

**PHIL 232 A01**  
CRN#12676 COR A225

September – December 2025  
TWF: 1:30am – 2:20pm

# Moral Problems of Contemporary Society

Instructor: Scott Woodcock [he/they]  
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Office Hours: Wed 10am-11am open hours + individual zoom meetings by appointment

## Course Description:

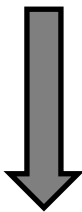
The aim of this course is to introduce students to a variety of controversial moral issues in contemporary society. In particular, students will be encouraged to carefully examine the *philosophical arguments* that arise in debates surrounding these controversial issues. The moral problems we will address in the course involve complex and often highly sensitive questions. The goal is to enable students to thoughtfully engage this subject matter and to learn how to articulate their opinions in the most persuasive way possible. The issues we will address in the course include the following: the ethics of genetic engineering, the basis for our obligation to protect the environment, the case for the decriminalization of addictive recreational drugs, the moral status of abortion, the duty to help alleviate global poverty, the ethics of prostitution, the distinctive wrong of colonization, and the justification for consumer boycotts. Class participation will be strongly encouraged in order to generate thoughtful discussion of the philosophical arguments proposed in the readings and their application to current events.

**Course Website:** Online materials will available via Uvic *Brightspace*.

**Texts:** All readings available online via Uvic *Brightspace*.

Suggested text for reference: *Moral Philosophy: A Contemporary Introduction*  
Daniel R. Denicola, Broadview Press 2018

**Requirements:** First Paper (10%)  
Mid-term Test (20%)  
Second Paper (20%)  
Final Exam (40%)  
Activist Letters (5%)  
Quote & Comment *or* News & Comment Assignments (5%)



**Note:** Writing assignment due dates and midterm test dates are posted below in the weekly schedule. *You are responsible for knowing these dates.* Plan ahead, and manage your overall personal workload accordingly.

## Grading System

Percentage	Letter Grade	Grade Point	Grade Definition
90 – 100	A+	9	An A+, A, or A- is earned by work which is technically <b>superior</b> , shows mastery of the subject matter, and in the case of an A+ offers original insight and/or goes beyond course expectations. Normally achieved by a minority of students.
85 – 89	A	8	
80 – 84	A-	7	
77 – 79	B+	6	A B+, B, or B- is earned by work that indicates a <b>good</b> comprehension of the course material, a good command of the skills needed to work with the course material, and the student's full engagement with the course requirements and activities. A B+ represents a more complex understanding and/or application of the course material. Normally achieved by the largest number of students.
73 – 76	B	5	
70 – 72	B-	4	
65 – 69	C+	3	A C+ or C is earned by work that indicates an <b>adequate</b> comprehension of the course material and the skills needed to work with the course material and that indicates the student has met the basic requirements for completing assigned work and/or participating in class activities.
60 – 64	C	2	
50 – 59	D	1	A D is earned by work that indicates <b>minimal</b> command of the course materials and/or minimal participation in class activities that is worthy of course credit toward the degree.
0 – 49	F	0	F is earned by work, which after the completion of course requirements, is <b>inadequate</b> and unworthy of course credit towards the degree.

Interpretation of these grade definitions is up to the discretion of the instructor. If you receive a grade during the course that you believe is unfair, please begin by discussing the matter with the instructor (or TA) in a respectful, open-minded manner. Rest assured that if you still believe the grade you received is unfair you can appeal the matter to the chair of the department.

For additional information regarding undergraduate grades, please consult the [Grading](#) section of the Uvic Undergraduate Calendar.

All evaluations of tests and assignments will be calculated according to percentage scores. Letter grades and grade point scores are listed purely for reference.

Final examinations are the property of Uvic and are not returned. They are available for viewing at the Records Office according to Uvic [Examinations](#) procedures and regulations.

Uvic is committed to providing a safe, supportive learning environment for all members. Further information regarding Uvic policies on human rights, equity, discrimination and harassment are located in the Uvic calendar [General University Policies](#), but if you have any particular concerns related to our course please do not hesitate to contact me.

**Policy on Late Assignments:** 5% per working day will be subtracted from grade unless students are delayed by illness or family emergency.

