**PY201: Philosophy and Ethical Reasoning**

**U.S. Military Academy at West Point**

**Spring 2019**

**Course Syllabus**

**Instructor:**

**Name:** Prof. Jeremy Davis

**Email:** [jeremy.davis@westpoint.edu](mailto:jeremy.davis@westpoint.edu) (for emergencies: [jeremydavisphilosophy@gmail.com](mailto:jeremydavisphilosophy@gmail.com))

**Office:** LH313

**Class Information:**

**Room: TH480**

**Meeting Times: I1, J1, J2, K2**

**Additional Instruction:** By appointment (also available to discuss via Skype)

**Course Details:**

This course is an introductory survey of the foundations of critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and just war theory.

In the first part of the course, we will begin with questions such as: What does it mean to ‘think critically’? What tools and concepts are required to reason well? And how do we structure our arguments clearly and persuasively? We will seek to answer these questions by studying the basics of elementary logic, logical fallacies, and how to read and write philosophy.

With these skills in hand, we will then move on to discussing one of the central fields of philosophy called moral theory—or, more generally, ethics. As a philosophical discipline, ethics is primarily concerned with questions of *the good* and *the right*. We will start by looking at *the good—*in particular, what makes for a good life? We then shift to the question of *the right*—that is, what is right action, or what ought I to do? We will survey the three main ethical theories—utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics—and take stock of their advantages and disadvantages.

In the third unit of the course, we will look at a series of questions that share a common theme—namely, what is the relationship between individuals and groups, particularly groups of which the individuals in question are not a part? We begin by looking at the ethics of famine relief, before turning to questions in social philosophy concerning the ethics of trust and belief, oppression, immigration, and patriotism.

In the final unit of the course, we will explore the ethics of war, and in particular, the subset of this area known as *just war theory*. We will look at the issue of realism and pacifism, just causes, proportionality, justice after war, and other related issues.

**What you’re in for:**

As a philosophy course, we will focus centrally on how to understand and articulate the interesting questions, and how we can make progress on answering them. What does this mean? For one thing, it means that we are not primarily concerned with acquiring definitive answers to the questions. In other words, unlike most other disciplines of study, in philosophy (of the sort we're doing), there are seldom any *right* or *wrong* answers.

But this does not mean that anything goes! It is not a free-for-all of argumentation and discussion, in which every idea is as strong as every other. Rather, we will learn to critically assess arguments on a number of topics that are of foundational importance in the field, or of relevance in our everyday lives as members of a society, a country, or humanity in general. And in so doing, we will hone the skills of philosophical and ethical reasoning, which will give you the resources to continue to think critically elsewhere in your life. It might therefore be more useful to think of the primary aim of this course as teaching you *skills*—though, to be sure, the particular content we will use to practice these skills is incredibly useful as well.

So, if you find yourself wondering at times: “Okay, but what is the right answer?”, I’ll advise you to reframe this question as, “Okay, but how would we best go about answering this question?” or “What more can be said to make progress on answering this question?” This, in my view, is what marks out philosophy as a distinct area of intellectual inquiry.

**Course Texts**

* Writing Philosophy by Lewis Vaughn (2nd ed.)
* Just and Unjust Wars by Michael Walzer (5th ed.)
* The remaining course readings will be posted on Blackboard*.*

**Course Requirements and Grading Distribution**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Assignment | Length | Points | Due Date |
| Critical Thinking Exam |  | 50 | Lesson 4 (in class) |
| Peer Edit | ~1 page | 50 | February 24 |
| First Essay | 4-5 pages | 150 | February 27 |
| Second Essay | 5-6 pages | 250 | April 3 |
| Oral Exam | 10 mins | 125 | April 25-May 10 (various; sign-ups posted in April) |
| Pop Quizzes (6 x 15 pts, 1 drop) |  | 75 | Various |
| Participation |  | 50 | Posted at term-end |
| TEE |  | 250 | TBD |
| Total |  | **1000** |  |

**A quick note about course requirements:** I believe that introductory philosophy should aim at teaching the central ways of doing philosophy—namely, reading, writing, and discussing (i.e. orally). To that end, apart from the aspects of the course that are required for all PY201 classes, I’ve selected assignments that I think will hone those skills. Given that many of the readings are quite challenging, we will almost always discuss the details of these readings in class. This creates an incentive for students to forgo doing the readings; but this is a feature of a class that I think a good philosophy instructor should work to discourage. Frequent quizzes are meant as a way of keeping you accountable to the readings. Moreover, philosophy is not always done from the keyboard: indeed, a lot of good philosophy is done in conversation. As such, we will have oral exams that will test your ability to think on your feet about philosophical problems that you have considered already in class, and you will be assessed on your participation in class as well. But, of course, writing philosophy is also an essential skill to practice. We have two written essays that will test this skill, and you will do further philosophical writing on the TEE.

