

PHIL 108.03 Moral and Social Problems

M-W-F 2:00 to 2:50PM, M-1-614

Professor: Dana Francisco Miranda

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Student Hours: Zoom or by appointment.

T 1:00-2:30PM; TH 1:00-2:30PM

Overview

How is the individual constituted or influenced by society? What possibilities and choices are available for individuals within social systems that are unequal and hierarchical? In this course, we will investigate the individual's relationship with society through an examination of American society and its moral and social problems. In particular, we will examine both negative and positive practices within the United States, as seen in philosophy and literature.

Course Objectives

Students will study the philosophical questions and problems that have confounded American society. In doing so, students will assess 1) the effect of social systems on individuals and groups and 2) determine to what extent individuals within a society can criticize the meanings, prejudices and assumptions found therein. Students will also further develop their skills in reading, writing and dialoguing through practicing philosophy.

Course Unit Instruction

This class is scheduled to meet for 3 hours per week. Additional instructional activities for the course include attendance at various College events and associated writing activities/workshops distributed across the semester. Participation in these events and completion of associated activities/workshops will add an additional 14 hours of instruction. Lastly, I reserve the right to make changes to this syllabus, as necessary. Therefore, students are advised to refer to the syllabus posted on Blackboard for the most updated version.

Policies

All UMass Boston policies are in effect. These include:

- Policy on Academic Dishonesty: As an academic community devoted to the discovery and dissemination of truth, the University of Massachusetts Boston insists that its students will conduct themselves honestly in all academic activities. Students are expected to refuse to engage in any activity unauthorized by university policy. Please be sure to review the Student Code of Conduct for Academic Honesty Policy and Procedures.
- Students with disabilities requesting classroom or course accommodations must complete a multi-faceted determination process through the Office of Disability Services prior to the development and implementation of accommodations, auxiliary aids, and services. Each Accommodation Plan is individually and collaboratively developed between the student and the Lillian Semper Ross Center for Disability Services. If you have not already done so, please contact the Center to have a dialogue regarding your academic needs and the

recommended accommodations, auxiliary aides, and services.

- If you are experiencing financial hardship, have difficulty affording groceries or accessing sufficient food to eat every day or do not have a safe and stable place to live, and believe this may affect your performance in this course, I would urge you to contact the Office of the Dean of Students (ODOS) or Student Support Services (SSS) for support. You may also discuss your concerns with me if you are comfortable doing so.

Some additional policies include:

- **Gender Pronouns:** All people deserve to be addressed in accordance with their identity, ranging from preferring a nickname to your gender pronouns. Students are encouraged to notify me of their gender pronouns so I can address you correctly (she, he, they, ze, etc.), especially if they have reason to believe I may use the incorrect pronouns. I use he/him.
- **Electronic Device:** Engaged listening without electronic mediation is an important skill, and this classroom will be an opportunity for those otherwise challenged in this domain to practice it. If you have important reasons (e.g., medical, disability accommodation, etc.) to use any such devices, please talk to me as soon as possible so that I can approve appropriate exceptions to this policy. Otherwise, this classroom will be free of electronic devices.
- **Email Communication:** At times I will communicate with the entire class using campus email systems, so it is essential that you regularly check your UMB email address or forward your UMB account email to your preferred email address. I encourage you to contact me via email with questions about the course, the material we cover in class, and assignments.
- **Policy on Children:** If you are a parent, you are welcome to bring your child to class. If they are interested and old enough to take part in the conversation, all the better. If they are babies, fine. If they need to breastfeed, fine. You probably have alternate arrangements, and your other professors might not have the same policy (and I respect that), but I just wanted to make my attitude about children explicit in case of preference or emergency. You are welcome here, and if you have dependents that need constant care or whose care has been interrupted, they are also welcomed.
- **Everyone needs help at some point (and typically at multiple points) in their academic journey.** If you or someone you know experiences academic stress, difficult life events, or feelings of anxiety or depression, we encourage you to seek support. Effective campus resources (such as Academic Support Services and Undergraduate Studies, Resources4U, the UHS Counseling Center, and the U-ACCESS Food Pantry) are here to help.
- **No one will be asked to speak for a group (whether class, race, sexual orientation, age, religion, creed, disability, gender, or geography).**

Assignments

Discussion Board (20%): For every week indicated as “Assignment Due,” students must comment on classroom readings. Students must add at minimum one question, observation, or provocation before class begins or choose to comment at least once on another student’s response. Students will be assigned to one of two groups (“Beacon” and “Harbor”). A Google Doc link will appear on our Blackboard homepage directing students to the proper document. Please note that students will have access to both documents, however, they are required to only participate in their respective group. Students will then receive new group assignments at the mid-point of semester so that they

may converse more fully with their class. Lastly, students have the option of forgoing 1 week of the Discussion Board. This may be used anytime during the semester.

