

Zach Blaesi

Teaching Dossier

Last updated January 4, 2022

For additional teaching-related materials, visit my website: zachblaesi.com/teaching

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1 Teaching Statement

My primary aim as an instructor is to help students view philosophy as a way of life: an ongoing process of asking “why” questions and refusing to accept “because I said so!” answers. To this end, I teach with an *expose-and-assess* approach, one that exposes the philosophical assumptions that people simply take for granted and equips students with the skills needed to assess those assumptions.

Consider the assumption that it is morally permissible to spend one’s money on luxuries and frills. When covering the ethics of poverty, I begin with a news clip about five Florida teens who taunted a man as he drowned to death. Even though these teens were never convicted of a crime, my students agree that their failure to help the drowning man was seriously wrong. But how do students feel about their own failure to prevent suffering and death around the world? Rather than just asking them, I have them write down three unnecessary purchases they’ve made in the last month. Recently, this prompted one student to confess that he spent seven hundred dollars on a pair of designer boots. I use students’ volunteered examples to enter dollar amounts into the website, *The Life You Can Save*, so that they can visualize the potential impact of their money around the world. This helps them see that their spending habits reflect an assumption about their moral obligations to the poor.

Or consider the view that life begins at conception. When covering the abortion debate, I play media clips to expose the assumption that we are biological organisms. According to substance dualism, however, we aren’t biological organisms at all: we are immaterial souls. After introducing this view, I have students get into groups to consider how a dualist might answer the question of when we begin to exist. This helps them realize that different theories of personal identity may have different implications for the moral status of the fetus, and it equips them with the concepts needed to adjudicate these issues. As one student put it, “[I] learned that many of the issues today that are branded as ‘scientific issues’ or ‘government issues’ are actually philosophical issues that must first be answered on the philosophical side of the debate before any common ground might be found.”

In order to assess philosophical assumptions, I believe that students must first learn to identify, evaluate, and construct arguments. However, many students enter my courses without a clear understanding of what an argument even *is*. Hence, I devote an entire unit to distinguishing argument from rhetoric and introducing basic argumentative strategies, which I reinforce throughout the semester. For example, I recently introduced my students to the optimistic induction from the success of science to the truth of physicalism. One of my students observed that the argument resembles an induction from the sun’s having risen every day in the past to the conclusion that it will rise again tomorrow—an example that we discussed the second week of class. Validating her observation helped my students understand that their task is to assess these arguments for cogency.

I have students put these argumentative strategies into practice by completing a variety of short writing assignments, which task them with either summarizing an argument from an assigned reading or critically evaluating a philosophical claim. This ensures that my students already have some experience writing the major components of an argumentative paper before they have to write one for the course. Moreover, I require students to write a final paper in stages by developing a thesis statement and writing an outline explaining how they plan to support it; submitting a rough draft for feedback; and revising and resubmitting their paper with a cover letter explaining where, how, and why they revised it. This approach enables me to assess students’ progress over time and help them make specific improvements at different stages of the writing process. For example, many of my students begin with a thesis that is too broad to support within the page limit. By having them develop a thesis first, I’m able to help them fix this mistake far in advance.

To further assess students’ progress, I administer a mid-semester evaluation, which is designed to prompt students to reflect on their own role in the course and to enable me to adjust my teaching methods to their unique educational needs. For instance, when some of my students commented that they sometimes found it difficult to focus when I would respond to students’ questions, I began using students’ questions to solicit answers from other students for the rest of the class to assess. This method kept my students much more engaged. Even if my methods change, however, my primary objective in teaching remains constant: to empower students to question the world around them.



PLAN II HONORS PROGRAM

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October 24, 2019

To Whom It May Concern:

On behalf of the Plan II Honors Program, I am pleased to acknowledge the contribution of time and service provided by Zach Alan Blaes, PhD Candidate/Teaching Assistant, Department of Philosophy, College of Liberal Arts, The University of Texas at Austin.

The Plan II Honors Program is the premier honors major at The University of Texas at Austin, providing an interdisciplinary education in the arts and sciences to the best and brightest undergraduates at the university. A year-long course sequence in Philosophy is a core component of the curriculum of the Plan II Honors major.

Immediately prior to the start of classes for the fall 2019 semester, one of the long established veteran instructors of the Plan II Philosophy course fell ill. With just a few days' notice, and while wrapping up his own graduate education, Zach Blaes stepped up to take over instructional duties for the course. Plan II Honors students have high expectations of their faculty: they want to learn, be challenged, engage in dialogue, absorb knowledge, but also contribute to the classroom experience. Lecture, even in a class of almost 100 students, is not a satisfactory learning experience for this group. Student reaction to Zach Blaes's teaching of the Plan II Honors core Philosophy course has been nothing short of fantastic! Students report that Zach Blaes's pedagogy is engaging, accessible, and produces an environment of active learning in the classroom.

The Plan II Honors Program is grateful to Zach Blaes for his service and leadership in taking over the Plan II Philosophy course. While we are sad to see such a fine scholar leave the 40 acres, we wish him all the best moving forward to join the ranks of faculty at another institution, in the next steps of his academic career. We enthusiastically endorse his application and again acknowledge our appreciation for his service to Plan II Honors and the university.

Sincerely,

Alexandra K. Wettlaufer
Director, Plan II Honors Program
Hayden W. Head Regents Chair in Plan II,
Stuart W. Stedman Director's Chair in Plan II

2 Course Evaluations

2.1 Evaluations as Instructor

I have designed and taught a total of four courses at UT Austin:

Course	Semester	Enrollment
Philosophy and Film (web-based)	Fall 2020	26 students
Contemporary Moral Problems	Fall 2018	117 students
Introduction to the Philosophy of the Arts	Spring 2018	48 students
Introduction to the Philosophy of the Arts	Fall 2017	147 students

