

PHIL 150 Contemporary Moral Issues

Fall 2023

Location: PAHB 108

Time: MWF 11-11:50 am

Instructor: Blake Francis

Email: bfrancis@umbc.edu

Office: PAHB 467

Office Hours: TTh 1-3pm & by appt

webex room: [bfrancis@umbc.webex.com](https://webex.com)

University Requirements Satisfied by this Course

General Education Requirements Satisfied by this course: Arts and Humanities (AH)

Functional Competency Satisfied by this Course: Critical Analysis and Reasoning

Course Description and Rationale

We are constantly confronted with moral issues that people strongly disagree about: Is abortion permissible? Should a university invite a speaker with racist views to campus? Should I donate to charities that mitigate global poverty (and if so, how much)? Do our individual greenhouse gas emissions do harm? This course applies the tools of moral theory to better understand these disputes. There are many disputed issues, but this semester we will concentrate on the following:

- Freedom of Speech
- Abortion
- The Environment and Climate Change
- Global Poverty

To improve our understanding and engagement with these difficult topics, we will utilize the tools of philosophy. We begin the course with a brief introduction to the philosophical study of moral issues, including what is called moral (or ethical) theory. As we proceed, we will approach specific moral issues by applying different moral theories to each problem. (That's why what we will be studying is sometimes called applied ethics.)

Course Materials:

Readings: Readings will be assigned for most course meetings. Most of our readings come from our textbook. The remainder of the readings will be in digital library reserves found in the "Course Materials" folder on Blackboard in "Library Reserves" or the "Links" folder. Please do the readings indicated on the syllabus **before** coming to class.

Required Textbook: [Mark Timmons, *Disputed Moral Issues: A Reader*, Fifth Edition, Oxford University Press.](#) (DMI in syllabus)

This course is enrolled in the Course Materials Initiative, which makes a digital textbook available to you through Blackboard. The cost of the book (about 45 dollars) was billed to your student

account when you enrolled in the class. You have until **Wednesday, September 13, 2023** to opt out of the program for a full refund. See the Course Materials folder on Blackboard for more information and to access the textbook. (Course Materials/My Textbook)

Also note: I highly recommend purchasing the 5th edition of our textbook. Many readings assigned in this class are not available in earlier editions. **If you choose to purchase an earlier edition, you are responsible for acquiring all assigned readings.**

Learning Outcomes

The goal of this course is to expose students to debates over contemporary moral issues. The course is also aimed at helping students learn and practice valuable philosophical skills, including constructing arguments, analyzing concepts, engaging respectfully with views that differ from their own, and applying moral principles.

Students who successfully complete this course should be able to:

- Describe some of the major issues, views, arguments, and debates concerning freedom of speech, abortion, the environment & climate change, and global poverty, including the following
 - applications of the central concepts and principles of different moral theories (including consequentialism, Kantian moral theory, rights-based theories, virtue ethics, and care ethics) to the contemporary moral issues studied.
 - debates about whether campus speech codes are justifiable, including how to balance protection from the harms of hate speech against potential threats to academic freedom
 - arguments about whether abortion is morally permissible, including disagreements about whether the fetus is a person and about whether the pregnant person has a right to have an abortion
 - issues that arise when considering abortion in terms of the intimate relationships involved in decisions about whether to become a parent
 - debates over whether non-human animals and nature are morally considerable
 - debates about whether individuals are morally responsible for their contribution to climate change
 - arguments about whether the affluent ought to aid distant people suffering from extreme poverty
 - debates over whether the affluent actively harm the global poor
- do close readings of philosophical texts to identify premises and conclusions of arguments.
- explain and evaluate the arguments of others verbally and in writing.
- develop your own reasoned position and respectably defend it against opposing views.

Methods of Evaluation:

Assessment in this class will be based on participation, “Philosophy Practice” assignments, and essay exams. Writing is the primary mode of evaluation for this class.

Participation:

Your **participation** grade includes both attendance and preparation. In order to be a full participant in our class, it is important that you (1) show up to class on time, having read and reflected on the readings, and (2) give your undivided attention to the lectures, discussions, and class activities. Keep in mind that material will be presented in class that is not in the readings. If you must be late or miss a class, ask another student for notes, and you are always encouraged to discuss course materials with me.

