

Pandemic Ethics

Thursday: 7:00-8:30 PM

Oct 29-Nov 19

Online (Blackboard Collaborate)

Aaron Yarmel

yarmel@wisc.edu

www.aaronyarmel.com

Online Office Hours: (by appointment)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The Covid-19 pandemic is raising unprecedented challenges for communities all across the world. While many of these challenges are scientific ones, others are ethical challenges about what we ought to value and how we ought to navigate difficult tradeoffs. In this brief course, you will learn tools from philosophy to help you make progress on these questions. In particular, we will discuss the following: How should goods be distributed under conditions of scarcity? When should we engage in nonviolent protest? Are we morally required to make sacrifices to help others (or are such sacrifices nice, but not required)? How should we respond to false or misleading news and to accusations of fake news?

COURSE READINGS

There are no required readings for the course, but optional readings are available for each class. All readings are available on the Canvas site.

GOALS

- To improve your familiarity with the facts, concepts, theories, and arguments from the relevant empirical, and philosophical literature.
- To improve your ability to think about and discuss ethical issues in general.
- To improve your ability to write philosophy essays in general.
- To improve your ability to evaluate arguments critically, collaboratively, creatively, and charitably.

RULES, RIGHTS, AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Class Environment

Nearly all of the questions we will be evaluating are controversial questions about which many people have strongly held views. It's crucial to understand the following point: what we're interested in here are the *reasons* why views are right or wrong, and not simply whether they are right or wrong. It may be frustrating to have to defend and evaluate views that would be accepted, or rejected, uncritically in other contexts, but that's an important part of the discipline of philosophy. Throughout this process, you must always treat your classmates with the highest level of respect.

Keep in mind that many of your classmates come from backgrounds that are very different from your own. In addition to differences in race, housing stability, health, sex, sexual orientation, gender, ethnicity, and economic status, some of your classmates will differ from you in their ideological, political, and religious commitments. It is important that everyone feels welcome to participate in class, so be mindful of the ways that others may be affected by what you do or say.

The following activities will not be permitted:

- Reading a newspaper (this includes doing a crossword or a sudoku)
- Listening to music
- Reading material that is not related to class
- Doing homework
- Emailing or surfing
- Texting
- Playing computer games
- Doing anything else that common sense ought to indicate does not belong in class

Diversity and Inclusion

Institutional statement on diversity: “Diversity is a source of strength, creativity, and innovation for UW-Madison. We value the contributions of each person and respect the profound ways their identity, culture, background, experience, status, abilities, and opinion enrich the university community. We commit ourselves to the pursuit of excellence in teaching, research, outreach, and diversity as inextricably linked goals. The University of Wisconsin-Madison fulfills its public mission by creating a welcoming and inclusive community for people from every background – people who as students, faculty, and staff serve Wisconsin and the world.”

<https://diversity.wisc.edu/>

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS AND READINGS

DATE	TOPIC	OPTIONAL READING	CONCEPTS
10.29	Distributing Goods Under Conditions of Scarcity	Mike Baker and Sheri Fink: <i>At the Top of the Covid-19 Curve, How Do Hospitals Decide Who Gets Treatment?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● legal vs moral obligations ● ethics vs ethos ● consequentialist ethics
11.12	A Duty to Help Others	Peter Singer, <i>Famine, Affluence, and Morality</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● thought experiments ● supererogation ● duties of beneficence vs duties of nonmaleficence
11.5	Nonviolent Protest	Martin Luther King, Jr., <i>Letter from Birmingham Jail</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● just vs unjust laws ● principled vs strategic nonviolence ● autonomy vs welfare
11.19	Fake News	Regina Rini, <i>Fake News and Partisan Epistemology</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● reliability ● confirmation bias ● censorship