**Academic Integrity:** Review the [Uvic Policy on Academic Integrity](#) *carefully*. Note: AI/plagiarism detection software may be used in this course, and students may be asked for oral explanations of written work.

**Student Conduct:** This course is governed by [general Uvic policies](#) for equity, fairness, & discrimination, and the Tri-Faculty [Student Code of Conduct](#).

**Counseling:** Many students experience difficulties with mental health during their years as undergraduate students. Make sure you are familiar with [Uvic Student Wellness](#), which is an excellent resource on campus. It is hard to shake the stigma associated with problems like depression and anxiety, but if you can benefit from help with mental health issues, then why not take advantage of this free resource? They are understaffed, but they genuinely want to help.

**Important Dates:** Please consult the Uvic calendar's [Academic Year Important Dates](#) for information about last possible dates to withdraw from courses without penalty, examinations period start/end dates, etc.

**Tech in Class:** Some students require laptops/tablets for their learning strategies, so I do not prohibit their use in class. However, studies prove that multi-tasking *reduces performance for nearby students*, so anyone who distracts others will be asked to leave and potentially subject to disciplinary action.

### **Uvic Sexualized Violence Prevention and Response:**

Sexualized violence is a serious issue on campus. You can learn more about how Uvic defines sexualized violence and its approach to prevention by visiting [www.uvic.ca/svp](http://www.uvic.ca/svp). If you or someone you know is impacted by sexualized violence and needs information, advice, and/or support, please contact the sexualized violence resource office in Equity and Human Rights (EQHR). Whether or not you have been directly impacted, if you want to take part in important prevention work on campus, you can reach out to: Sexualized Violence Resource Office in EQHR, Sedgewick C119; email: [svpcoordinator@uvic.ca](mailto:svpcoordinator@uvic.ca).

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### **Territory Acknowledgment**

The University of Victoria is committed to acknowledging and respecting the Lekwungen peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands, and the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

For information about support for indigenous students and efforts to foster reconciliation, please visit the Uvic [Office of Indigenous Academic & Community Engagement](#).


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## Schedule of Readings and Assignments




**Note:** Dates listed are subject to change. Class attendance is vital to stay informed about revised scheduling. Material is meant to be read *before* the date when it will be discussed so that students can get the most out of lectures and be prepared to participate.

### Week      Readings

<b><u>Week 1</u></b>	<b>Introduction to Moral Problems</b>
Sept. 3	First Meeting
Sept. 5	Michael J. Sandel: <i>The Case Against Perfection</i>
<b><u>Week 2</u></b>	<b>Background Ethical Theory</b> [readings this week suggested not required]
Sept. 9	Daniel R. DeNicola: <i>Intro to Moral Philosophy Chapter 6: Utilitarianism</i>
Sept. 12	Daniel R. DeNicola: <i>Intro to Moral Philosophy Chapter 7: Kantianism</i>
<b><u>Week 3</u></b>	<b>Genetic Engineering and Respect for Disabled Persons</b>
Sept. 16	Julian Savulescu & Guy Kahane: <i>The Moral Obligation to Create Children with the Best Chance of the Best Life</i> [parts I & II]  Suggested = Inmaculada de Melo-Martín: <i>The Trouble with Moral Enhancement</i>
Sept. 17	Adrienne Asch: <i>Prenatal Diagnosis and Selective Abortion: A Challenge to Practice and Policy</i>  Julian Savulescu & Guy Kahane: <i>The Moral Obligation to Create Children with the Best Chance of the Best Life</i> [part III]
Sept. 19	Elizabeth Barnes: <i>Valuing Disability, Causing Disability</i> [parts I-IV + VI]  Suggested = David DeVidi & Catherine Klausen: <i>No Mere Difference</i>
<b><u>Week 4</u></b>	<b>The Decriminalization of Addictive Drugs</b>
<b>Sept. 23</b>	<b>How to Write a Philosophy Paper</b> [no reading]
Sept. 24	Douglas Husak: <i>Four Points about Drug Decriminalization</i>  Suggested = Dan Baum: <i>Legalize it All</i>
Sept. 26	Peter De Marneffe: <i>Against the Legalization of Heroin</i>  Suggested = Brian D. Earp: <i>Racial Justice Requires Ending the War on Drugs</i>