Participation (20%): Attendance is mandatory. I understand that emergencies arise, so each student is allowed two absences. Each absence beyond the allotted two will result in a point deduction. Please note that to receive a grade in this category one must not only show up, but also participate. This will primarily reflect a) Preparation for posing questions in the discussion period of class and b) Engaged listening and discussion contributions during this period; will be boosted by c) Participation and question-posing during the (ideally interactive) lecture segment. If you are at any point unsure how you are doing in participation and want to know, email me and we can begin a conversation. Students who are extremely weary of speaking in class can receive alternative assignments in lieu of in-class participation but must meet with me in the first two weeks of the semester (or within one week of enrolling if not enrolled during this period) to make arrangements.

Short Paper (20%): One essay submission of 700-750 words responding to prompts provided in advance. The paper will be due on the Friday of Week 6 (October 15, 2021). The short essay must be handed in electronically by midnight. Rubric:

- 5 points: Essay addresses all aspects of the question and does so in a thoughtful way, incorporating key insights from texts and class discussions, and suggests a reasonable, though possibly somewhat open-ended, answer.
- 4 points: Essay addresses the question adequately but struggles to reconcile different positions, either through internal inconsistencies (e.g., the essay defends a contradictory position) or through failing to grapple with central dimensions of the material.
- 3 points: Essay addresses the question but doesn't demonstrate any commitment to rigor or critical thought or fails to relate the question to material from the reading(s) and/or class discussions.
- 2 points: Essay is substantial but does not address the prompt.
- 1 point: Essay fails to address the prompt and lacks substance or coherence.

Essays that are late but no more than 48 hours late will be docked 1 point. Essays that are more than 48 hours late will be docked 2 points. Essays that are not turned in by the end of the semester will receive no credit. Essays receiving a grade of 3 or lower can be rewritten and submitted for re-grading if you meet with me to discuss them.

Term Paper (30%): For the final paper, students must meet with me in person or must have digital approval; for group papers, all members of the group must be present at this meeting together unless extraordinary circumstances dictate otherwise. Term papers must be emailed by midnight December 20, 2021. My policy is to deduct ten points for each day late. You may choose from any of these options:

- Position paper: Write a paper defending a philosophical position related to topics discussed in class or in the assigned readings. Solo: 1000 words. Group of 2: 1500 words.
- Research paper: Either a) Read 1-2 outside works and critically examine the reading or its relation to one or more of the required readings for the course, or b) Read and criticize a full book from which one of the required readings is drawn, or c) Propose a research project of your own, subject to instructor approval. Solo: 1000 words. Group of 2: 1500 words.

Assessments (10%): Students will complete mid-semester and end-of-class self-assessments so that we may better focus on qualitative and not quantitative evaluations. You will be reflecting carefully on your own work and the work of your peers. If this process causes more anxiety than it alleviates, see me at any point to confer about tips for self-evaluations. Please know that if an assignment does not feel productive, we can find ways to modify, remix, or repurpose the instructions.

Mid-semester assessments must be completed by midnight on October 22, 2021. Final assessments must be completed by midnight on December 22, 2021, after your term paper is turned in.

Guidance on Late Work

Missing a deadline is a stressful experience. Sometimes it's just the result of an acute situation, but sometimes it's the result of something more persistent—struggling with the material, life circumstances, or one's mental state—and the source of trouble is not always obvious from the inside. Students in these situations often blame themselves and as a result incur late penalties. Students sometimes even fail classes because they get paralyzed and ultimately never submit the assignment. If you are in this situation, I can help. If you are going to miss a deadline:

1. Email me whatever you have before the deadline. If I get something from you, no matter how incomplete, the first day's late penalty will be halved.
2. Stay in contact with me until you finish. We will make a plan to get you back on track.

