

Contemporary Moral Issues

Course Information

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- Office Hours: TBA

Location: TBA

Time: TBA

Course Description

Is eating meat morally permissible? How about abortion? Are we morally required to help those in poverty? Or to act in environmentally responsible ways? Is there a moral right to own a gun? To immigrate? People have strong, conflicting beliefs about how to answer these questions. Often, these beliefs are ones they hold near and dear. This can make it difficult to subject those beliefs to rational evaluation. The goal of this course is to do just that. We will be looking at arguments for different answers to these questions, and evaluating their strengths and weaknesses. By the end of the course, students will be able to rationally engage with both sides of these hot-button moral issues and more.

Course Materials

All required readings will be available through the course website located on Canvas.

Time Commitment

Our course will meet 35 times (for a total of 35 hours). Doing the readings and writing up summaries and reflections should take about 2 ½ hours for each class, for a total of 90 hours. For each of your three papers, you should expect to spend 15 hours reading, reviewing notes, outlining, drafting and polishing your work. Each rewrite should take 5 hours. So the total number of hours spent for the course is around 180 hours.

Accessibility and Accommodation

Please inform me early in the term if you have a disability or other conditions that might require accommodations or modification of any of the course procedures. You may speak with me after class or during my office hours. For more information, please contact Student and Employee Accessibility Services at 401-863-9588 or SEAS@brown.edu.

Grade Breakdown

Attendance & Participation	10%
Expert Presentation	10%
Reading Summaries & Reflections	20%
Papers	20% each

Course Requirements

Attendance & Participation: After shopping period, I'll take attendance with a sign-in sheet. For each class meeting, it will be your responsibility to (a) sign in or (b) send me an email in advance of the class explaining why you cannot attend. For each unexcused absence over 3, your attendance grade will be lowered by 10%. This is a discussion-based course and so informed and respectful participation is expected. Students will also be required to participate in several in-class debates, explained below. In addition to in-class participation, you may earn participation credit through e-mail correspondence with me and office hour discussion.

Expert Presentation: You will each be assigned a reading from the course reading list on which you will become an expert. On the day that your reading is assigned, you are expected to come to class prepared with a 10-15-minute presentation on the reading. The presentation should include a thorough summary of the reading as well as your own reaction to it in order to jump start that day's discussion. You should have an outline handout for the class to pass out.

Reading: I'll assign regular readings, which will generally be around 10-30 pages. You will need to do each assigned reading carefully, preferably more than once. To hold you accountable for doing the readings, I'll expect you to write up a summary and a reflection – comment, question, or criticism – on each day's reading. Summaries should be short (100-200 words) and reflections can be even shorter (20-50 words). Summaries and reflections for a given day's reading must be posted on the relevant discussion board on Canvas *before* the start of class (10am). Late posts will not be accepted. You will be able to see each other's comments and reflections only after you post your own. For each missed post over 3, your reading grade will be lowered by 10%.

Papers: You will write a paper for each of the three units of this course. Papers should be around 2000 words, but no less than 1500 and no more than 2500. For each paper, you will choose any one of the assigned readings of the relevant unit to write on. Around half of each paper should be devoted to clearly, accurately, and charitably presenting the author's argument. The other half of the paper should be devoted to your own original philosophical evaluation of that argument. You will have the opportunity to rewrite each of the first two papers. If you turn in a rewrite for a paper, the recorded grade for that paper will be the average of the grades of your original paper and your rewrite.

Course Schedule

Unit 1: Life-and-Death Issues

Abortion

- Session 1* Fischer, "Introduction"
- Session 2* Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion"
- Session 3* Marquis, "Why Abortion is Immoral"
- Session 4* Debate Day: abortion case

Euthanasia

- Session 5* Rachels, "Active and Passive Euthanasia"
- Session 6* Callahan, "A Case Against Euthanasia"
- Session 7* Debate Day: euthanasia case

Meat-Eating

- Session 8* Norcross, "Puppies, Pigs, and People"
- Session 9* Bruckner, "Strict Vegetarianism is Immoral"
- Session 10* Debate Day: meat-eating case

Poverty Relief

- Session 11* Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality"
- Session 12* Pummer, "Charity and Partiality"
- Session 13* Debate Day: poverty relief case
- Session 14* Writing Workshop Day

Unit 2: Political Issues

Gun Control

- Session 15* Huemer, "Is There A Right to Own a Gun?"
- Session 16* LaFollette, "Gun Control"
- Session 17* Debate Day: gun control case

Immigration

- Session 18* Miller, "Immigration: A Case for Limits"
- Session 19* Kukathas, "The Case for Open Immigration"
- Session 20* Debate Day: immigration case

Taxation

- Session 21* Nozick, "Distributive Justice"
- Session 22* Schweiger, "Ethical Obligations of Wealthy People"
- Session 23* Debate Day: taxation case

Climate Change

- Session 24* Sinnott-Armstrong, "It's Not My Fault"
- Session 25* Hordequin, "Climate Change, Collective Action, and Individual Action"
- Session 26* Debate Day: climate change case

Unit 3: Educational Issues

Educational Justice

- Session 27* Ladson-Billings, "From Achievement Gap to Educational Gap"
- Session 28* Schouten, "Educational Justice: Closing Gaps or Paying Debts?"
- Session 29* Debate Day: educational justice case