<p><b><u>Week 5</u></b></p> <p><b>Sept. 30</b></p> <p>Oct. 1</p> <p><b>Oct. 3</b></p> 	<p><b>Environmental Ethics</b></p> <p><b>No Class – National Day for Truth and Reconciliation</b></p> <p>Joseph DesJardins: <i>Biocentric Ethics and the Inherent Value of Life</i></p> <p>Suggested = Marc Ereshefsky: <i>Where the Wild Things Are: Environmental Preservation and Human Nature</i></p> <p>Robert Elliot: <i>Faking Nature</i></p> <p>Suggested = Rita Elizabeth Risser: <i>On Conserving or Remaking the Natural World</i></p> <p><b>*** First Paper Due ***</b></p>
<p><b><u>Week 6</u></b></p> <p>Oct. 7</p> <p>Oct. 8</p> <p><b>Oct. 10</b></p>	<p><b>Collective Action Problems</b></p> <p>Garrett Hardin: <i>The Tragedy of the Commons</i></p> <p>Suggested = Simo Kyllonen: <i>Climate Change, No-Harm Principle, and Moral Responsibility of Individual Emitters</i></p> <p>Review</p> <p><b>*** Midterm Test ***</b></p>
<p><b><u>Week 7</u></b></p> <p>Oct. 14</p> <p> </p> <p>Oct. 17</p>	<p><b>The Moral Status of Abortion – Part One</b></p> <p>Mary Anne Warren: <i>On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion</i></p> <p>Suggested = Cixin Liu: <i>The Village Teacher</i></p> <p>Don Marquis: <i>Why Abortion is Immoral</i></p> <p>Suggested = Amy Berg: <i>Abortion and Miscarriage</i></p>
<p><b><u>Week 8</u></b></p> <p>Oct. 21</p> <p> </p> <p>Oct. 24</p>	<p><b>The Moral Status of Abortion – Part Two</b></p> <p>Judith Jarvis Thomson: <i>A Defense of Abortion</i></p> <p>Suggested = William Simkulet: <i>Abortion, Property, and Liberty</i></p> <p>+</p> <p>Suggested = Andrew Botterell: <i>Why Gametes are not like Enriched Uranium</i></p> <p>Margaret Olivia Little: <i>Abortion, Intimacy, and the Duty to Gestate</i></p> <p>Suggested = Fiona Woollard: <i>Mother Knows Best: Pregnancy, Applied Ethics, and Epistemically Transformative Experiences</i></p>

<b><u>Week 9</u></b>	<b>The Moral Status of Prostitution + Sex Robots</b>
Oct. 28	Martha Nussbaum: <i>“Whether from Reason or Prejudice”</i> Suggested = Frej Klem Thomsen: <i>Prostitution, Disability and Prohibition</i>
Oct. 29	Scott A. Anderson: <i>Prostitution and Sexual Autonomy</i> Suggested = Lori Watson: <i>Philosophical Debates About Prostitution</i>
Oct. 31	John Danaher: <i>The Symbolic-Consequences Argument in the Sex Robot Debate</i> Suggested = Richard Stone: <i>Living in the Age of the Automatic Sweetheart</i>
<b><u>Week 10</u></b>	<b>Obligations to Relieve Global Poverty</b>
Nov. 4	Peter Singer: <i>Famine, Affluence, and Morality</i> + Peter Singer: <i>What Should a Billionaire Give—and What Should You?</i>
Nov. 5	Robert Noggle: <i>Give Till It Hurts? Beneficence, Imperfect Duties, and a Moderate Response to the Aid Question</i> Suggested = Elizabeth Ashford: <i>Obligations of Justice and Beneficence...</i>
Nov. 7	Judith Lichtenberg: <i>Negative Duties, Positive Duties, and the New Harms</i> Suggested = Thomas Pogge: <i>“Assisting” the Global Poor</i>
<b><u>Week 11</u></b>	<b>Structural Injustice and Unjust Enrichment</b>
Nov. 11	----- <b>Reading Break</b>
Nov. 12	-----
Nov. 14	Todd Calder: <i>Shared Responsibility, Global Structural Injustice, and Restitution</i>
<b><u>Week 12</u></b>	<b>The Wrong(s) of Colonialism</b>
Nov. 18	Anna Stilz: <i>Occupancy Rights and the Wrong of Removal</i> [Parts I and III] Suggested = Margaret Moore: <i>The Taking of Territory and the Wrongs...</i>
Nov. 19	Lea Ypi: <i>What’s Wrong with Colonialism</i> [Parts I-III, VII-VIII, & X, XI]
Nov. 21	Glen Sean Coulthard: <i>Seeing Red</i> (ch. 4 from <i>Red Skin, White Masks</i> ) Suggested = Eve Tuck & K. Wayne Yang: <i>Decolonization is not a Metaphor</i>