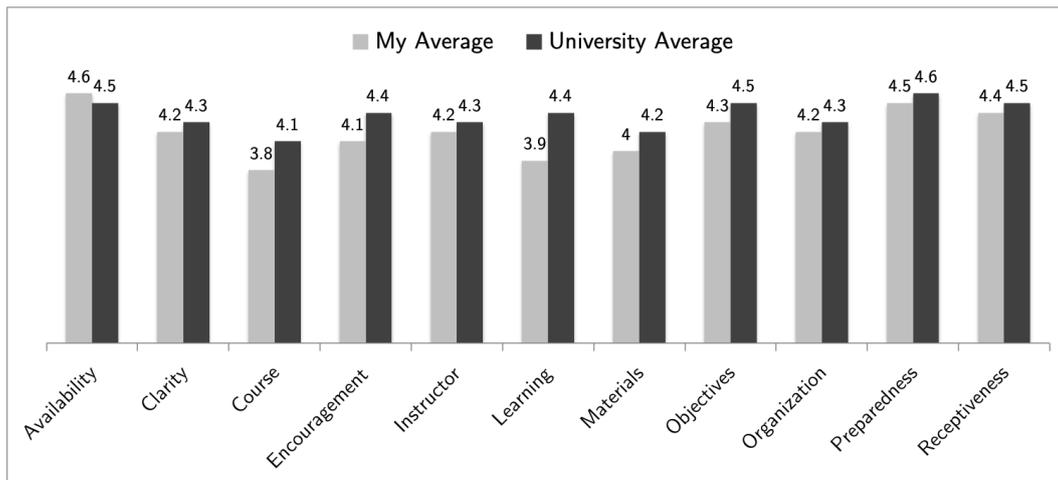
For each course, students were presented with the following statements:

AVAILABILITY:	The instructor was available to students either electronically or in person.
OBJECTIVES:	The instructor clearly defined and explained the course objectives and expectations.
COURSE:	Overall, this course was [5 = excellent / 4 = very good / 3 = neutral / 2 = satisfactory / 1 = unsatisfactory].
CLARITY:	The instructor communicated information effectively.
ENCOURAGEMENT:	The instructor encouraged me to take an active role in my own learning.
INSTRUCTOR:	Overall, this instructor was [5 = excellent / 4 = very good / 3 = neutral / 2 = satisfactory / 1 = unsatisfactory].
LEARNING:	Overall, I learned a great deal in this course.
MATERIALS:	The course materials (e.g., text and supplemental materials) were helpful to me.
ORGANIZATION:	The course was well organized.
PREPAREDNESS:	The instructor was prepared for each instructional activity.
RECEPTIVENESS:	The instructor made me feel free to ask questions, disagree, and express my ideas.

They were then asked to report the degree to which they agreed with each of the previous statements (on a scale from 1–5). Here are my averages in comparison with university averages:

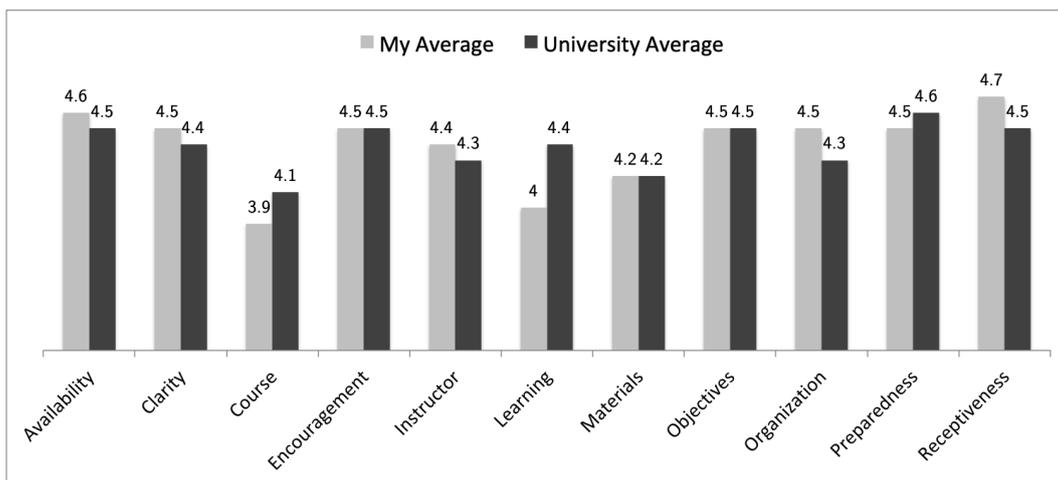
Introduction to the Philosophy of the Arts (Fall 2017)

5 = Strongly Agree 4 = Agree 3 = Neutral 2 = Disagree 1 = Strongly Disagree



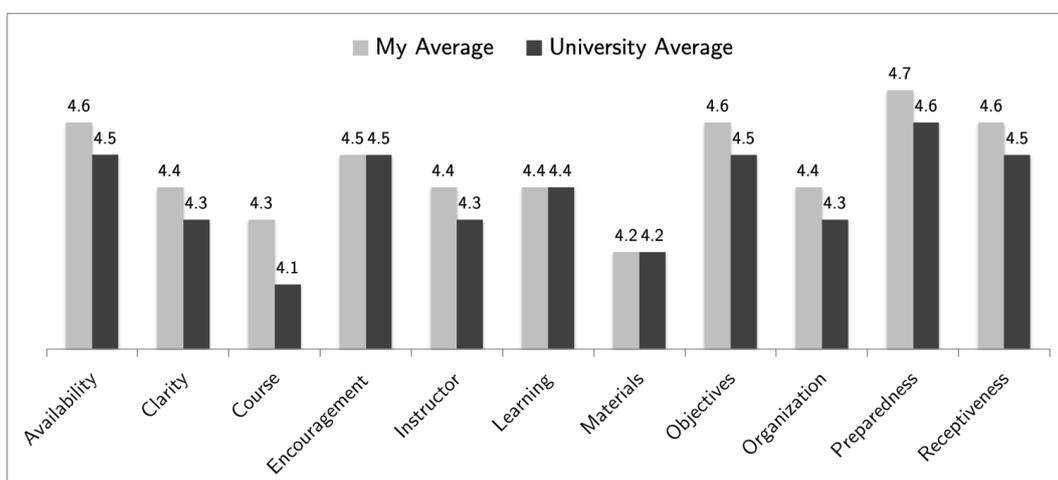
Introduction to the Philosophy of the Arts (Spring 2018)

