

**PH 200-02: Contemporary Ethics—**  
**Life, Sex, and Death**  
Emerson College, Spring 2021

**Professor:** Dr. Aleksy Tarasenko-Struc

*Contact:* a\_tarasenkostruc@emerson.edu

*Office hours:* Wednesday, 5h–6h PM EST, and by special appointment

**Course Meetings:** 10h–11h45 AM EST, over Zoom

**Course Description**

In this course, we will examine three clusters of moral issues pertaining to human mortality and sexuality. First, we will begin by trying to understand the nature of sex (and sexual desire) in order to determine which kinds of sex acts are morally wrong (or otherwise morally objectionable) and why. If a sex act is consensual, does that make it morally permissible? Do any sexual desires count as unnatural or perverted, and if so, is it wrong, on these grounds, to act on them? What is it to use someone sexually? Is doing so ever consistent with respect for that person's humanity? Is sexual objectification always bad? Why is rape wrong, exactly? Second, we will move on to explore the moral significance of killing human beings, by sketching the moral profile of three forms of killing: (1) abortion, (2) euthanasia (and physician-assisted suicide), and (3) genocide. Questions to be discussed include these: What kind of value do human beings have? How much are we morally required to sacrifice for the sake of other people? How extensive is our sovereignty over our bodies? How, if at all, is killing a whole people morally different from killing individuals? Can any human action be truly evil? Finally, we will consider why death is bad (and why it might be good), why living is good (and why it might be bad), and how these are related both to each other and to the meaning of life. Specifically, we will think about whether our lives' meaningfulness depends either on our mortality or on the survival of the rest of humanity, and whether we should regret having been born.

This is an intermediate course in ethics—the branch of philosophy dedicated to the study of right and wrong, of good and evil and of how we ought to live. This course is ideal for those who have completed at least one philosophy course, particularly PH 105 ('Introduction to Ethics'), but there is no official prerequisite, and it aims to be accessible to people with no philosophical background.

**Course Goals**

We will pay special attention to the structure and content of arguments for various positions on a range of complex moral issues; to the relation between philosophy and other fields and media (such as the arts and the humanities); and to the mechanics of writing an extended argumentative essay.

By the end of the semester, you should be able to

- identify substantive value judgments in both philosophical and nonacademic texts/media;
- articulate the reasons or arguments that might support various value judgments;

- understand how value judgments shape our conception of ourselves and the world;
- evaluate various views concerning morality, the good life, and matters of value generally;
- characterize and critically engage with these views, in writing, in a clear and cogent manner; and
- conduct discussions with others in a way guided by the virtue of intellectual humility.

Note: PH 200 counts toward the Ethics and Values Perspective (4 credits).

### **Required Text**

There is only one required text for this course:

Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife* (Oxford University Press, 2013)

This book may be bought online at a reasonable price or borrowed from numerous local libraries. Readings will otherwise consist in articles or book chapters, which will be made available on Canvas.

For those seeking an introduction to the subject of moral philosophy, I recommend these three:

Russ Shafer-Landau, *The Fundamentals of Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2020)

James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (McGraw-Hill, 2014)

Simon Blackburn, *Being Good* (Oxford University Press, 2003)

### **Course Requirements and Grades**

Every student is required (1) to participate thoughtfully and respectfully in class discussions and group activities; (2) to submit three papers; and, finally, (3) to complete all five of the reading quizzes.

Here is how each component of your final grade is weighted:

- 15%: *Participation*
- 25%: *Reading Quizzes* (X 5): due February 3, February 28, March 14, April 4, April 18
- 15%: *Paper 1* (5–6 pages), due February 21
- 20%: *Paper 2* (6–8 pages), due March 28
- 25%: *Paper 3* (7–10 pages), due April 29

Except in special circumstances, in order to pass this course, all written work must be submitted to the instructor. In addition to these assignments, there will be occasional opportunities for extra credit.

- **Participation:** This course aims for a roughly equal balance of lecture and discussions (and other activities). Participation is very important, as reflected by the fact that your participation score accounts for a significant proportion of your final grade. Everyone is expected to contribute to class discussions and activities in some form. I especially encourage you to ask clarificatory questions about the material: if you are confused about some topic that we are studying, it is *very* likely that other students are, too! This means that not only will you be

penalized for failing to participate in class discussions, you will lose out on an essential source of philosophical understanding: dialogue with others, the clash of differing points of view.

Course meetings will generally be conducted synchronously, over Zoom, although I may occasionally require or invite you to complete assignments associated with asynchronous courses (e.g. discussion boards, watching video lectures, etc.). Here is the key information for login:

*Link for meeting:* [redacted]

*Meeting ID:* [redacted]

*Password:* [redacted]

- **Absences:** The instructor has discretion over whether to excuse an absence. Absences are excused in case of (documented) illness, mental health issues, death of a friend/family member, or job interview, among considerations. Here are the standard penalties for multiple *unexcused* absences:
  - 0–4 absences = 0 points deducted from final score
  - 5–7 absences = 2 points deducted from final score
  - 8–10 absences = 3 points deducted from final score
  - >10 absences = failure of the course
- **Reading Quizzes:** You will complete five quizzes, all of them on Canvas, over the course of the semester. The aim of these quizzes is to ensure that you are reading regularly by testing your comprehension of the material. You will generally have a week to complete online quizzes.
- **Papers:** You will write and submit three papers on topics that I will assign. These will be tightly structured argumentative essays with a substantial interpretive component. They will be graded according to how well they exemplify the virtues of philosophical writing: clarity of expression, cogency of argument, accuracy of interpretation, focus and efficiency of language, and charity.

