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%

Part of learning how to reason well and analyze material involves talking and discussing topics, question, and arguments with other people. Verbalizing or even just summarizing the opinions and perspectives of others forces us to think about them in ways that otherwise would not because we must determine how to explain their ideas in our own thoughts and words. As such, class discussion will be essential for understanding, analyzing, and making our own ethical arguments and broadening/deepening our moral horizons.

This course deals with a collection of (sometimes difficult) philosophical texts. Our class discussions will not function unless you read the material for each class and have made a good faith effort to understand it. They 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 half of you will come to class on any given day. Furthermore, at various points some of you will not be able to come to class at all due to Covid or other problems. Thus, there will be two aspects of your participation for this course:

1) Zoom participation (1/3 of your grade): 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. I will periodically pause lecture 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 may introduce an element of randomness to determine whose question we will discuss.

2) The other two thirds of your participation grade will come from your contributions on the days that you come to class (or would otherwise come to class if you didn’t have Covid issues or something analogous to them). 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 30 minutes in advance of our discussion. We may not get to everyone’s submitted questions, so we may have to introduce randomness to the process. When questions come in from Zoom, I will often 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 is a way to contribute to class discussion and develop your analysis and evaluation skills even if you cannot attend. It might also help those of you who otherwise feel uncomfortable speaking up in front of the class directly. If you are too sick to participate on Zoom or send in questions in advance, you will need to send me an email about this and have the USU Covid response team send me an email.

I should also say this: 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%

The purpose of the exams is to test how well you have been able to take in the course material and content. The arguments and case studies we review in the course will help you evaluate ethical and moral arguments that are relevant to applied social, political, and human questions, and the tests are a critical way for me to learn what you are and are not retaining from what we cover. As such, I want to emphasize that the exams will be difficult and will ask a great deal of intricate questions about the nature of the people and arguments we read about. If I make the exam too easy, I do not learn anything about whether the class is soaking in information. Thus, when I write the exam, I aim to make many of the questions test for significant comprehension of the material. These tests help me better teach the course as we go forward.

This is all to say that it is common and expected that the raw score for the exams is somewhere around 65%. Do not panic or feel despondent if you get a low raw score on the exam. I want to know what you have learned, and that includes putting questions on the exam that test for a range of comprehension levels (from modest to spectacular). If everyone gets As, that is potentially OK. But in the event that the average is in the 60s, the test will be curved. This is not an invitation to be glib or cavalier about test prep: insofar as the average for the test is in the 60s, it
is a sign that you will still have to work hard and prepare for the exam if you want your final score to be in the A or B range.

In this course, there will be two exams (a midterm and a final). 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. This will be an exercise that helps develop practice in ethical reasoning about how to do some good and to communicate the fruits of that reasoning to others.

There will be two phases to this assignment:

1) I will put you all in groups of ten (we have 50 people in this course) in Canvas. You will then record a video of yourself giving a presentation outlining what you think will be the best use of our money and why (the prompt for this is posted under the “Assignments” tab in Canvas). You will then watch the videos from the other people in your group and send the TA your assessment as to which charity we should send our money to (you cannot vote for your own). The presentation that receives the most votes will then move on to the next round.

2) 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. This assignment will help you practice evaluating various and diverse ethical perspectives and communicating the results of your deliberations in writing. 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**

1/19 Introduction

Week Two

1/26 Virtue Ethics – Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Sections 2, 3, and 4)

1/28 “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” -- Peter Singer

Week Three

2/2 Strangers Drowning 71-102

2/4 Strangers Drowning 41-60

Week Four

2/9 Animal Rights – “All Animals Are Equal” -- Peter Singer

2/11 Strangers Drowning 12-40

Week Five

2/16 Foreign Intervention – Stephen Kinzer readings – See Canvas

2/18 Foreign Intervention – “In Defense of Empire,” Robert Kaplan; The Melian Dialogue -- Thucydides

Week Six

2/23 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


2/27 The Most We Can Do presentations due on Canvas

Week Seven

3/2 Strangers Drowning 119-152

3/4 Civil Disobedience -- “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” Martin Luther King, Jr;

12pm 3/5 to 12pm 3/7: First Exam (online on your own time)

Week Eight


3/11 Strangers Drowning 171-191

Week Nine
3/16 First In-Class Discussion of Donation


Week Ten


3/25 Strangers Drowning 205-221

Week Eleven

3/30 Strangers Drowning 223-244

4/1 Strangers Drowning 245-268 and Exam 1.5

Week Twelve

4/6 Adoption – “Race and the New Reproduction” – Dorothy Roberts

4/8 Friday Schedule

Week Thirteen

4/13 “A Defense of Abortion” – Judith Jarvis Thomson

4/15 “Why Abortion Is Immoral” – Don Marquis

Week Fourteen

4/20 Second In-Class Discussion of Donation and Final Vote

4/22 “Sometimes There’s Nothing Wrong with Letting a Child Drown” – Travis Timmerman

Week Fifteen

4/27 “Moral Saints” – Susan Wolf

12pm 4/28 to 12pm 4/30 – Second Exam

Week Sixteen

5/1 Moral Excellence Paper Due