Affirmative Action

- Session 30* Mosley, "A Defense of Affirmative Action"
- Session 31* Wolf-Devine, "Preferential Policies Have Become Toxic"
- Session 32* Debate Day: affirmative action case

College Sports

- Session 33* Brand, "The Role and Value of Intercollegiate Sports in Universities"
- Session 34* Corlett, "On the Role and Value of Intercollegiate Sports in Universities"
- Session 35* Debate Day: college sports case

Case Debates

Overview

The goal of case study debates is to bring to bear the ethical theory and arguments from the readings to a complex, real-life moral case. Two teams will go head-to-head in each debate. The teams will be asked to carefully consider a case related to that day's topic and to take a stance on the key question. The key question will be a yes-or-no question like "is person x morally blameworthy for doing y?" or "is person x morally obligated to do y?" or "is option x morally superior to option y?"

One team will be the pro-team and the other team will be the con-team. The pro-team will defend the "yes" answer to the key question and the con-team will defend the "no" answer.

This isn't about being right or wrong. This also isn't about rhetorical flourishes or being persuasive. This is about making good arguments. This is about applying theory to practice, working as a team to come up with a thoughtful and reasoned-based stance, and trying to see a hot-button moral issue from a side you might not take yourself.

Teams

At the beginning of the course, each student will sign up to participate in a certain number of debates, the number being dependent pending on enrollment in the course. On the day of the debate, participating students will be assigned to one of two teams. Two teams participate in each debate. There will be eleven debates throughout the course.

Outline of Debate Procedure

1. Distribution and reading of case
2. Coin flip
3. Presentation of positive cases (11 minutes)
 - a. 3 minutes: conferral period
 - b. 4 minutes: presentation of pro-team case
 - c. 4 minutes: presentation of con-team case
4. Presentation of responses (8 minutes)
 - a. 2 minutes: conferral period
 - b. 3 minutes: presentation of pro-team response to con-team case
 - c. 3 minutes: presentation of con-team response to pro-team case
5. Concluding statements (5 minutes)
 - a. 1 minute: conferral period
 - b. 2 minutes: presentation of pro-team's concluding statement
 - c. 2 minutes: presentation of con-team's concluding statement
6. Q&A from audience (10 minutes)

Explanation of Procedure Components

Distribution and reading of case: The two participating teams will sit facing each other in the front of the classroom. The moderator will distribute a copy of the case to each member of the participating teams. The moderator will then read aloud the case and the key question.

Coin flip: The moderator will flip a coin. The team who wins the coin toss will get to decide whether they are the pro-team or the con-team.

Presentation of positive cases: Each team will have 3 minutes to confer with each other in order to come up with a positive case in favor of their stance. After the conferral period, each team will have up to 4 minutes to present their positive case during which any member(s) of the team may speak. The pro-team will have 4 minutes to present their positive case first. Immediately following, the con-team present will have 4 minutes to present their positive case second.

Presentation of responses: Each team will have 2 minutes to confer with each other in order to come up with a response to the other team's positive case. The pro-team will come up with objections and challenges to the con-team's positive case. The con-team will come up with objections and challenges to the pro-team's positive case. After the conferral period, each team will be given up to 3 minutes to present their positive case during which any member(s) of the team may speak. The pro-team will have 3 minutes to present their response first. Immediately following, the con-team will have 3 minutes to present their response second.

Concluding statements: Each team will be given 1 minute to confer with each other in order to come up with a concluding statement. The teams may use the concluding statement for whatever purpose they see fit. Teams can reiterate the strongest points in favor their stance, respond to an objection or challenge raised by the other team, or offer a new argument in favor of their stance. After the conferral period, each team will be given up to 2 minutes to deliver their closing statement during which any member(s) of the team may speak. The pro-team will have 2 minutes to present their closing statement first. Immediately following, the con-team will have 2 minutes to present their respond second.

Q&A: Audience members (students on non-participating teams) will have the chance to ask teams questions. The Q&A will be supervised by the moderator. The first audience question will be directed to the pro-team, the second audience question will be directed to the con-team, and so on until the 7 minutes are up. Teams must keep their answers to less than a minute. Any member(s) of the team to whom the question is directed may answer. Audience members are asked to make their questions pointed and short. No follow-up questions will be permitted.

Roles

Moderators: The instructor will serve as moderators for all of the debates. Their job is to distribute copies of the case study to members of the participating team, oversee the coin toss, keep time, and distribute and collect scorecards, and calculate scores.

Participating teams: Two teams (8 to 10 students) will participate in each debate. Their job is to follow the procedures outlined above.

Scorekeepers: All students who are not on one of the two participating teams will be scorekeepers. Each scorekeeper will be given a scorecard, which they will use to evaluate the two participating teams along several dimensions. Scorekeepers will fill out scorecards during the debate, and turn in the scorecards to the moderator at the end of the debate. Scorekeepers must be critical and active listeners throughout the debate in order to be able to proficiently evaluate the participating teams.

Questioners: All students who are not on one of the two participating teams will be allowed to ask questions to the teams during the Q&A period at the end of the debate.

Scorekeeping and Scorecards

Scorekeepers will evaluate each of the participating teams in five categories. Each team can earn up to five points per category. A total of 25 points is up-for-grabs for each team. The moderator will collect the scorecards at the end of each debate and add together all the points each team has earned. The team with the most points will be the winner of the debate.