Attendance will be taken using Qwickly. **Each student has three “freebie” unexcused absences.** You may use your freebies at your discretion (There’s no need to be in touch with me for permission!). Your three freebies will be marked “excused” at the end of the semester. After the three freebies are used up, unexcused absences count negatively toward your participation grade. If you have any concerns about participation, please get in touch with me. **Please don’t come to class if you feel ill. Contact me to make arrangements.**

Philosophy Practice (PhilPrac) Assignments:

Tourist: “Excuse me, how do you get to Carnegie Hall?”

New Yorker: “Practice, practice, practice.”

Everyone knows that if you want to learn how to play a musical instrument, you have to practice. The same goes for thinking about ethics in a philosophical way. Over the semester, I will assign short assignments over Blackboard that ask you to respond to readings and practice philosophical skills like working with arguments or analyzing concepts. These “Philosophy Practices” (PhilPracs) provide opportunities to practice and receive feedback as you apply the skills of philosophy to contemporary moral issues. PhilPracs will set the stage for our discussion on Fridays and must be completed on time.

A total of **10 PhilPracs** will be assigned as homework over the course of the semester and are worth 20 points each. On the weeks they are assigned, PhilPracs will be **due Friday mornings at 9 a.m. sharp**. PhilPracs submitted late will receive 0 credit. PhilPracs are graded on a three-point scale (Full Credit, Half Credit, No Credit). See Blackboard/Assignments/PhilPracs for more details.

Exams:

There will be four in-class essay exams. Each exam covers material from one unit in the course. (The “final exam” will take place during the final time slot for our class but is not cumulative. It covers unit 4). The exams are composed of essay questions designed to test your knowledge as well as your ability to evaluate the arguments of others and defend your own reasoned position. If you have a valid excuse (serious illness, death in the family, etc.), you may make arrangements with me to take a make-up exam at a different time.

Grading:

This course will be graded on a 1,000-point scale.

| | |
|------------|----|
| 1000 - 900 | =A |
| 899 - 800 | =B |
| 799 - 700 | =C |
| 699 - 600 | =D |
| 599 - 0 | =F |

Evaluation of Assignments:

| | |
|---------------|----------------|
| Participation | = 100 points |
| PhilPracs | = 200 points |
| Exam 1 | = 175 points |
| Exam 2 | = 175 points |
| Exam 3 | = 175 points |
| Final Exam | = 175 points |
| <hr/> | |
| Total | = 1,000 points |

Course Policies and Expectations:

Classroom Culture:

A positive learning environment is an atmosphere where diverse perspectives can be expressed. It is especially important that we foster a positive environment in this course, which focuses on controversial issues that we are bound to disagree strongly about. Each of us is expected to respectfully engage with points of view that we strongly disagree with during in-class discussions and in written assignments. Learning how to do philosophy involves learning how to engage openly, respectfully, reasonably, and critically with ideas that challenge. The range of views you hold and the experiences you bring into the classroom will make our learning experiences much more interesting and enriching.

Attendance Policy

Attendance is required for this class. After the three “freebie” absences are used, additional absences may be excused in certain circumstances (illness, religious obligation, death in the family etc.) on a case-by-case basis. If you are ill, please email me to let me know and stay home.

Attendance will be taken using Qwickly. Students will log in to Blackboard to register their attendance. If you arrive late to class and the check-in period has closed, approach me after class to inform me that you were in attendance. However, if you arrive late, you will be given partial participation points for the day. Tardiness is a disruption to the rest of the class and is discouraged.

Use of your **cell phone or laptop for non-class purposes** is a distraction to you and other students. If you use your devices for non-class purposes, you will be counted absent that day. If you **sleep** in class, you will be counted absent that day.

Late Policy

Please be in touch in advance if you have a valid excuse for missing an exam. A make-up quiz or exam can be scheduled.

PhilPracs cannot be made up or submitted late except in rare circumstances. Please be in touch with me if serious illness or other severe circumstances prevent you from completing these assignments. Otherwise, late PhilPracs receive 0 credit.

Email:

I welcome emails raising any questions you may have about the reading, writing assignments, or course logistics. However, please note some questions may be more appropriate for office hours. I will do my best to respond to emails within 24 hours, Monday through Friday.