<b><u>Week 13</u></b>	<b>Consumer Boycotts and the Art of Immoral Artists</b>
Nov. 25	Valentin Beck: <i>Consumer Boycotts as Instruments for Structural Change</i> Suggested = Ewan Kingston: <i>Shopping with a Conscience? The Epistemic Case for Relinquishment over Conscientious Consumption</i>
Nov. 26	Bradley Elicker: <i>Why We Should Avoid Artists Who Cause Harm</i> Suggested = Shen-yi Liao: <i>The Art of Immoral Artists</i>
Nov. 28 	Mary Beth Willard: <i>Epistemic Injustice, Jerks, Boycotts, and You</i> <b>*** Writing Assignment #2 Due ***</b>
<b><u>Week 14</u></b>	<b>The Ethics of Online Shaming</b>
Dec. 2 	Krista K. Thomason: <i>The Moral Risks of Online Shaming</i> Suggested = Kathryn J. Norlock: <i>Online Shaming</i> <b>*** Last Day to Submit Q&amp;C Assignments ***</b>
Dec. 3 	Review <b>*** Last Day to Submit Activist Letters ***</b>

**Warning:** there will be a **Registrar Scheduled Exam in December**. I do not control the date of this exam, and I don't have the power to change this date once it is scheduled. Therefore, *do not book travel during the exam schedule* until you know this date.

## Class Discussion

We will try to include as much interactive discussion in class as we can while at the same time staying on schedule. Our goal will be to create an environment in class where ideas are discussed with a *common goal* of thoughtful engagement and learning as much as we can about arguments that can be put forward in favour of different viewpoints.

Establishing this kind of cooperative environment is not always easy. The topics we will be discussing are controversial, and they are sometimes associated with sharp divisions in the different perspectives at stake. Moreover, these divisions are amplified by incentives from social media to view moral debate in ruthlessly competitive terms. This course will aim to provide a different opportunity for discussion compared to those forums. Instead of seeking to win debates against perceived enemies, class discussion will be organized to encourage students to work together in order to learn about different perspectives.

**What will this mean in practice?** It means we will try to get participation from many different students in class, and we will expect all contributions to discussion to remain as *respectful* as possible. If you are someone who finds the modern emphasis on promoting equity, diversity and inclusion too much of a ‘hindrance’ on your right to free speech, this is definitely not the course for you. Conversely, if you find it too difficult to engage with opposing viewpoints you find offensive no matter how respectfully other students present them, this will be a difficult course for you to endure.

The subject matter can sometimes cover extremely sensitive topics with which students may have firsthand experience. I will try to mitigate how difficult this can be as best I can, but students should be aware that these difficult topics will be explored.

In general, our aim will be to promote an inclusive environment in which students work together to examine controversial topics in a detailed but cooperative manner.

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## Frequently Asked Questions

Please read these over so you can anticipate common issues before it is too late. If you have any further questions about the answers provided here please don’t hesitate to ask.

**Q: Do I really need to read the material before class? It’s hard to understand.**

A: Yes, *make the effort*. We can sort things out in class, but reading the material on your own first will prepare you for class and help you to understand the content at stake.

**Q: Do I need to complete each of the course requirements to pass the course?**

A: No, in this particular course (unlike some other courses at Uvic), I do not require each of the various tests/assignments to be completed for an overall pass. So, for example, if you are unable to complete a certain assignment, you can still pass the course.

