Course Description

This course deals with the intersection of ethics/morality and contemporary social and political topics. We will read about many prominent (and sometimes not so prominent) issues in the field of “applied ethics”. As you may have noticed, there is a great deal of disagreement and controversy in our present political landscape. People in this country and across the world disagree, often vehemently and to the point of violence, about what we owe to each other and how to create community. The project of this course is to reach for dialogue as a tool for engaging with and potentially resolving some of these disagreements rather than coercion or force.

However, the main theme that we will focus on in this course is the life of moral greatness. The assigned text is dedicated to telling the stories of people who have lived the life of radical charity and concern for others. I find this life and the people who live it to be deeply compelling and underappreciated, so we are going to specifically consider not just what we can and cannot do, but what great moral achievement looks like beyond merely not harming or interfering with the lives of others. Indeed, the lives of these moral saints will be the jumping off point for discussing the pressing social and political concerns of our time.

Grading

Participation: 20%

This course deals with a collection of (sometimes difficult) economic and philosophical texts. Our class will not function unless you read the material for each class and have made a good faith effort to understand it. It will also not function if nobody other than me talks during class. We will go through the assigned reading every day and discuss it, which means that you will need to participate in our class discussions. As such, I want to reward keeping up with the reading as much as possible.

However, this semester comes with a twist courtesy of the coronavirus. The format of this course is face-to-face hybrid, which means only a third of you will come to class on any given day. As such, your participation grade will come in two segments. The first third of your participation will come from the questions you ask over Zoom when you are tuning in to our class remotely. You will be expected to follow along with the discussion and send in at least one question per class. We will periodically pause to answer Zoom questions during lecture. If you submit a question, then you will receive participation points. It is possible we will not have time to cover all of the questions, so we will introduce an element of randomness to determine whose question we will discuss. The other two thirds of your participation grade will come from your contributions on the days that you come to class. Given that it is much harder for people to participate in class discussion over Zoom, I will expect the people in class to help carry the discussion. On the days you come to class, you will need to come up with at least two questions or comments about that day’s readings. You will need to email the TA in advance of our discussion, and I will expect you to ask it during class. We may not get to everyone’s submitted questions, so we may have to introduce randomness to the process. Even if your questions are not covered specifically in the course of lecture. When questions come in from Zoom, I will throw them out to the students who have come to class, and I will give them the opportunity to expand on or respond to the questions before I do. If you are involved in this process, you will
earn your participation points for the semester. All of this means that you need to pay special attention to the readings on the days you come to class so that help carry our discussions.

If you cannot attend class in person on the days you have been assigned for academic-excused or medical reasons, then you will need to send the questions in advance so that we can cover them.

This semester, participation will depend on your compliance with all of the COVID rules that USU has set out. You must always wear a mask while in class and maintain six feet of distance between yourself and other people.

**Exams: 40%**

In this course, there will be two exams (a midterm and a final). The questions will come from the readings and lecture. The exams will be multiple choice and administered online at specific times.

**The Most We Can Do: 20%**

In this course, we will read about the lives of people who are almost entirely devoted to helping other people and rescuing the proverbial “drowning stranger.” As we will see, there are philosophers and others who have endeavored to develop a kind of moral calculus for determining how people can do the most good with finite resources. We will enter into this project as a class. Right now, I have collected $1000 for our class to donate to a charity. You of course will not contribute any of your own money to this pot. Over the course of the semester, we will collectively decide as a class what charity or collection of charities we should donate this money to. It will be up to you to find the charity that you think does the most good and to formulate reasons for why this charity is most worthy of our donation.

I will put you all in groups of ten (we have 50 people in this course), and at some point during the semester you will meet outside of class and give presentations to each other as to which charity you think we should donate to. I expect every person do to this. Your presentation need be only be three to four minutes, and you will send me a three page paper laying out your case as well (if your presentation is good enough, that will suffice for your grade). After everyone has presented, the group will vote (you cannot vote for your own) on which charity to send the money to. There will be five “finalists” that we will consider the merits of as a class in several discussions during class. At the end of this process, you will vote as a class to determine which charity or collection of charities we should donate to. You will be evaluated on your initial presentations and on your contributions to the class discussion about the finalists.

**The Life of Moral Excellence: 20%**

By the end of the semester, we will have read the stories of people who have devoted themselves to the service of others. I want to hear which you find most compelling or which constitutes the highest achievement. You will write a short paper (no more than three pages) explaining to me which of the lives detailed in the book *Strangers Drowning* you think is best, most worth living, or most valuable (pick one). You will need to give some kind of justification for the position you take. If you like, you can use one of the moral theories we cover in the course to justify your answer.
Course Schedule

Week One
9/1 Introduction

Week Two
9/8 Virtue Ethics – Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Sections 2, 3, and 4)
9/10 “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” -- Peter Singer

Week Three
9/15 Strangers Drowning 41-60
9/17 Animal Rights – “All Animals Are Equal” -- Peter Singer

Week Four
9/22 Strangers Drowning, 71-102
9/24 Strangers Drowning 12-40

Week Five
10/1 Foreign Intervention – “In Defense of Empire,” Robert Kaplan; The Melian Dialogue -- Thucydides

Week Six
10/6 Torture (Major Content Warning) – “The Truth About Torture” -- Mark Bowden; Watch/Listen to Mohamedou Ould Slahi’s Guantánamo Diary; “Guantánamo Diary exposes brutality of US rendition and torture” -- Spencer Ackerman
10/10: First meeting for proposals for The Most We Can Do must be completed by this point

Week Seven
10/13 Strangers Drowning 119-152
10/15 Civil Disobedience -- “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” Martin Luther King, Jr;
10/16 First Exam (online on your own time)

Week Eight
10/20 Reparations – “The Case for Reparations,” Ta-Nehisi Coates; “It's Futile to Put a Price on Slavery,” Glenn Loury

10/22 *Strangers Drowning* 171-191

**Week Nine**

10/27 First In-Class Discussion of Donation


**Week Ten**

11/3 Organ Donation: “When alcohol abstinence criteria create ethical dilemmas for the liver transplant team” -- K A Bramstedt, N Jabbour; “Are Alcoholics Less Deserving of Liver Transplants?” -- Daniel Brudney

11/5 *Strangers Drowning* 205-221

**Week Eleven**

11/10 *Strangers Drowning* 223-244

11/12 *Strangers Drowning* 245-268

**Week Twelve**


**Week Thirteen**


11/26 Thanksgiving

**Week Fourteen**

12/1 Abortion -- “Why Abortion Is Immoral” – Don Marquis

12/3 Second In-Class Discussion of Donation and Final Vote

**Week Fifteen**

12/8 “Sometimes There’s Nothing Wrong with Letting a Child Drown” – Travis Timmerman

12/10 “Moral Saints” – Susan Wolf

**Week Sixteen**

12/17 Final Exam 12:00-1:50; Moral Excellence Paper Due