5 = Strongly Agree 4 = Agree 3 = Neutral 2 = Disagree 1 = Strongly Disagree



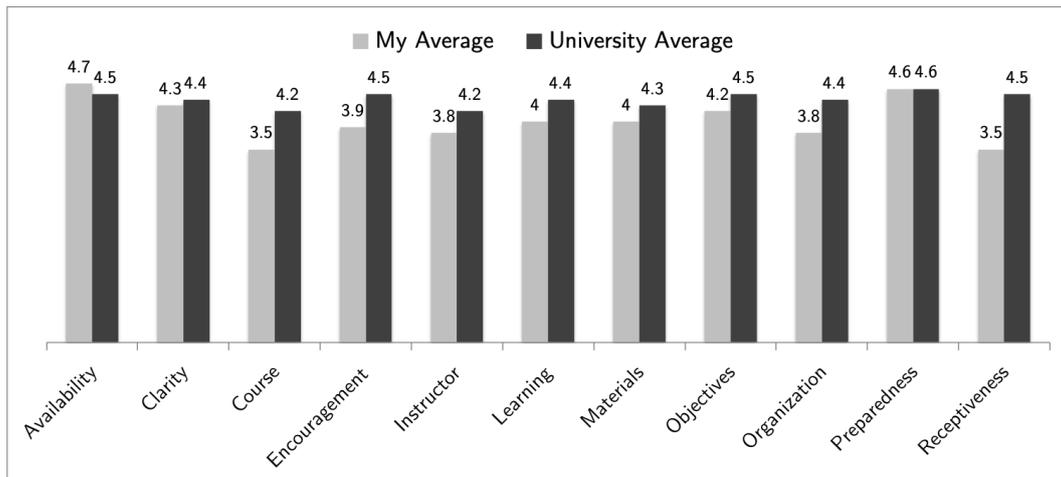
Contemporary Moral Problems (Fall 2018)

5 = Strongly Agree 4 = Agree 3 = Neutral 2 = Disagree 1 = Strongly Disagree



Philosophy and Film (web-based) (Fall 2020)

5 = Strongly Agree 4 = Agree 3 = Neutral 2 = Disagree 1 = Strongly Disagree



Note: Fall 2020 was my first time teaching a web-based course due to sudden administrative changes implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since I work best with students in person, this change was a big adjustment for me. With decreased visual feedback from students, I moved at a slower pace to make sure that every student fully understood the material, which led to falling behind schedule and left less time for student interaction during synchronous Zoom meetings. On top of this, in the midst of a chaotic semester, I forgot to send my students a reminder to submit their online evaluations, leading to a 20% decrease in surveys returned in comparison to my previous three courses. While my other quantitative evaluations demonstrate an upward trajectory from my first time teaching in Fall 2017, I believe that the aforementioned factors played a role in my receiving lower quantitative evaluations for Fall 2020 in comparison to Fall 2018. Despite the lower quantitative evaluations, my [qualitative evaluations](#) for Fall 2020 are largely positive.

Having learned from this experience, I adjusted my approach to Zoom in Spring 2021 when leading discussion sections for Introduction to Ethics, leading to some of my best evaluations as a teaching assistant since coming to UT Austin in 2014 ([click here](#) to see the results). I believe that by making similar adjustments in future web-based courses, I will receive similarly positive student evaluations.

2.2 Evaluations as Teaching Assistant

I have worked as a teaching assistant for a total of seven courses at UT Austin:

Course	Semester	Instructor
Introduction to Ethics (web-based)	Spring 2021	Nicole Smith
Problems of Knowledge and Valuation	Fall 2019	Ian Proops
Problems of Knowledge and Valuation	Fall 2016	John Deigh
Mind and Body	Spring 2016	Michael Tye
Science and the Modern World	Fall 2015	Cory Juhl
Introduction to the Philosophy of the Arts	Spring 2015	Katherine Piatti
Medicine, Ethics, and Society	Fall 2014	Jeff Leon

My responsibilities included leading weekly discussion sections; conducting review sessions; grading assignments, quizzes, exams, and/or papers; and mentoring students during office hours.

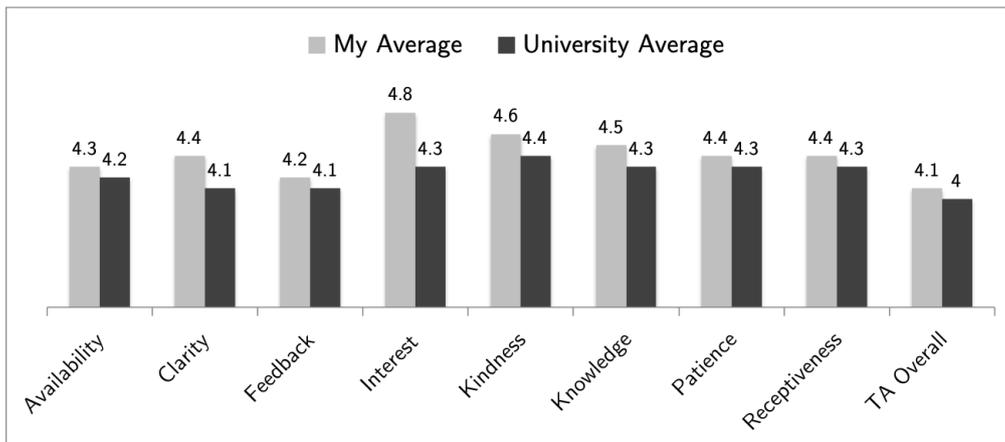
For each course, students were presented with the following statements:

AVAILABILITY:	The teaching assistant was available for scheduled office hours.
CLARITY:	The teaching assistant explained the material clearly.
FEEDBACK:	The teaching assistant provided helpful comments and feedback on assignments.
INTEREST:	The teaching assistant seemed interested in the subject matter.
KINDNESS:	The teaching assistant was kind and respectful of me.
KNOWLEDGE:	The teaching assistant was knowledgeable about the subject matter.
PATIENCE:	The teaching assistant was patient with my questions.
RECEPTIVENESS:	The teaching assistant was receptive to my questions.
TA OVERALL:	Compared with other TAs I've had, I would rate this TA [5 = Excellent / 4 = Very Good / 3 = Satisfactory / 2 = Unsatisfactory / 1 = Very Unsatisfactory].