Readings

There is no text for this course; all readings will be provided online.

Schedule

Week 1 Introductions

Sep. 6: Labor Day (*No class*)

Sep. 8: Introductions. What is this course and who's in it? *No reading.*

Sep. 10: The Challenge of Cultural Relativism by James Rachels

Week 2 Complicity

Sep. 13: Enabling Harm by Gregory Mellema

Sep. 15: The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas by Ursula Le Guin

Sep. 17: My Family's Slave by Alex Tizon

Assignment Due

Week 3 Our America

Sep. 20: What is an American? By Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur

Sep. 22: Trans-national America by Randolph Bourne

Sep. 24: The Other America by Martin Luther King Jr. + A Night at the Garden by Marshall Curry

Assignment Due

Week 4 Unfreedom

Sep. 27: The Last Flogging by Frederick Douglass

Sep. 29: Slavery, Civil Rights, and Abolitionist Perspectives Toward Prison by Angela Davis
Oct. 1: Tasting Abolition by Rustbelt Abolition Radio
Assignment Due

Week 5 Racism

Oct. 4: The Nature of Racism by Michael Dummett
Oct. 6: The Souls of White Folk by W.E.B. Du Bois
Oct. 8: Judgment Day by Al Feldstein and Joe Orlando
Assignment Due

Week 6 Settler Colonialism

Oct. 11: Indigenous Peoples Day (*No class*)
Oct. 13: Colonialism in Equality: Hawaiian Sovereignty and the Question of U.S. Civil Rights by J. Kēhaulani Kauanui
Oct. 15: When Listening Isn't Enough: Settler Denial and Epistemic Injustice by Anna Cook
No Assignment. Short Paper Due Friday

Week 7 Borders

Oct. 18: Immigration: The Case for Limits by David Miller
Oct. 20: Aliens and Citizens: The Case for Open Borders by Joseph Carens
Oct. 22: How to Tame a Wild Tongue by Gloria Anzaldúa
Assignment + Mid-Semester Assessment Due

Week 8 Gender Oppression

Oct. 25: Oppression by Marilyn Frye
Oct. 27: A Black Feminist Statement by Combahee River Collective
Oct. 29: The Social Organization of Masculinity by R.W. Connell
Assignment Due

Week 9 The Just in Injustice

Nov. 1: Social Identity Wheel (SIW)
Nov. 3: Five Faces of Oppression by Iris Marion Young
Nov. 5: SCUM Manifesto by Valerie Solanas
Assignment Due

Week 10 Queer Liberation

Nov. 8: Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics by Cathy Cohen + Y'all Better Quiet Down by Sylvia Rivera
Nov. 10: Open Normativities: Gender, Disability, and Collective Political Change by Alexis Shotwell
Nov. 12: How Do You Know? By Jamison Green
Assignment Due

Week 11 Cause for Protest

Nov. 15: Direct Action by Voltairine de Cleyre
Nov. 17: A New Sense of Direction by Martin Luther King, Jr.
Nov. 19: Political Rioting: A Moral Assessment by Avia Pasternak
Assignment Due

Week 12 Abortion

Nov. 22 A Defense of Abortion by Judith Jarvis Thomson

Nov. 24: An Argument that Abortion Is Wrong by Don Marquis

No Assignment Due

Thanksgiving Recess (Nov. 25 - Nov. 28)

Week 13 Death Penalty

Nov. 29: In Defense of the Death Penalty by Louis Pojman

Dec. 1: The Folly of Capital Punishment by Jeffrey Reiman

Dec. 3: The Death Penalty Is Cruel. But So Is Life Without Parole. By Stephen Lurie

Assignment Due

Week 14 Climate Change

Dec. 6: The Rights of Animals and Unborn Generations by Joel Feinberg

Dec. 8: Climate Change and Causal Inefficacy: Why Go Green When It Makes No Difference? by James Garvey

Dec. 10: Our House is on Fire by Greta Thunberg

No Assignment Due

Week 15 By Way of Conclusion

Dec. 13: Class Review + Term Paper Workshop

Remember: Term Paper and Final Self-Assessment due next week.