*Critical Thinking Exam*

This exam covers the critical thinking unit of the course. There will be a short matching section, a multiple choice section, and a final section in which you will be required to identify the logical fallacies in a short passage.

*Peer Edit*

For the first essay, you will be paired with another cadet in the class to give feedback on their essay (and they will do the same for yours). You are required to send a draft of your essay to your peer-editor no later than Feb. 20th. On Feb 21 and 22 (depending on your class time), we will do in-class peer editing, in which you will read and comment on the essay according to the guidelines provided. You will be graded according to your effort in identifying and critiquing the ideas of your partner.

*First Essay*

This assignment will examine your understanding of the basics of ethical theory. More specific details, such as prompts and writing guidelines, will be provided several weeks prior to the due date.

*Second Essay*

This essay will build upon the skills of the previous written assignment, focusing more on your argumentative skills. You will write on one of the topics from the middle unit of the course: famine relief, oppression, patriotism, or immigration. Prompts and instructions will be provided weeks prior to the due date.

*Oral Exam*

For this assessment, you will be randomly assigned one of four pre-circulated prompts covering our recent readings. You will then have ten minutes in which to have a dynamic, spontaneous conversation with me on that topic. You are not expected to have prepared remarks, nor are you expected to have all the answers to any question I might throw your way. Rather, you are expected to be capable of demonstrating an understanding of the core issues, the basics of a view of your own (though you need not defend it completely--that is, you may have reservations, provided you’re able to articulate those reservations and why you have them.

*Pop Quizzes*

There will be six pop quizzes designed to examine your understanding of the assigned readings. Your lowest grade will automatically be dropped. (NB: You can replace your remaining lowest grade with a 15/15 by briefly discussing a song that relates in a non-trivial way to the course reading for a particular class. This need not be the content of the class you present in; in other words, you can discuss content from a few classes prior, if you’d like. To do this, you must email me 24 hrs prior to the class you’d like to present in. Ideally, you will play the song (typically, just part of it) for us and discuss how it is relevant, what questions it raises that are germane to the topic, etc. This is not a full-fledged ‘presentation’; you can do it from your chair.

*Participation*

I expect active participation from each of you. This means, at a minimum, that you come to class having carefully read that day’s material, thought about it, and contribute to discussion. The best participants will listen to and engage with others’ comments, rather than just saying whatever they wish to say at a given time. Good participants also show respect. I will not tolerate disrespect towards me or your fellow classmates. I consider disrespect to include the following (though this list is not exhaustive): racist, sexist, homophobic, violent, or otherwise abusive language or gestures; making fun of or insulting others; and persistent talking-over or interrupting. Your participation grade can also be negatively affected by lateness, sleeping in class, engaging in side conversations, or engaging in distracting behaviors.

*TEE*

The term-end examination will comprise material from the entire semester. Details and schedule TBD.

**Essay Submission, Late Penalty, Plagiarism**

All essays must be submitted before midnight on the due date via Blackboard. (Details will be provided closer to the deadline.) Late papers will incur a 10% deduction per day, as per PY201 course-wide standards.