They were then asked to report the degree to which they agreed with each of the previous statements (on a scale from 1–5). Here are my averages in comparison with university averages:

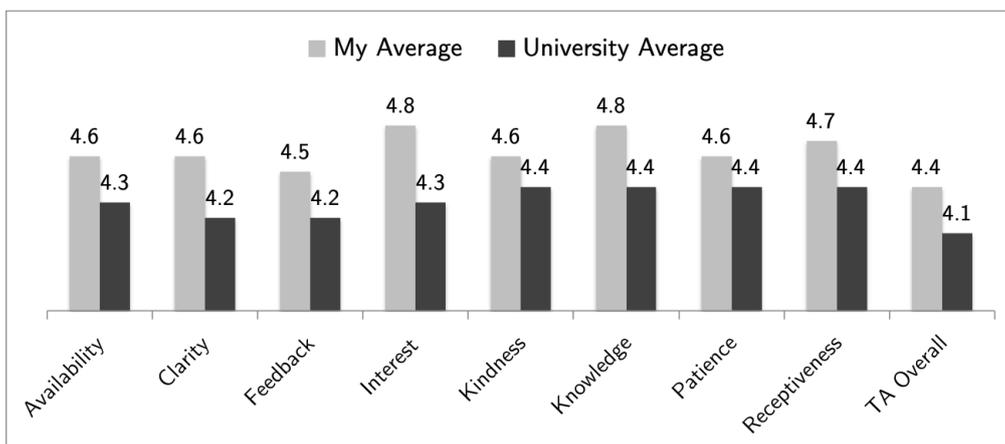
Medicine, Ethics, and Society (Fall 2014)

5 = Strongly Agree 4 = Agree 3 = Neutral 2 = Disagree 1 = Strongly Disagree



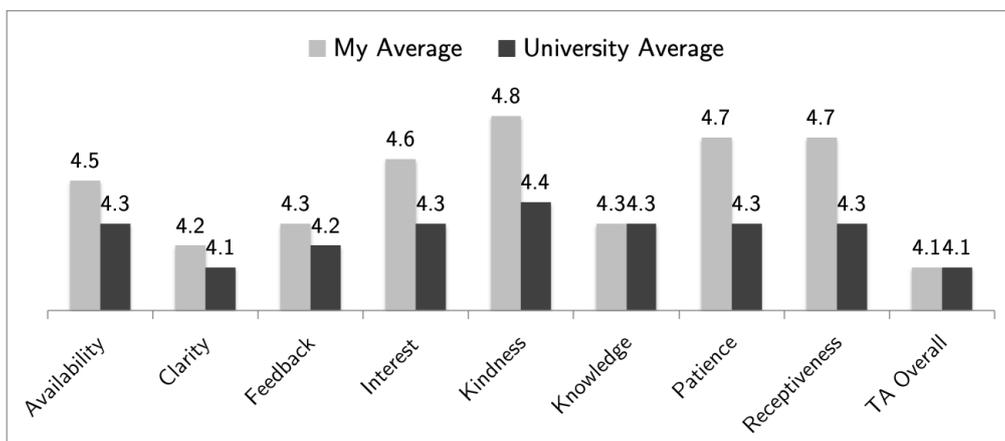
Introduction to the Philosophy of the Arts (Spring 2015)

5 = Strongly Agree 4 = Agree 3 = Neutral 2 = Disagree 1 = Strongly Disagree



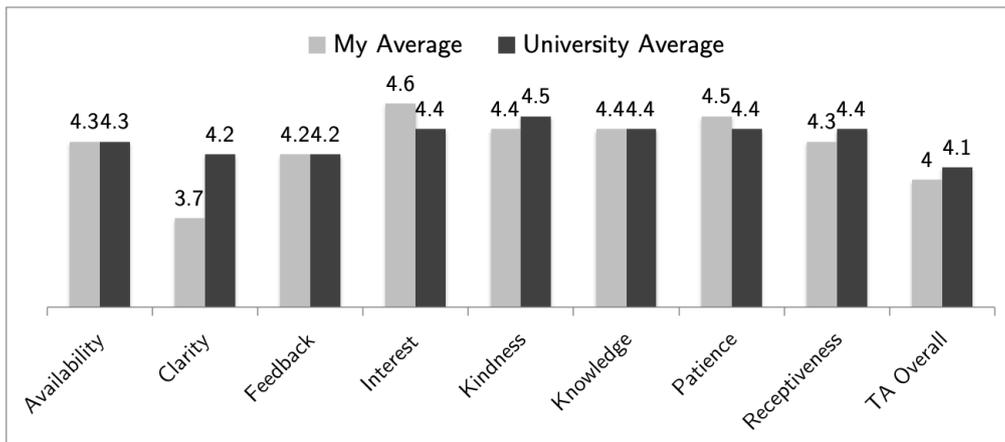
Science and the Modern World (Fall 2015)

5 = Strongly Agree 4 = Agree 3 = Neutral 2 = Disagree 1 = Strongly Disagree



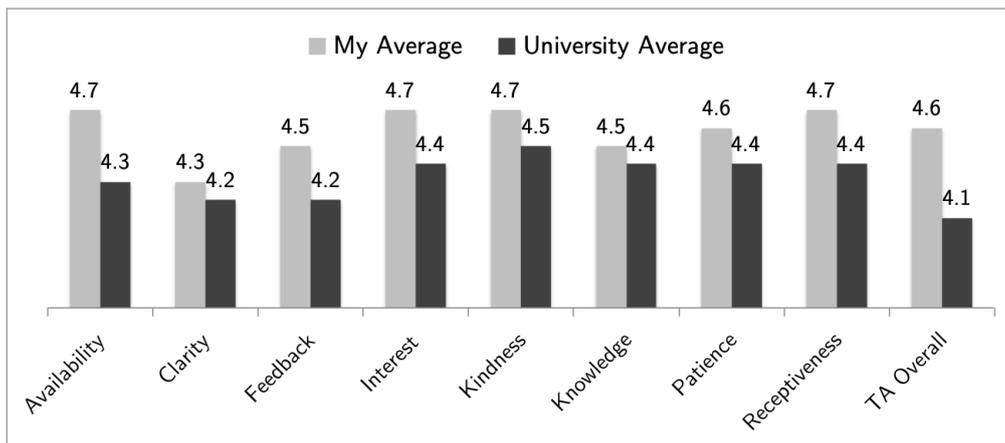
Mind and Body (Spring 2016)

