

## Current Moral and Social Issues

**Instructor:** Rose Fonth

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

**Class Sessions:** Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2:00pm – 3:20pm

**Location:** Murray Hall, Room 204

**Office Hours:** Tuesdays, 3:30pm – 4:30pm 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 biological, racial, and AI ethics. Some questions we will consider are: Is abortion immoral? Can institutions be racist? Is AI-generated art theft? We will also examine the nature of social construction more broadly, making sense of what it means to say that an entity 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 biological, racial, and AI ethics, examining how philosophers analyze concepts like harm, rights, moral status, and justice.
4. To investigate the nature of social construction, including how this specifically applies to current analyses of racial categories.

### Evaluation:

#### *Grade Breakdown:*

Attendance: 15%

Discussion Posts: 20%

Short Response Paper: 15%

Mid-term Exam: 25%

Final Exam: 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 to receive an excused absence. (This course matters, but your physical and mental health and well-being matters 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 11:59pm**.

*Short response paper*

This paper will require that you briefly respond to one of the articles from Unit 1. The short response paper will be around 400-600 words. The short response paper is **due via Canvas two weeks after the paper prompt is assigned**.

*Mid-Term Exam*

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

*Final Exam*

There will be one final exam. It is scheduled during **Final Exams Week**, at the university-assigned date and time.

Note: there is **no** take-home final paper for this course.

**Readings:**

It is expected that you do each reading for each session and that you come prepared to discuss these readings with your peers. Check the Canvas page for the updated reading list schedule.

**Meetings:**

My office is in **Room 527** 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.

**Personal 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.

**No-Electronics Policy:**

No phones, laptops, or tablets are allowed during class sessions, unless you have been given special permission. Electronics can be used not just to distract yourself but also those around you. It is also demonstrable that handwriting notes is more effective than typing when it comes to memorization and information retention.

**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. This also includes the improper use of AI tools. 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>

**Schedule** (*subject to change—see Canvas for the most up-to-date version*):

**Unit 0: Moral & Social Preliminaries**

Week 1

No Class

Introduction: What is (Moral and Social) Philosophy?

*No Reading*

Week 2

Is Morality Relative or Objective?

*Reading:* James Rachels (1999), "The Challenge of Cultural Relativism"

Normative Ethics: Utilitarianism

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

Week 3

Normative Ethics: Deontology

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

**Unit 1: Bioethics**

The Ethics of Abortion

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

Week 4

The Ethics of Abortion

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

Euthanasia & End-of-Life Ethics

*Reading:* James Rachels (1975), “Active and Passive Euthanasia”

Week 5

Euthanasia & End-of-Life Ethics

*Reading:* Thomas Sullivan (1977), “Active and Passive Euthanasia: An Impertinent Distinction?”

Catch-up

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

Week 6

What is Racism?

*Reading:* Jorge Garcia (1996), “The Heart of Racism”

What is Racism?

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

Week 7

The Ethics of Protest

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

The Ethics of Protest

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

Week 8

Catch-up

## **Midterm**

## **Week 9: Spring Break**

## ***Unit 3: AI Ethics***

Week 10

Is AI Art Morally Problematic?

*Reading:* Trystan Goetze (2024), “AI Art is Theft”

Cont.

Week 11

Is AI Art Morally Problematic?

*Reading:* Eric Shoemaker (2024), “Is AI-Art Theft? The Moral Foundations of Copyright Law in the Context of AI Image Generation”

AI & Emotions

*Reading:* Kelly Weirich (2023), “ChatGPT and Emotional Outsourcing”

Week 12

AI & Emotions

*Reading:* Masoud Toossi Saeidi (2025) “Emotionalized AI and the meaningfulness gap: an AI ethics perspective”

Catch-up

***Unit 4: Social Construction***

Week 13

Are Social Entities Real?

*Reading:* John Searle (1995), “The Building Blocks of Social Reality”, in *The Construction of Social Reality*

Are Social Entities Real?

*Reading:* Sally Haslanger (2012), “Social Construction: The “Debunking” Project”

Week 14

Constructing Race

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

Constructing Race

*Reading:* Sally Haslanger (2019), “A Social Constructionist Analysis of Race”

Week 15

Cont.

Catch-up