

# Current Moral and Social Issues

**Instructor:** Rose Fonth

**Email:** rose.fonth@rutgers.edu

**Class Sessions:** Mondays and Thursdays, 12:10pm – 1:30pm

**Location:** Scott Hall, Classroom: 203

**Office Hours:** Thursdays, 1:45pm – 2:45pm and by appointment

## Course Description:

In this course, we will critically examine several contemporary issues in moral and social philosophy. Towards that end, we will investigate issues in reproductive, racial, and sexual ethics. Some questions we will consider are: Is abortion immoral? Can institutions be racist? Is sexual objectification always morally problematic? We will also examine the nature of social construction more broadly, making sense of what it means to say that a group or category is socially constructed as well as investigating whether the social world is as real as the natural world.

## Course Materials:

All course reading materials will be provided on Canvas.

## Course Objectives:

1. To develop the ability to critically evaluate opposing philosophical arguments, using evidence from the texts to assess their soundness.
2. To understand and apply the core principles of major normative ethical theories to complex, real-world moral issues.
3. To gain a critical understanding of contemporary academic debates in reproductive, racial, and sexual ethics, examining how philosophers analyze concepts like harm, rights, oppression, and justice.
4. To investigate the nature of social construction, including how this specifically applies to current analyses of racial social categories.
5. To write a philosophy paper that critically engages with a topic within moral or social philosophy.

## Evaluation:

### *Grade Breakdown:*

Attendance: 15%

Discussion Posts: 20%

Short Response Paper: 15%

Mid-term Exam: 25%

Final Paper: 25%

### *Attendance*

Attendance will be taken at every class session. However, if you are sick or have an emergency and are going to be absent to a class session, then make sure to report your absence online via the Rutgers Student Self-Reporting Absence Application. (this course matters, but your physical and mental health and well-being matter more!)

### *Discussion Posts*

Before the start of each week, you will submit a discussion post (minimum 150 words) via Canvas where you comment on one of the readings for the week. You can either pose a question or comment on a claim or argument made, and you should cite the relevant reading. I will put up each discussion post after our Thursday session, and they will be **due on Sundays by 8pm**. Also, I will drop your lowest discussion post grade at the end of the semester.

### *Short response paper*

This paper will require that you briefly respond to any claim or argument from one of the papers we discuss. You can respond to any paper from Units 1, 2, and 3. The short response paper will be 500-800 words. The short response paper is **due via Canvas two weeks after the paper is assigned**.

### *Mid-Term Exam*

There will be one mid-term exam. It is currently scheduled for **Week 8**.

### *Final paper*

This paper will require that you critically engage with an argument or a debate in moral or social philosophy. The final paper will be 1250-1750 words. The final paper will be **due via Canvas by April 30, 11:59pm**.

**Note:** There is **no** final exam. So, we will not be meeting during finals week.

### **Readings:**

It is expected that you do each reading for each session. Check the Canvas page for the updated reading list schedule.

### **Borderline Grades:**

In cases of borderline grades (eg, 89.5%, 74.7%), I will exercise discretion in whether I decide to “bump” them up to the next nearest partial letter grade. However, attendance and participation will be the *most* significant factors in these decisions, so I would *strongly recommend* that you try to attend every class session and participate frequently in class discussions.

### **Meetings:**

My office is in **Room 544** of the **Philosophy Department**, which is located on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor of the Gateway Building. I am available each week for in-person meetings during my designated office hours. If that time does not work for you, feel free to send me an email so we can schedule an appointment at a time that does work.

### **Electronic Communication:**

Besides in-person communication, you can also contact me by sending me an email to my email address ([rose.fonth@rutgers.edu](mailto:rose.fonth@rutgers.edu)) or by sending me a message on Canvas. While I will respond to either form of communication, I do respond quicker via email, so I would *strongly recommend* that you communicate with me via email rather than via Canvas.

### **Late Policy:**

Papers must be submitted by the deadline to be considered for full credit. For each day that a paper is late, the paper will be deducted by one partial letter grade (i.e., it will lose 3 points per day).

However, I do grant **extensions** depending on the circumstances. An extension will be granted only for: compelling academic reasons (e.g., conflicts with other deadlines); or compelling personal reasons (which will be assessed on a case-by-case basis).

**Extra Credit:**

There is no extra credit offered in this course.

**Accommodations:**

I am committed to ensuring that every student can pursue their academic goals in this course. If you need certain accommodations or services, please reach out to me. You can find more about Rutgers' accommodations and services on their "Access and Disability Services" webpage here: <https://radr.rutgers.edu>. Once you have enrolled with the relevant access and disability services office, I may ask to see your letter of accommodations, which you can also find more info about here: <https://webapps.rutgers.edu/student-ods/forms/loa>

**Academic Integrity:**

No form of cheating, plagiarism, or any other sort of academic wrongdoing will be tolerated in this course. I strongly recommend that you familiarize yourself with the university's Academic Integrity Policy if you have any questions regarding what sort of activity would constitute a violation of the university's policy: <https://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/pdfs/current.pdf>

**Reading Schedule:**

***Unit 0: Preliminaries***

Week 1

Introduction: What is (Moral and Social) Philosophy?

*No Reading*

Week 2

Philosopher's Toolkit

*Reading:* Joel Feinberg (1971), "A Logic Lesson" in *Reason and Responsibility*

Utilitarianism

*Reading:* John Stuart Mill (1863), "Utilitarianism"

Week 3

Deontology

*Reading:* Onora O'Neill (1985), "A Simplified Account of Kant's Ethics"

Cont.

***Unit 1: Reproductive Ethics***

Week 4

Abortion

*Reading:* Judith Jarvis Thompson (1971): "A Defense of Abortion"

Abortion

*Reading:* Don Marquis (1989): "An Argument that Abortion is Wrong"

Week 5

Paternalism

*Reading:* John Stuart Mill (1859), “On Liberty”

Paternalism

*Reading:* Gerald Dworkin (1972), “Paternalism”

## ***Unit 2: Racial Ethics***

Week 6

Racism

*Reading:* J.L.A. Garcia (1996), “The Heart of Racism”

Racism

*Reading:* Tommie Shelby (2002), “Is Racism in the Heart?”

Week 7

Protest

*Reading:* Candice Delmas (2016), “Civil Disobedience” (excerpt)

Protest

*Reading:* Myisha Cherry (2018), “Love, Anger, and Racial Injustice”

Week 8

Catch-up

## **Midterm Exam**

## **Week 9: Spring Break**

## ***Unit 3: Sexual Ethics***

Week 10

Objectification

*Reading:* Immanuel Kant (1770-1780/1930), *A Lecture on Ethics* (excerpt)

Objectification

*Reading:* Catharine McKinnon (1987), *Feminism Unmodified* (excerpt)

Week 11

Objectification

*Reading:* Martha Nussbaum (1995), “Objectification”

Pornography

*Reading:* Catharine McKinnon (1989), “Sexuality, Pornography, and Method” in *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*

Week 12

Sex Work

*Reading:* Christine Overall (1992), “What’s Wrong with Prostitution? Evaluating Sex Work”

Catch-up

## ***Unit 4: Social Construction***

Week 13

Social Objectivity

*Reading:* John Searle (1995), *The Construction of Social Reality*, Chapter 1

Social Objectivity

Cont.

Week 14

Social Debunking

*Reading:* Kwame Anthony Appiah (1989), “The Conservation of ‘Race’”

Social Debunking

*Reading:* Haslanger (2019), “Tracing the Sociopolitical Reality of Race” in *What is Race?*

Week 15

Catch-up