5 = Strongly Agree 4 = Agree 3 = Neutral 2 = Disagree 1 = Strongly Disagree



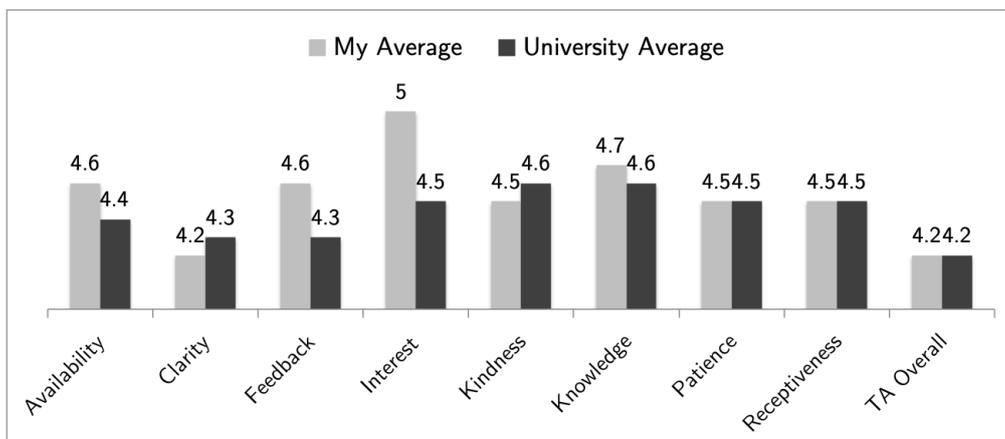
Problems of Knowledge and Valuation (Fall 2016)

5 = Strongly Agree 4 = Agree 3 = Neutral 2 = Disagree 1 = Strongly Disagree



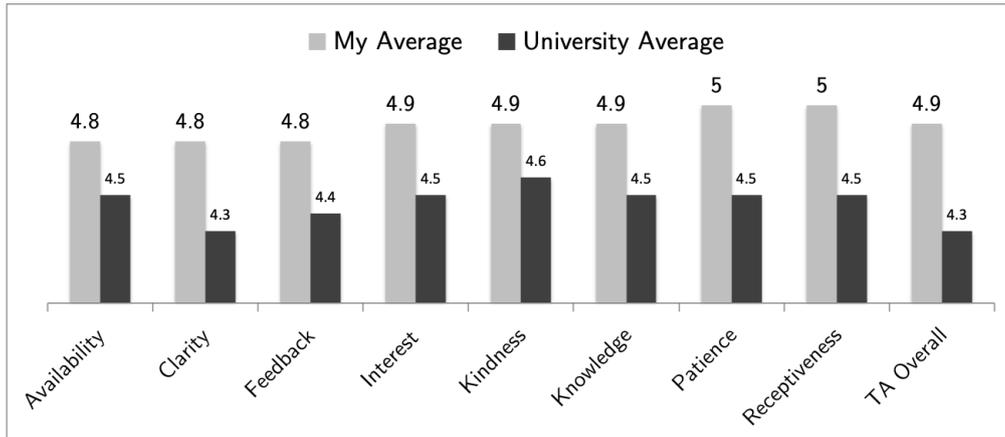
Problems of Knowledge and Valuation (Fall 2019)

5 = Strongly Agree 4 = Agree 3 = Neutral 2 = Disagree 1 = Strongly Disagree



Introduction to Ethics (Spring 2021)

5 = Strongly Agree 4 = Agree 3 = Neutral 2 = Disagree 1 = Strongly Disagree



2.3 Selection of Student Comments

These comments are quoted verbatim from my student evaluations. For the original evaluations together with a complete list of comments, visit my website: zachblaesi.com/teaching

2.3.1 Philosophy and Film (web-based) (Instructor, Fall 2020)

"I really enjoyed having Zach as my professor this semester! I especially appreciated his individualized, detailed feedback on our writing assignments, as they helped me improve my writing skills and streamline my corrections. He was also always available during his office hours, so I would often go and speak with him about my specific assignment and receive any clarification, if needed. Overall, an amazing professor!"

"The professor for this course is the most critical grader I have encountered, and for that I am grateful. The instructor made the course objectives and expectations very clear from the beginning while relaying to us the difficulties that come with philosophy courses and work. Through the instructor's critiques of my assignment, the instructor allowed for resubmission of work and gave insight into where the assignment went right and where it went wrong. The instructor was the most instructive grader I have had in my academic career and was incredibly patient when explaining what is expected from philosophical writing, both style and structure."

"Overall, I very much enjoyed this course. You're a very intelligent person with extensive knowledge in the fields of film and philosophy, so it was rewarding to hear your lectures. As someone who was taking this class for fun, I would've liked to have more discussion on how philosophy was directly working within films vs discussion on the philosophical ideas we see within them. On top of that, I felt the workload was a bit high, especially for an intro class, while trying to juggle other classes, a job, independent pursuits, and during COVID with little leniency on late or missed work. However, I took this class for enjoyment and certainly got that. I feel your inclusion of optional readings really opened up the world to philosophy for me and your detailed feedback was always very helpful. Thank you!"

"To be honest, I don't think this is a problem with him or the course as much as it was with me. Every lecture just flew into one ear and out the other and I just couldn't find the courage to participate in class. I've spoken up every now and then only to feel really stupid at the end of it. Although, I honestly don't think philosophy is for me, and I shouldn't be too harsh on the class. However, I learned a lot about myself in this class and I can't deny that the critical thinking refresher I've had has been great. I just don't think this class was for me. Sorry Zach."

"For being the first online class this professor taught, it went very well. The class was engaging and interesting."

2.3.2 Contemporary Moral Problems (Instructor, Fall 2018)

"This is by far my favorite course that I've ever taken at UT, and maybe even in my entire educational

career. All of Zach's lectures were interesting and actually made me want to come to class. He was always open to questions and could always come up with a very well put response. He genuinely cared about his students and took their feedback very seriously. For example, students complained that the assigned readings were too long so he took the time to read through the articles he assigned and cut out all the extra 'fluff'. I have recommended this course to multiple friends and would definitely take another course offered by Zach."

"A really great course. I felt really comfortable expressing my own opinions and Zach was respectful of everyone. Zach is really knowledgeable about the subject matter and I learned a lot. This class has actually changed some of my viewpoints about the world and will influence how I talk about issues and make decisions for the rest of my life."

"Professor Blaes is one of the most caring, eloquent, inspiring, and engaging professors. It is evident how much effort and time he puts into this course. He has office hours in person and online, his lectures seem so prepared, and he provides so many resources and optional readings for those who want to read more about a topic we briefed over in class. Maybe it is just in the nature of this course, but he makes us think and talk about issues that are uncomfortable but necessary. He also cares about what we think while questioning our beliefs. Most importantly, he teaches us how to carefully determine our beliefs and how to stay consistent with our beliefs."