Office Hours:

I encourage all students to come to office hours to discuss any aspect of this course. I hold office hours in person twice a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays at 1 p.m. **Please stop by in person on Tuesdays or Thursdays between 1 p.m. and 3 p.m. No appointment is needed!** You can also make an in-person or virtual appointment by emailing me. Webex room: (<https://umbc.webex.com/meet/bfrancis>).

Plagiarism and Cheating

Plagiarism is using the words or ideas of others without proper citation. Plagiarism and other kinds of cheating will not be tolerated. The penalty for this kind of dishonesty could be severe. If you are caught violating the UMBC honor code, you will receive a failing grade on the assignment in question, and you will be reported to Academic Misconduct Management Database. For more information, see: <https://academicconduct.umbc.edu/>

Reading assignments in the course schedule are subject to change. Students are responsible for keeping up with changes that are announced in class or over Blackboard.

DMI= *Disputed Moral Issues* (Blackboard: Course Materials/My Textbook)

LR= Library Reserves (Blackboard: Course Materials/Library Reserves)

Link = web address (Blackboard: Course Materials/Links)

Reading Assignment Schedule

- 8/30 (W) **General Introduction**
Reading: PHIL 150 Syllabus
- 9/1 (F) **What is moral theory?**
Reading: “A Moral Theory Primer” (DMI pp.1-5)
 No PhilPrac Due
- 9/4 (M) Labor Day
- 9/6 (W) **Are you a moral relativist?**
Reading: Timmons, “Why I am not a Moral Relativist (and Neither Are You)” (DMI pp. 41-48)

Unit 1: Freedom of Speech

- 9/8 (F) **What is the right to free speech?**
Reading 1: Introduction to Chapter 4 (DMI pp.149-57)
Reading 2: [MyUMBC Community Standards](#) (Link)
Reading 3: UMBC Magazine, [“Balancing free speech and inclusion event creates robust campus conversation”](#) (Link)
PhilPrac 1 Due @ 9am
- 9/11 (M) **Should all speech be protected?**
Reading 1: Mill, “On Liberty” (DMI pp.157-160)
Reading 2: “Consequentialism” (DMI pp.6-7)
Optional Reading: Mill, “Utilitarianism” (DMI pp. 49-54)
- 9/13 (W) **What is hate speech? Part 1: Racist Speech**
Reading: Matsuda, “Public Response to Racist Speech: Considering the Victim’s Story” (pp. 2331-2341) and optionally read 2326-2331. (LR) (*CW: reference to racial violence and mention of racial slurs*)
- 9/15 (F) **What is hate speech? Part 2: Misogynistic Speech**
Reading: Richardson-Self, “Woman-Hating: On Misogyny, Sexism, and Hate Speech” (DMI pp.160-71) (*CW: mention of misogynistic language, references to sexual assault and sexual violence, esp. p. 166*)
PhilPrac 2: Due @ 9am

- 9/18 (M) **Can campus speech codes be justified to prevent the “causal” harm of hate speech?**
Reading: Altman, “Speech Codes and Expressive Harm” (DMI pp.171-74) (*CW: mention of racial slurs*)
- 9/20 (W) **Can campus speech codes be justified to prevent the “expressive” harm of hate speech?**
Reading 1: Altman, “Speech Codes and Expressive Harm” (DMI pp. 174-179) (*CW: mention of racial slurs*)
Reading 2: “Kantian Moral Theory” (DMI pp. 14-19)
- 9/22 (F) **Can campus speech codes ever be justified?**
Reading: Whittington, *Speak Freely: Why Universities Must Defend Free Speech*, pp.77-95 (LR)
PhilPrac 3 Due @ 9am
- 9/25 (M) Review Day
- 9/27 (W) **In-Class Exam 1**
 Unit 2: Abortion
- 9/29 (F) **Is abortion morally permissible?**
Reading: Introduction to Chapter 9 (DMI pp. 413-421)
 No PhilPrac Due
- 10/2 (M) **Does a fetus have moral standing?**
Reading: Singer, *Practical Ethics* (pp.123-129) (LR)
- 10/4 (W) **Is a fetus a “person?”**
Reading: Singer, *Practical Ethics* (pp.134-38) (LR)
- 10/6 (F) **Isn’t a fetus a “person?”** [*Video Lecture. No in-person class.*]
Reading: Lee and George, “The Wrong of Abortion” (DMI pp.421-24)
PhilPrac 4 due @ 9 am
- 10/9 (M) **Why is killing morally wrong?**
Reading 1: Marquis, “Why Abortion is Immoral” (DMI pp.443-47)
Reading 2: “Ethics of Prima Facie Duty” (DMI pp.24-26)
Optional Reading: Singer, *Practical Ethics* (pp. 141-144) (LR)
- 10/11 (W) **What does the right to life entail?**
Reading 1: Thomson, “A Defense of Abortion” (DMI pp.448-51)
Reading 2: “Rights-based Moral Theory” (DMI pp.19-20)
- 10/13 (F) **Do pregnant people have the right to choose?**
Reading 1: Thomson, “A Defense of Abortion” (DMI pp.452-56) (cont.)
PhilPrac 5 due @ 9 am

