bathroom Bills.

Week 14: November 30th – December 4th

Chapter 16: Removing Historical Monuments.

Week 15: December 7th – 9th

Chapter 11: Political Correctness. (Classes end on Wednesday, but you may have until Thursday evening to make submissions if you like).

Final Exam: December 20th or 22nd (as will be decided based on student convenience), on the Slack.