"Even though I probably did terrible in this class, that is on me. With the readings and discussion group section, I feel as if I have acquired a new sense of the world and a new perspective on ongoing issues happening almost everywhere. Instead of dismissing ideas, I had to research and find stances for both sides of various moral issues and to then debate them more often th[a]n not finding myself on the side that I would normally disagree with. Great class."

"I thoroughly enjoyed this course. I have never had a professor who has put in so much work and thought into their class. Zach was always available to his students and constantly communicated with us about assignments and topics we would discuss in class. He also listened to feedback from his students and tried to accommodate everyone. When students voiced concerns that the workload was heavy, he did his best to slim down assignments while still giving us important material needed for the class. He also provided multiple opportunities outside of class for extra practice if students were confused. Zach is the most fair and hardworking professor I have had during my time at UT and I would love to take a class with him again in the future."

"Zach has been one of the most dedicated professors I have had at UT. He was always really prepared for each class. Also, anyone could see his passion on the subject, and his ability to make it understandable for undergraduate students. I have never taken a philosophy course, and have now found myself very interested in the topic. Zach went the extra mile for every class, and his effort was evident. This was a great class."

"Zach was a great teacher. He had engaging presentations and lectures that related well to the

content we were learning in class. There was a good balance of reading and material for the course but it was not overwhelming. I liked that he was engaging us in class discussion and using squarecap to help facilitate discussion.”

“This was one of my favorite classes. You can tell that Zach is passionate about what he is teaching and wants students to excel. He does a great job of providing information and optional readings for us! Great class.”

“I LOVE Professor Blaesi. He was always available to students, and it was so obvious that he really cared about each and every one of us. He is passionate about Philosophy and sparked student[s] interests as well. He really worked very hard to make this class the best it could be for his students.”

“Zach was always prepared for lectures. It was obvious how much effort he put into what he was teaching. You could tell that he was very passionate about not only the material but making sure that his students understood the material well.”

“Zach was a good professor, and me coming into this course knowing absolutely nothing about what i was going to learn was awesome because i learned a whole lot. I was able to think outside the box and refute my own opinions and challenge myself. I really enjoyed this class.”

“Great teacher!”

“Makes the class very interesting and fun.”

“Zach is an amazing instructor. I couldn’t ask for a better intro to philosophy professor.”

“Super passionate about this and very approachable. Great guy.”

“The instructor was well versed with most of the topics provided. This class did open my eyes to a world of philosophical debate. Because of this class, I ended up in so many arguments with friends of mine.”

“It was an amazing and fun class. Really enjoyed it!”

“Professor Blaesi is an excellent professor and the course was one on my favorite courses at UT so far.”

2.3.3 Introduction to the Philosophy of the Arts (Instructor, Spring 2018)

“I originally took this course for the VAPA credit, but ended up enjoying it a lot more than I thought. The topics we covered, for the most part, were very interesting, and some I was aware of but hadn’t known it was an actual concept or theory (e.g. the male gaze). Zach was very knowledgeable on the topics in lecture but also kept us entertained and engaged. Zach was a wonderful instructor that showed his passion for the subject, which allowed us to become interested in it as well. This class

helped me gain a new perspective in looking at art, and has already changed how I watch films. Thanks for a great class and semester!”

“The instructor was very knowledgeable about the topic and was approachable, while still being professional. The class was entertaining and his lectures were informative. In addition, the instructor was incredibly receptive to suggestions to improve the class. Overall, the instructor showed a lot of effort to better our understanding of the material and our general appreciation of philosophy and created a good environment for us to learn in.”

“I appreciate how open to change the instructor is. I.e. Mid semester surveys.”

“The course helped me broaden my ideas in philosophy beyond the Ancient philosopher to more modern philosophy and how philosophy can be done about basically any issue. Zachary Blaesi was a great professor that knows a great deal about what he is talking about, and he is an excellent instructor. He tells you exactly what is required of you.”

2.3.4 Introduction to the Philosophy of the Arts (Instructor, Fall 2017)

“Zach Blaesi’s course has been one of my most enjoyable courses at the University of Texas. His lectures are interesting and informative. The workload is somewhat high, but the readings are resourceful. Zach was willing to work with my accommodations and provide assist[ance] on all assignments.”

“Professor Blaesi’s class was very cool to take. This was my first semester at UT and I appreciate the learning skills that I obtained while in this class. We had writing assignments and short quizzes, so I never felt too stressed out about this class. Blaesi structures his teaching in a way that encourages learning, whereas some teachers may just lay all of the information out on the table and expect students to absorb it all. With this philosophy class, I was able to retain the knowledge I needed to be successful at my own pace, which I am very thankful for.”

“Zach made the subject matter very interesting and, though philosophy can be a difficult topic to understand, Zach ALWAYS connected subjects within the course to real life scenarios. He’d always show clips of shows or popular movies that exemplified what we talk about in class, making it so much easier to comprehend. Overall, [a] super fair, funny, and engaging teacher.”

“Offers an incredibly clear understanding/interpretation of the material and was always very helpful via email whenever I had questions. Always took the time to ensure I had a sufficient understanding of the readings and gave thought provoking essay topics. The class was very organized and he made complex material easy to follow.”

“One of my favorite classes and teachers. I could tell he was really interested in the course and loved to get involved with students. I felt like I actually learned useful information in this class.”

“Zach was a great professor. He seemed to be very interested in the course material and did a good

job of explaining the concepts in his lectures. As I have never taken a philosophy class before and struggled with some of the readings, he always used examples in class to help clarify the topics. The readings sometimes felt long and confusing, and the clicker quizzes were sometimes difficult even when I had done all of the readings, but overall, the grade distribution was fair and the course load was an appropriate amount. He was available with office hours which was helpful when I needed help since I wasn't used to writing philosophy papers. Zach was very nice, understanding, and did what he could to help us understand the concepts"

"Fun class that talked about complex topics. However, Zach made sure to help us understand each topic."

"Professor Blaesi was a very thorough professor. He explained every topic very well and was receptive to questions."

"Zach Blaesi is very knowledgeable about both philosophy and art and obviously brings [h]is own intellectual curiosity and passion to the class and it's subjects."

"I thought the course was very interesting, and I enjoyed listening to the instructor's presentations. He seemed very well-versed and engaged in the topic material."