- 10/16 (M) **Is *unintentional* killing wrong?**
Reading 1: “Natural Law Theory” (DMI 11-14)
Reading 2: Lee and George, “The Wrong of Abortion” (DMI pp.427-32)
- 10/18 (W) **What can virtue ethics teach us about the ethics of abortion?**
*Reading 1:*Hursthouse, “Virtue Theory and Abortion” (DMI pp 433-441)
Reading 2:“Virtue Ethics” (DMI 29-30)
- 10/20 (F) **What is the moral importance of deciding whether to *become a parent*?**
Reading: Little, “The Moral Complexities of Abortion” (DMI pp.457-66)
 “The Ethics of Care” (DMI pp.30-34)
PhilPrac 6 due @ 9 am
- 10/23 (M) Review Day
- 10/25 (W) **In-Class Exam 2**
- Unit 3 The Environment and Climate Change
- 10/27 (F) **What is an *environmental ethic*?**
Reading: Introduction to Chapter 15 (DMI pp.722-28)
 No PhilPrac due.
- 10/30 (M) **Do only humans have moral standing?**
Reading: Baxter, “People or Penguins: The Case for Optimal Pollution” (DMI pp.729-33)
- 11/1 (W) **Do ecosystems have value for their own sake?**
Reading: Leopold, “The Land Ethic” (DMI pp.734-38)
- 11/3 (F) **What are the environmental virtues?**
Reading 1: Hill, “Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving the Natural Environment” (DMI pp.739-745)
Reading 2: Virtue Ethics (DMI pp. 29-30)
PhilPrac 7 due @ 9 am
- 11/6 (M) **Are individual emitters morally responsible for causing climate change?**
Reading: Sinnott-Armstrong, “It’s Not *My* Fault: Global Warming and Individual Obligations” (DMI pp.754-59)
- 11/8 (W) **Are we collectively responsible for causing climate change?**
Reading: Sinnott-Armstrong, “It’s Not *My* Fault: Global Warming and Individual Obligations” (DMI pp.761-766) (cont.)
- 11/10 (F) ***Aren’t* we individually *and* collectively obligated to reduce our emissions?**
Reading: Hourdequin, “Climate, Collective Action, and Individual Ethical Obligations” (DMI pp.769-773)