Unless it is late or you have received an extension, your paper should be uploaded to Canvas.

Here is the grading scheme for papers:

<b>A+</b>	100	<b>B+</b>	89	<b>C+</b>	79	<b>D+</b>	69
<b>A+/A</b>	98	<b>B+/B</b>	87	<b>C+/C</b>	77	<b>D+/D</b>	67
<b>A</b>	96	<b>B</b>	85	<b>C</b>	75	<b>D</b>	65
<b>A-/A</b>	94	<b>B/B-</b>	83	<b>C/C-</b>	73	<b>D/D-</b>	63
<b>A-</b>	92	<b>B-</b>	81	<b>C-</b>	71	<b>D-</b>	61
<b>A-/B+</b>	90	<b>B-/C+</b>	80	<b>C-/D+</b>	70	<b>F</b>	60

- **Extra Credit:** One aspect of face-to-face meetings that I am keen to preserve is their personal character. As part of this effort: one point of extra credit will be added to your final grade if you upload a photo of yourself, with your face clearly visible, as your profile picture on Canvas.

Please make a photo of yourself your profile pic by 11h59 PM on Sunday, January 31.

## Course Policies:

- **Respect:** Discussions in this course should be respectful, constructive, and inclusive. We will follow the NYU Guidelines for Respectful Philosophical Discussion, which can be found [here](#).
- **Accommodations:** Students who require special accommodations for a documented disability should contact me immediately, so that necessary arrangements can be made in a timely manner. To obtain the requisite documentation, follow the [accommodations process](#), ideally early on.
- **Plagiarism:** You are encouraged to discuss the material with your peers outside of class, but all work must contain your own thoughts, written in your own words. Feel free contact me if you would like clarification concerning what counts as plagiarism or what proper citation consists in.

Common forms of plagiarism in this course have included:

- borrowing wording from a handout (without quoting and citing it)
- borrowing wording from one of the readings (without quoting and citing it)
- borrowing wording from the essay prompt
- borrowing wording or ideas from an online source (without quoting and citing it)
- borrowing wording or ideas from another student's paper

You can also find a definition of plagiarism, along with Emerson College's plagiarism policy, [here](#)

- **Readings:** This is a reading-intensive course. You can expect to have ~50 pages of reading each week. Required readings should be completed *before* the session for which they are assigned.

Some selections will be dense and difficult, so you may have to reread them once or twice.

- **Extensions:** Extensions for any valid reason will be granted *only if* they are requested at least one full day before the due date. Keep in mind that *extensions will not generally be granted on the third paper*.

Note: If you take an extension, you effectively waive your right to receive comments on time!

Note: If you take an extension, please send me your paper by email directly, at the above address.

- **Late Work:** It is important that you submit your work on time. Except in unusual circumstances, late work will be penalized 1/3 of a letter grade per day (e.g. from A to A-, etc.).

Note: If you submit work late, you effectively waive your right to receive comments on time!

Note: If you submit work late, please send me your paper by email directly, at the above address.

- **Drafts:** It is very important to me that you learn to polish your writing in this course—by revising, revising, and revising your work. To this end, I am offering to read drafts of your papers and to give you feedback on them, in advance of the deadline, so that you may rewrite them for a higher grade. If you want me to look over a draft, send it to me *at least* four days before the due date.

- **Exemplars:** I plan to use a small handful of excellent essays as exemplars to illustrate to the class those virtues of writing that I want you to cultivate. I will do so with your work unless you object. If you would not like your work to be used for this purpose, please let me know by email.
- **Office Hours:** Office hours are one hour set aside each week for speaking with students about matters related to the course or their intellectual trajectory more generally. Everyone should feel encouraged to meet with me, individually or in a group, for any academic reason, and especially if they want to discuss my comments on their work. You can make an appointment with me [here](#).

Office hours will be conducted remotely through Zoom. If you schedule a meeting with me, I will send you an invitation ahead of time through your Emerson College email account. Please message me to see about alternative meeting times if you cannot make my office hours.

- **Email:** I will strive to answer your emails within two business days, where this excludes weekends and holidays. If you have not received a response in this time, please remind me.
- **Title IX:** I am a responsible employee at Emerson College which means I am not a confidential resource. I will keep your information as private as I can; however, if you disclose information that may violate Emerson's Sexual Misconduct Policy, I must report it to the Title IX Coordinator. You may also contact the Title IX office directly at [titleix@emerson.edu](mailto:titleix@emerson.edu) or (617) 824-8999. Alternatively, if you would like to speak with someone confidentially, please contact the Healing & Advocacy Collective, Counseling and Psychological Services, or Health and Wellness.