"Zach is highly enthusiastic about teaching the material of this course and provided a lot of opportunities to engage with students in a large lecture setting."

"I really found this course interesting! I've always wanted to take philosophy course and I'm really glad this course fulfilled my VAPA credit. I talked about almost everything in this class with some of my friends who had taken philosophy courses before. I may have never spoken up in the class, but I was fascinated and I think it added a lot to my studies as someone who makes art and participates in art themselves. The class felt very relaxed and not intimidating."

"Professor Blaesi is dedicated and excited about the work he is doing in this class. Throughout the semester, he was always willing to help and give the best insight he possibly could. Excellent class."

"Zach is a great teacher all around. Very knowledgeable about the subject and passionate about the material. His communication was enthusiastic and fun. Would definitely recommend."

"Zach is a stand up guy. Very understanding and knows his stuff."

"Awesome course. Being the first college course I ever took in college, it was a great way to start my semester. Learned a great deal about a subject I never thought I would [e]ver be this invested in."

2.3.5 Introduction to Ethics (TA, Spring 2021)

"Zach has truly been one of the most helpful and detail oriented TA's I have had at UT. I truly appreciated his swift and thorough responses to any questions or curiosities I had throughout the

semester. It is evident that he is extremely knowledgeable about the material and he is very passionate about what he does. The discussions he led were always meaningful and engaging and truly promoting higher levels of analytical thinking among students. I hope to have him as a TA for future courses!"

"This was actually my first time taking a philosophy class (I'm a computer science major) and I was surprised how much I enjoyed it and learned about the ways we justify morality. I loved the progression of thoughts/modes of thought and how the sequence of theories was presented. Your discussion sessions made it simple and clear how different philosophical approaches have changed over the years and I appreciate how thoughtful and thorough you were in answering all of my questions. Thank you for a great semester!"

"Compared to other TAs that I've had, Zach was by far the most dedicated. For almost every assignment that I have submitted, Zach would supply me with multiple papers or articles that were relevant to my topic that he thought were interesting reads. Additionally, there was an occasion when he responded to one of my assignments with a response that was longer than what I had turned in. It was an honor to have him as a TA as his discussions always struck a healthy balance between being purely educational and being interesting."

"Zach is a very thorough TA who knows his stuff. He is invested in our understanding of the material and has shared with us resources outside of the lecture materials that would further expand our knowledge. Zach also takes the time to discuss questions in a manner that makes me feel seen when he would address mine. He is amazing!"

"TA was very helpful and seemed very interested in the class and its material. Held very interesting and helpful discussion sections and went above and beyond to share extra materials to help understand the subject matter[.]"

"Zach was the best TA! He always answered any additional questions we had at length, making sure to provide supplementary reading so we could apply the ethical concepts we learned to our own work/lives."

"Zach always did a great job in discussions of making us feel comfortable and really took time to help us understand topics. On top of being very knowledgeable about philosophy, he did a great job of making things digestible for us beginner philosophers."

"Zach was a great TA! He went above and beyond to help his students grasp the dense material the class covered. He was always very kind and never made me feel like any of my questions were dumb questions."

"Zach was a great TA who always answered any questions and created engaging discussions."

"He took his time explaining each topic we discussed during his zoom sessions and helped everyone with their questions if they had any. I felt as if I learned a lot from his explanations and feel confident

in my knowledge of ethics moving forward. If something challenged me during this class, he was unequivocal when explaining something a second time.”

“Our TA Zach was one of the best TAs I have ever had. In discussion sections, he made sure everyone could speak and understand materials. He was always willing to listen to my questions and help me to better understand material. I am very thankful!”

2.3.6 Problems of Knowledge and Valuation (TA, Fall 2019)

“Zach is a great Philosophy TA. He has been patient with us when we do not understand the material. He lets us ask questions and is always available to talk about the material to help us boost our understanding. I can tell he wants us to succeed in this class. His grading is just and his comments are very helpful. I am happy I have a friendship with this guy because he is a really interesting and intelligent man. He stepped in to teach while our professor was sick and he did an excellent job. I received a foundation which I use to this day to understand philosophy texts and write my own philosophy essays from Zach’s teaching.”

“Zach is perhaps the most knowledgeable, professional, and engaging teaching assistant at the University. He did a fantastic job leading discussion hours. My favorite aspect of Plan II is small group seminar environments, thus, at the beginning of the semester, I knew our discussion hour had the potential to fulfill that for me. Without someone like Zach leading, however, the experience would not have been nearly as fulfilling. Each Monday, I was excited for the brain exercise that was discussing prompts with Zach. He knew the subject extremely well and could go down nerdy, funny, highly thought-provoking rabbit holes with us. I was not familiar with much philosophy before this, but Zach has made me excited to continue philosophizing[.]”

“Zach was very helpful and one thing I really appreciated was he never made me feel dumb or like my questions were dumb, and he always tried to understand my reasoning. He also made extra office hours and a writing workshop, both of which were helpful.”

“Zach was one of the best TAs that I have ever had; he could be a professor. He was extremely helpful for assignments and was always patient with us. He made himself readily available for extra help, and I really appreciate how he went out of the [way to] help us.”

“Fantastic. Dedicated. Knowledgeable. Most invested and responsive TA I have had yet.”

2.3.7 Problems of Knowledge and Valuation (TA, Fall 2016)

“Zach brought interest and excitement to an otherwise fairly uninspired course. Any praise I could write here wouldn’t do Zach justice. Favorite TA I’ve had.”

“He made the material easier to understand and would often explain things more lucidly than the professor would. He also provided really helpful handouts that outline the material. Was also a great

grader, very fair and objective. Much of my success in the class is due to him. I also appreciated how personable he was.”

“The absolute best TA I have ever had by a long shot. Mr. BlaesI inspired me in class and was always helpful.”

2.3.8 Mind and Body (TA, Spring 2016)

“Zach is a wonderful TA! Knew just as much as the prof. but could explain the material even better, he also seemed to care more about answering questions, and was very respectful and friendly toward his students. Zach was one of the best TAs I have ever had!”

“Zach did a very good job in explaining everybody’s answers even if it was a bit repetitive at times. He was incredibly patient, and showed that he cared.”

“You did an excellent job explaining question[s] in S.I. [supplemental instruction sections] and were very approachable so we felt free to ask those questions, which was much more intimidating [in] class. You were also very responsive to what your students wanted, and I appreciated how you would check in with us to see what concepts you should cover and how we should use our time together.”