PhilPrac 8 due @ 9 am

- 11/13 (M) **Do my efforts to reduce emissions make a difference? Is this the right question to ask?**
 Hourdequin, “Climate, Collective Action, and Individual Ethical Obligations” (DMI pp.773-779) (cont.)
- 11/15 (W) Unit Review Day
- 11/17 (F) In-class Exam 3
 Unit 4 Global Poverty
- 11/20 (M) **What do the affluent owe people living in extreme poverty?**
 Introduction to Chapter 13 (DMI 624-26)
- 11/22 (W) **Should you donate to save the lives of people living in extreme poverty? If so, how much?**
Reading 1: Singer, “The Life You Can Save” (DMI pp.633-36)
Reading 2: “Consequentialism” (DMI pp.6-11)
- 11/24 (F) Thanksgiving Break
- 11/27 (M) **Is it wrong not to donate?**
Reading: Singer, “The Life You Can Save” (DMI pp.639-44) (cont.)
- 11/29 (W) **Can I appeal to my entitlements to justify not giving aid?**
Reading: Arthur, “World Hunger and Moral Obligation” (DMI pp.647-55)
- 12/1 (F) **Do the affluent *harm* the global poor?**
Reading: Pogge, “World Poverty and Human Rights” (DMI pp.565-61)
PhilPrac 9 Due @9am
- 12/4 (M) **Does responding to global poverty require addressing injustice or donating? Part 1: Justice vs. Charity**
Reading: Ashford, “Severe Poverty as Unjust Emergency” (DMI pp.662-67)
- 12/6 (W) **What are our duties of justice to the global poor?**
Reading: Shue, *Basic Rights*, pp. 35-43; 51-53 (LR)
- 12/8 (F) **Does responding to global poverty require addressing injustice or donating? Part 2: Shue’s Tripartite Analysis of Duties**
Reading: Ashford, “Severe Poverty as Unjust Emergency” (DMI pp.668-70)
PhilPrac 10 Due @9am
- 12/11 (M) Final Exam Review

In-Person Final Exam: December 15, 2023; 10:30 am-12:30 pm

University Policies and Resources:

UMBC Statement of Values for Academic Integrity

By enrolling in this course, each student assumes the responsibilities of an active participant in UMBC's scholarly community in which everyone's academic work and behavior are held to the highest standards of honesty. Cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, and helping others to commit these acts are all forms of academic dishonesty, and they are wrong. Academic misconduct could result in disciplinary action that may include but is not limited to, suspension or dismissal. For additional information, please see the [Academic Integrity website](#) or consult the UMBC Student Handbook, the Faculty Handbook, or the UMBC Policies section of the UMBC Directory.

Sexual Assault, Sexual Harassment, and Gender-Based Violence and Discrimination

[UMBC Policy](#) and Federal law (Title IX) prohibit discrimination and harassment on the basis of sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity in University programs and activities. Any student who is impacted by sexual harassment, sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, sexual exploitation, gender discrimination, pregnancy discrimination, gender-based harassment, or related retaliation should contact the University's Title IX Coordinator to make a report and/or access support and resources. The Title IX Coordinator can be reached at:

titleixcoordinator@umbc.edu or 410-455-1717

You can access support and resources even if you do not want to take any further action. You will not be forced to file a formal complaint or police report. Please be aware that the University may take action on its own if essential to protect the safety of the community.

If you are interested in or thinking about making a report, please use the [Online Reporting/Referral Form](#). Please note that if you report anonymously, the University's ability to respond will be limited.

Notice that Faculty are Responsible Employees with Mandatory Reporting Obligations.

All faculty members are considered Responsible Employees, per [UMBC's Policy on Sexual Misconduct, Sexual Harassment, and Gender Discrimination](#). Faculty are therefore required to report any/ all available information regarding conduct falling under the Policy and violations of the Policy to the Title IX Coordinator, even if a student discloses an experience that occurred before attending UMBC and/or an incident that only involves people not affiliated with UMBC. Reports are required regardless of the amount of detail provided and even in instances where support has already been offered or received.

While faculty members encourage you to share information related to your life experiences through discussion and written work, students should understand that faculty are required to report past and present sexual assault, domestic and interpersonal violence, stalking, and gender discrimination that is shared with them to the Title IX Coordinator so that the University can inform students of their [rights, resources and support](#). While you are encouraged to do so, you are not obligated to respond to outreach conducted as a result of a report to the Title IX Coordinator.

If you need to speak with someone in confidence, who does not have an obligation to report to the Title IX Coordinator, UMBC has a number of [Confidential Resources](#) available to support you:

- [Retriever Integrated Health](#) (Main Campus): 410-455-2472; Monday-Friday; 8:30 a.m.–5 p.m.; For After-Hours Support 410-455-3230

- [Center for Counseling and Well-being](#) (Shady Grove Campus): 301-738-6273; Monday-Thursday 10:00 a.m.-7 p.m. (virtual) [Online Appointment Request Form](#)
- Pastoral Counseling via [The Gathering Space for Spiritual Well-being](#): 410-455-3657; i3b@umbc.edu; Monday – Friday 8:00 a.m.–10:00 p.m.