### Schedule of Meetings and Assignments

\* Titles with an asterisk denote recommended readings; titles without one denote required readings.

#### **Sex I: The Nature and Aim(s) of Sex**

January 19: [No Readings: Introduction to Topics and Mechanics of Course]

January 21: Greta Christina, 'Are We Having Sex Now or What?'

January 26: Thomas Nagel, 'Sexual Perversion'

Roger Scruton, *Sexual Desire*, ch. 4 ('Desire') \*

Alan Goldman, 'Plain Sex' \*

Jessica Begon, 'Sexual Perversion: A Liberal Account' \*

January 28: Thomas Mappes, 'Sexual Morality and the Concept of Using Another Person'

#### **Sex II: Sexual Objectification**

February 2: Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, pp. 96–98

Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, pp. 155–159

Catharine MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, pp. 123–30  
Sally Haslanger, 'On Being Objective and Being Objectified', pp. 223–32  
Raja Halwani, *Philosophy of Sex, Love, and Marriage*, ch. 8 ('Sexual Objectification'), pp. 245–259 \*

**\*Wednesday, February 3: Quiz 1 Due by 11h59 PM\***

February 4: Martha Nussbaum, 'Objectification', pp. 249–71  
Rae Langton, 'Sexual Solipsism' \*  
Rae Langton, 'Autonomy-Denial in Objectification' \*

**\*February 5: Add/Drop Date\***

February 9: Nussbaum, 'Objectification', pp. 272–91  
Timo Jütten, 'Sexual Objectification' \*  
Lina Papadaki, 'What is Objectification?' \*

February 11: [No Readings: Workshop on Philosophical Writing]

**Sex III: Rape**

February 16: John Gardner and Stephen Shute, 'The Wrongness of Rape'  
Mari Mikkola, *The Wrong of Injustice*, ch. 6 ('Dehumanization'), pp. 153–57  
Susan Brison, *Aftermath*, ch. 1 ('Surviving Sexual Violence') \*

February 18: Jean Hampton, 'Defining Wrong and Defining Rape' [focus on pp. 134–52]

**\*Sunday, February 21: Paper 1 Due by 11h59 PM\***

**Killing I: Abortion**

February 23: Philippa Foot, 'The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect'  
Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, excerpt ('The Unspeakable Crime of Abortion') \*

February 25: Don Marquis, 'Why Abortion is Immoral'  
Don Marquis, 'Abortion Revisited' \*

**\*Sunday, February 28: Quiz 2 Due\***

March 2: Judith Jarvis Thomson, 'A Defense of Abortion'  
Michael Tooley, 'Abortion and Infanticide' \*

March 4: Gina Schouten, 'Fetuses, Orphans, and a Famous Violinist'

Peter Singer, 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality' \*  
Liam Murphy, 'The Demands of Beneficence' \*

## **Killing II: Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide**

March 9: Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 'Declaration on Euthanasia'

March 11: Ronald Dworkin et al, 'Assisted Suicide: The Philosophers' Brief'

James Rachels, 'Active and Passive Euthanasia' \*

Bonnie Steinbock, 'The Intentional Termination of Life' \*

**\*Sunday, March 14: Quiz 3 Due\***

March 16: Frances Kamm, 'A Right to Choose Death?'

March 18: David Velleman, 'A Right of Self-Termination?', pp. 606–20

## **Killing III: Genocide and Evil**

March 23: Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, ch. 15, epilogue

Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity*, ch. 8 ('Genocide and the Holocaust') \*

March 25: Primo Levi, *If This is a Man*, ch. 2 ('On the Bottom')

Berel Lang, 'The Evil in Genocide'

Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, ch. 2 ('Torture') \*

**\*Sunday, March 28: Paper 2 Due\***

## **Death and the Meaning of Life I: Death's Badness and Fear of Death**

March 30: Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, Book III, excerpt

Thomas Nagel, 'Death'

April 1: Bernard Williams, 'The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality'

**\*Sunday, April 4: Quiz 4 Due\***

## **Death and the Meaning of Life II: The Annihilation of Humanity**

April 6: Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*, lecture 1 ('The Afterlife, Part I')

April 8: Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*, lecture 2 ('The Afterlife (Part II)')

April 13: Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*, lecture 3 ('Fear, Death, and Confidence')

April 15: Susan Wolf, 'The Significance of Doomsday'

Mark Johnston, 'Is Life a Ponzi Scheme?'

**\*Sunday, April 18: Quiz 5 Due\***

**Death and the Meaning of Life III: The Badness of Life?**

April 20: [No Class: Friday Schedule]

April 22: David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, ch. 2 ('Why Coming into Existence is Always a Harm')

Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, excerpt ('The Myth of Sisyphus') \*

April 27: Susan Wolf, 'The Meanings of Lives'

Susan Wolf, 'Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life'

April 29: [No Class: Friday Schedule]

**\*Thursday, April 29: Paper 3 Due\***