All work must be cited in accordance with the DAW. It is your responsibility to understand what plagiarism is and to avoid it. All instances of suspected plagiarism will be reported and are taken very seriously. (If you have any concerns or questions, this is certainly a case where it is better to ask questions ahead of time rather than to try to ask for forgiveness after the fact.)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Lesson #** | |  |  |
| **1 day** | **2 day** | **Topic** | **Required Reading (Before Class)** |
| 1 | 1 | **Introduction to Class** | —Andy Owen, “Ethics on the Battlefield” |
| *Questions: Why are we—cadets at West Point—taking philosophy? What relevance does this have for us?* | |
| 2 | 2 | **Introduction to** **Philosophy/Critical Reasoning I** | —Shelly Kagan, “Why Study Philosophy?”  —Vaughn, pp. 21-39 |
| *Questions: What is the point of philosophy? What are the basic tools of critical thinking?* | |
| 3 | 3 | **Critical Reasoning II** | —Vaughn, pp. 55-68, 88-98 |
| *Questions: What are the proper logical forms? What are the different logical fallacies?* | |
| **Critical Thinking In-Class Exam (50 pts)** | | | |
| 4 | 4 | **Cultural Relativism** | —James Rachels, “The Challenge of Cultural Relativism”  —Thomas Hurka, “Values are Not Relative” |
| *Questions: Isn’t morality just dependent on the culture? Aren’t ‘right’, ‘wrong’, ‘good’, and ‘bad’ just culturally relative?*  *Song: “Mr. Hitler” by Lead Belly* | |
| 6 | 5 | **Hedonism** | —J. S. Mill, “Utilitarianism” [ch 2., stop at “Happiness as an Aim”]  —Robert Nozick, “The Experience Machine” |
| *Questions: Is pleasure the only intrinsic good? What kinds of pleasure are there? If pleasure is the only good, wouldn’t we choose a life that maxed out pleasure, if given that option?*  *Song: “Don’t Stop Me Now” by Queen* | |
| 7 | 6 | **Objective List Theory** | —Jean Kazez, “Necessities” |
| *Questions: If pleasure is not the only intrinsic good, what else might be an intrinsic good? How are these things different from pleasure?*  *Song: “Bear Necessities” from The Jungle Book* | |
| 8 | 7 | **Utilitarianism** | —J.S. Mill, “Utilitarianism”  —R. M. Hare, “A Utilitarian Approach to Ethics” |
| *Questions: What does it mean to be a ‘utilitarian’? What are the different types of utilitarianism?*  *Song: “Two Kinds of Happiness” by The Strokes* | |
| 9 | 8 | **Utilitarianism** | —J.J.C. Smart, “Extreme and Restricted Utilitarianism” [read section 3 until bottom of p. 350 only]  —Bernard Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism” |
| *Questions: What might be some of the drawbacks of alternative versions of utilitarianism?*  *Song: “My Way” by Frank Sinatra* | |
| 10 | 9 | **Kantian Deontology** | —Immanuel Kant, “The Good Will and the Categorical Imperative” |
| *Questions: What is Kant’s view on moral duty? What has moral worth? How do we know what our moral obligations are?*  *Song: “Don’t Lie to Me” by Motorhead* | |
| 12 | 10 | **Other Deontological Theories** | —W.D. Ross, “What Makes Right Acts Right?”  —Philippa Foot, “The Problem of Abortion and Doctrine of Double Effect” |
| *Questions: What are some non-Kantian deontological principles? How do ‘prima facie duties’ work? What are the distinctions between doing-allowing and intending-foreseeing?*  *Song: “Good Intentions” by Lyle Lovett* | |
| 13 | 11 | **Virtue Ethics** | —Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (selections) |
| *Questions: What is Aristotle’s ‘doctrine of the mean’? In what ways is a virtue theory different from those we have previously encountered in the course?*  *Song: “Strength, Courage, and Wisdom” by India Arie* | |
| **February 19 & 20: Course Drop: Writing (no class meeting)**  **February 21 & 22: In-Class Peer Editing** | | | |
| 16 | 14 | **Famine Relief** | —Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”  —Will MacAskill, “Banking: The Ethical Career Choice” |
| *Questions: What are our obligations to the global poor? Do these extend to the full range of life choices, or are they restricted only to the possibility of current financial contributions?*  *Song: “Cold Cash and Colder Hearts” by Thrice* | |
| **First Essay Due February 27th by 11:59 PM on Blackboard** | | | |
| 17 | 15 | **Famine Relief** | —Travis Timmerman, “Sometimes there is nothing wrong with letting a child drown”  —Amia Srinivasan, “Stop the Robot Apocalypse” |
| *Questions: What are some arguments against the Singerian view of famine relief? Where do these alternative views leave us?*  *Song: “How Much a Dolla Cost?” by Kendrick Lamar* | |