Other Resources:

- [Women’s Center](#) (for students of all genders): 410-455-2714; womenscenter@umbc.edu. [Monday–Thursday 10:00am-5:30pm and Friday 10:00am-4pm]
- [Shady Grove Student Resources](#), [Maryland Resources](#), [National Resources](#).

Child Abuse and Neglect:

Please note that Maryland law and [UMBC policy](#) require that faculty report all disclosures or suspicions of child abuse or neglect to the Department of Social Services and/or the police even if the person who experienced the abuse or neglect is now over 18.

Accessibility and Disability Accommodations, Guidance and Resources

Accommodations for students with disabilities are provided for all students with a qualified disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA & ADAAA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act who request and are eligible for accommodations. The Office of Student Disability Services (SDS) is the UMBC department designated to coordinate accommodations that creates equal access for students when barriers to participation exist in University courses, programs, or activities.

If you have a documented disability and need to request academic accommodations in your courses, please refer to the SDS website at sds.umbc.edu for registration information and office procedures.

SDS email: disAbility@umbc.edu

SDS phone: (410) 455-2459.

If you will be using SDS approved accommodations in this class, please contact the instructor to discuss implementation of the accommodations. During remote instruction requirements due to COVID, communication and flexibility will be essential for success.

Pregnant and Parenting Students

[UMBC’s Policy on Sexual Misconduct, Sexual Harassment, and Gender Discrimination](#) expressly prohibits all forms of discrimination and harassment on the basis of sex, including pregnancy. Resources for pregnant, parenting and breastfeeding students are available through the University’s Office of Equity and Civil Rights. Pregnant and parenting students are encouraged to contact the Title IX Coordinator to discuss plans and ensure ongoing access to their academic program with respect to a leave of absence – returning following leave, or any other accommodation that may be needed related to pregnancy, childbirth, adoption, breastfeeding, and/or the early months of parenting.

In addition, students who are pregnant and have an impairment related to their pregnancy that qualifies as disability under the ADA may be entitled to accommodations through the Office of Student Disability Services at sds.umbc.edu.

Religious Observances & Accommodations

UMBC [Policy](#) provides that students should not be penalized because of observances of their religious beliefs, and that students shall be given an opportunity, whenever feasible, to make up within a reasonable time any academic assignment that is missed due to individual participation in religious observances. It is the responsibility of the student to inform the instructor of any intended absences or requested modifications for religious observances in advance, and as early as possible. For questions or guidance regarding religious observances and accommodations, please contact the Office of Equity and Civil Rights at ecr@umbc.edu.

Hate, Bias, Discrimination and Harrassment

UMBC values safety, cultural and ethnic diversity, social responsibility, lifelong learning, equity, and civic engagement. Consistent with these principles, [UMBC Policy](#) prohibits discrimination and harassment in its educational programs and activities or with respect to employment terms and conditions based on race, creed, color, religion, sex, gender, pregnancy, ancestry, age, gender identity or expression, national origin, veterans status, marital status, sexual orientation, physical or mental disability, or genetic information.

Students (and faculty and staff) who experience discrimination, harassment, hate, or bias based upon a protected status or who have such matters reported to them should use the [online reporting/referral](#) form to report discrimination, hate, or bias incidents. You may report incidents that happen to you anonymously. Please note that, if you report anonymously, the University's ability to respond may be limited.

Retriever Essentials - FREE FOOD ESSENTIALS FOR EVERYONE IN THE UMBC COMMUNITY!

Retriever Essentials is a faculty, staff, and student-led partnership that promotes food access in the UMBC community. We offer FREE groceries, toiletries, baby items, and meal swipes, and have opportunities to engage and volunteer:

- Pick up items from our free store, [The Essential Space](#) located in RAC 235
- Receive fresh food every Thursday 2:15-2:45pm @ the Library (email or see IG for exact location)
- Stop by one of our [Food Zones](#) to pick up a pre-assembled bag of non-perishable food items and personal care products
- Pick up snacks and food from our [Free Corner Stores](#) at the Campus Police Station or Library Atrium
- Email us at retrieveressentials@umbc.edu if you need free meal swipes
- To donate food, see instructions [here!](#)

Also email us if you would like to join our team or [volunteer](#) with us! Free