**Q: I am only in first year, and/or I have never taken a Philosophy course before. Is it still possible to take this course?**

A: Yes. There are no prerequisites for this course, and you do not need the background covered in PHIL 100 to take this course. The reading and expectations for the course are more demanding than a 100-level course, but for some students it will be feasible to take this course in first year.

**Q: What will be the format of the midterm test and final exam?**

A: Each will include a mix of different questions. Some will require short answers (e.g. T/F, multiple choice or filling in a blank), but some will be *open-ended opportunities* to write as much as one can in the time allocated.



**Q: What is the best way to succeed in this course?**

A: Do the readings in advance to get the most out of the lectures. Make sure you clearly understand the material *as we cover it* (using email or office hours if necessary), and make solid notes as you go. Then, when you prepare for a test/assignment, use your notes to *remind* yourself of what you have previously understood. In short, your aim should be to gain clear comprehension of the material as we discuss it so you can get help if you need it. Avoid trying to learn material right before a text or assignment.

**Q: I'm having a difficult week in terms of workload in my other courses and hours at my job (that I need to pay for school). Can I have an extension?**

A: No. I genuinely sympathize with these requests, but I do not grant extensions based on workload rather than illness or family emergency so **please do not ask me this**. As stressful as workload issues are for students, I can't compare the workloads different students in the class might be facing without my knowledge. All I can do is give due dates well in advance and recommend that students plan accordingly.

**Q: I'm over the word count. Does this really matter?**

A: Would I include it in the instructions if it didn't? If you are only a few words over I won't give you a zero, but still: use the opportunity to work on *editing* your writing.

**Q: I didn't read the instructions for the Q&C Assignments. Now it's the last week of class. Can I hand in retroactive assignments on readings we already covered?**

A: No. It defeats the point of the assignment. Read assignment instructions.

**Q: When is the last day to start handing in Q&C's if I want to get full marks?**

A: This term it would be **Nov. 21**. Read the Q&C instructions so you understand why.

**Q: I know the material but I'm just really busy – can't I just get ChatGPT to write my assignment for me?**

A: First, remember that you are taking a course in applied *ethics*. Second, remember that professors are starting to get a feel for how ChatGPT works so they can assign unique assignment instructions and recognize anomalous passages. Third, re-read the section above on plagiarism and academic integrity. I aim to provide students with sufficient help and support that they do not have reason to turn to academic misconduct. If they do take this option, the consequences of being detected can be extremely serious.

**Q: Are you willing to look over drafts of our assignments?**

A: In principle, yes, but in a large class it is not always feasible. It is preferable to send me a provisional outline of your argument so that I can make suggestions.

**Q: I'm not feeling well, but *maybe* I'm ok to write the test. Should I just try and see what happens? I can always just quit and write it again later, right?**

A: No. I respect students trying to tough things out, but think it over procedurally from the perspective of the university: it is 100% reasonable to delay a test due to student illness, but it is another thing entirely to let a student see the contents of that test and then have a second try at it. Therefore, if you think you might not be well enough to write an exam, then *do not write that exam*. Contact me instead.

**Q: What is the Minor in Applied Ethics, and how is this course related to it?**

A: The Minor in Applied Ethics is an interdisciplinary program here at Uvic that allows students to study applied ethical issues from a variety of perspectives. The two core courses required are PHIL 232 and PHIL 337. After that students can select courses from a long list that includes many different departments. For example, a student can choose to focus on environmental ethics and then selected courses related to the topic in many different disciplines like geography, sociology, philosophy, economics, and political science. See our Brightspace site for the link to more information.

**Q: Will graduating with a Minor in Applied Ethics help me get a job?**

A: How could it not? While there are no straightforward employment opportunities for a MAE graduate like there are for vocations like plumbing or engineering, it is certainly true that graduating with a MAE shows employers that you can *think critically about complex problems* and express your own views on these difficult topics. These skills transfer to other contexts, and employers can be expected to recognize this fact.

**Q: There are so many great courses on the MAE list of electives. How do I choose?**

A: I don't know! There are just so many options. 😊