| 18 | 16 | **Oppression and Injustice** | —Iris Marion Young, “Five Faces of Oppression” |
| *Questions: What is oppression? What forms does it take?*  *Song: “The Blacker the Berry” by Kendrick Lamar* | |
| 19 | 17 | **Oppression and Injustice** | —Miranda Fricker, “Testimonial Injustice” |
| *Questions: What is ‘epistemic injustice’, or ‘testimonial injustice’ in particular? How does this intersect with oppression?*  *Song: “Quiet” by Milck* | |
| 22 | 18 | **Patriotism** | —Alasdair MacIntyre, “Is Patriotism a Virtue?”  —Thomas Hurka, “The Justification of National Partiality” [skim ‘nationalism and impersonal goods’ section; read the rest carefully] |
| *Questions: How might patriotism—or national partiality—be justified? Can it operate ‘outside’ of ordinary morality, or does it exist as a part of it?*  *Song: “America!” by Bill Callahan* | |
| 23 | 19 | **Patriotism** | —Robert Goodin, “What Is So Special about Our Fellow Countrymen?” [skip sections 3 and 4] |
| *Questions: Are there ways of justifying some actions of patriotism or partiality that don’t require abandoning or overriding other basic features of morality? If so, what would this entail in terms of our duties?*  *Song: “This Land is Your Land” by Woodie Guthrie* | |
| 24 | 20 | **Immigration (Amnesty)** | —Joseph Carens, “On Belonging: What we owe people who stay” |
| *Questions: What do we owe to people who live in our country, even when their being here runs contrary to law?*  *Song: “Without a Face” by Rage Against the Machine* | |
| 25 | 21 | **Immigration (Amnesty)** | —Michael Blake, “Equality without Documents: Political Justice and the Right to Amnesty” |
| *Questions: Is the issue of amnesty a matter of ‘justice’, or just a matter of moral decency?*  *Song: “Prayer of the Refugee” by Rise Against* | |
| 26 | 22 | **Realism & Pacifism about War** | —Walzer, “Against Realism” (pp. 3-20)  —Bazargan, “Varieties of Contingent Pacifism in War” [skim all] |
| *Questions: What is realism in the context of war? What is pacifism? What kinds of pacifism are there?*  *Song: “Give Peace a Chance” by John Lennon* | |
| **Second Essay Due April 3rd by 11:59 PM on Blackboard** | | | |
| 27 | 23 | **Just Cause** | —Helen Frowe, “Just Wars?” |
| *Questions: What are the just causes for war? How do they justify war?*  *Song: “Run to the Hills” by Iron Maiden* | |
| 28 | 24 | **Proportionality** | —Thomas Hurka, “Proportionality in the Morality of War” [skim sections III and IV; read the rest carefully] |
| *Questions: What does proportionality require? What are the relevant goods in the proportionality calculation? How do we weigh different groups against each other?*  *Song: “Another Bag of Bones” by Kevin Devine* | |
| 29 | 25 | **Moral Equality of**  **Combatants** | —Walzer, “The Rules of War” (pp. 34-48) |
| *Questions: Does it matter that soldiers on one side of a war are fighting for an unjust cause?*  *Song: “Two Tribes” by Frankie Goes to Hollywood* | |
| 31 | 26 | **Moral Equality of Combatants** | —Jeff McMahan, “The Ethics of Killing in War” [stop at section V] |
| *Questions: Is war subject to a special kind of morality, or is it subject to the same morality that applies elsewhere in life? Is fighting for the unjust side justified in any or all cases, or is it more like being a bank robber?*  *Song: “Combat Rock” by Sleater-Kinney* | |
| **April 18 & 19: Course Drop: Oral Exam Prep** | | | |
| 34 | 28 | **The Status of Noncombatants** | —Walzer, “Noncombatant Immunity and Military Necessity” (pp. 138-159) |
| *Questions: What status do noncombatants have in war? What grounds are there for this special status?*  *Song: “White People for Peace” by Against Me!* | |
| 35 | 29 | **Supreme Emergency** | —Walzer, “Supreme Emergency” (pp. 250-267) |
| *Questions: What is a ‘supreme emergency’ and what effect does this have on the morality of war?*  *Song: “Sleep Now in the Fire” by Rage Against the Machine* | |
| **Oral Exams Begin (through May 10)**  Sign-Up Sheet Posted in April | | | |
| 36 | 30 | **Justice after War** | —Helen Frowe, “Jus Post Bellum” |
| *Questions: What are the requirements of jus post bellum? Are they just about limiting victors’ gains, or are they also about restoring and repairing the relationship between the two adversaries?*  *Song: “Turn! Turn! Turn!” by Pete Seeger* | |

*\*\*For students on 1-Day, to accommodate the change in schedule from 30 to 40 lessons, we will be dropping the following lessons, as indicated above: 5, 11, 20, 21, 30, 33, 37, 38, 39, 40.*