2.3.9 Science and the Modern World (TA, Fall 2015)

“Zach was great, always very helpful and dedicated himself to make sure we knew the material. This class has been a challenge, however Zach provided enough help and plenty of resources to ensure that we would be successful in class. Great TA!”

“Zach was genuinely interested in what we had to say, and wanted us to do well in the course. He was enthusiastic, helpful, and inspiring.”

“Engaging and thought provoking. Consistently excellent discussion sections. Probably my favorite TA in college thus far!”

2.3.10 Introduction to the Philosophy of the Arts (TA, Spring 2015)

“Zachary encouraged an open and active learning environment as well as participation.”

“He really tried to make the concepts more understandable which was great for philosophy. I appreciated his hard work. Thanks Zach!”

“Zach, you were awesome and seemed very interested in the course material. If you keep TA’ing, don’t change your style!”

2.3.11 Medicine, Ethics, and Society (TA, Fall 2014)

“Zach was very informed on every topic we covered in class. He was available, caring, kind, engaging,

and thoughtful. An excellent instructor.”

“Zach really took his time grading all of our exams and unlike most TA’s, he provided very useful and detailed feedback on each exam question. You could tell that he genuinely cared about the course material and wanted us to be just as interested in the material as he was.”

“It’s nice to have a TA that makes the students critically think and share their thoughts. Zach was a great TA, and cares/knows a lot about what he teaches us.”

Contemporary Moral Problems

Fall 2018

MW 11 AM–12 PM WAG 101

Zach Blaesi (instructor)

zblaesi@utexas.edu

WAG 408C

M 12:30–1:30 PM; T 3:30–4:30

PM; or by appointment

Name redacted (TA)

Email redacted

Office address redacted

Office hours redacted

Name redacted (TA)

Email redacted

Office address redacted

Office hours redacted

Course Description

We are confronted by moral questions on a daily basis, whether on the news, through social media, or in our personal lives and social interactions. Moreover, many of us have strong views on a range of moral issues, and these views play an important role in guiding our decisions. This is sometimes most apparent during election seasons, when we are faced with the challenge of deciding whom to support to represent our interests and values within the United States government. But whether we notice it or not, our moral views also inform what we eat, how we spend our money, and how we interact with each other.

Have you ever wondered *how* to answer moral questions? When's the last time you paused to carefully consider *why* you hold the views that you do or to consider the possibility that your views might be *wildly mistaken*? What if you lead an inconsistent life? In this course, we will aim to make progress on these and related questions by exploring philosophical positions on a number of issues in contemporary applied ethics. Are there good reasons to have children, or is it wrong to bring children into this world? Are we morally obligated to use our financial resources to alleviate global poverty? How should we address the threat of climate change (if at all)? Is it morally permissible to buy meat and other animal products? These are some of the questions you can expect to explore in this course.

We will also work toward cultivating a number of practical philosophical skills, such as:

- Developing a methodology for answering moral questions
- Understanding and expositing philosophical positions
- Critically evaluating arguments and viewpoints
- Communicating complex ideas in a clear and economical manner

Flags

This course carries the **Ethics flag**. Ethics courses are designed to equip you with skills that are necessary for making ethical decisions in your adult and professional life. You should therefore expect a substantial portion of your grade to come from assignments and in-class activities involving ethical issues and the process of applying ethical reasoning to real-life situations.

Course Materials

READINGS

You are not required to purchase a textbook for this course. Instead, the readings for each week will be made available for download via Canvas under "Files." This course is meant to introduce you to competing positions on a wide range of issues in applied ethics. **As a result, it is a reading intensive course.** Many of the readings will also be dense and require multiple read-throughs to fully grasp. In some cases, we will only have time to focus on the big picture in class, leaving out some of the more subtle details for your personal reflection or to bring up during discussion sections. The readings for each week are listed on the schedule below. This schedule is **subject to revision**.

STUDENT RESPONSE TECHNOLOGY

You are required to purchase student response technology for this course. You will use this technology not only to take in-class quizzes but also to participate in class activities. While I usually use **iClicker**, I've recently learned that **Squarecap** has certain advantages. I'm leaving the decision up to the class. You will be polled on which option you prefer, and the winning option will be required for this course.

Assignments & Grading

DAILY QUIZZES – 15 points total

- There will be a total of 20 in-class quizzes throughout the semester. Each quiz will be worth **1 point**, or 1% of your final grade.
- I will only count your highest 15 quizzes, **which means that it is possible to miss 5 quizzes with no penalty to your final grade**, but **not** possible to earn more than 15 points toward your final grade.
- The quizzes are meant to determine that you've completed the assigned readings. They will consist of no more than four questions each and take only a few minutes to complete. Typically, a quiz will be administered at the start of class, but on some occasions, there may be a quiz at the end of class or multiple quiz questions throughout a given lecture.

DISCUSSION SECTION DEBATES – 10 points

- In discussion sections, there will be a total of **four** debate activities throughout the semester. Each debate-activity will be worth **2.5 points**, or 2.5% of your final grade; these points will be awarded on the basis of attendance/participation.
- I will send out a list of eight potential debate topics through Canvas, which correspond to topics on the syllabus. The first week of class, you will rank these in order of which topics you are most interested in debating.
- I will choose the four highest ranked topics for the activities, **but the winning topics won't be announced in advance**. In addition, you will be **randomly assigned** to one of three groups for each activity: **for**, **against**, or **judge**. As a result, you will be expected to come to discussion sections prepared to argue both **for** and **against** positions on **each of the eight topics** (even though there will only be four "official" debates).

READING RESPONSES – 20 points

- Throughout the semester, I will assign **six** different reading response assignments. Some of them will be summary-based; the rest will require critical thinking. You must submit a total of (**but no more than**) **five**. The prompts (together with a grading rubric) will be administered through Canvas.
- Each reading response should be **500–700 words** in length (roughly one single-spaced page) and will be worth a total of **4 points**, or 4% of your final grade. However, they will be graded as Pass (4 points), Half-credit (2 points), or Fail (0 points).
- Students who have received Half-credit may revise their submission for the chance to receive a Pass, so long as they submit the revision **within three days** of receiving their grade; however, this courtesy will be extended only **once per student**, and it cannot be applied to reading response #6.

FIND-A-FLAW ASSIGNMENT – 10 points

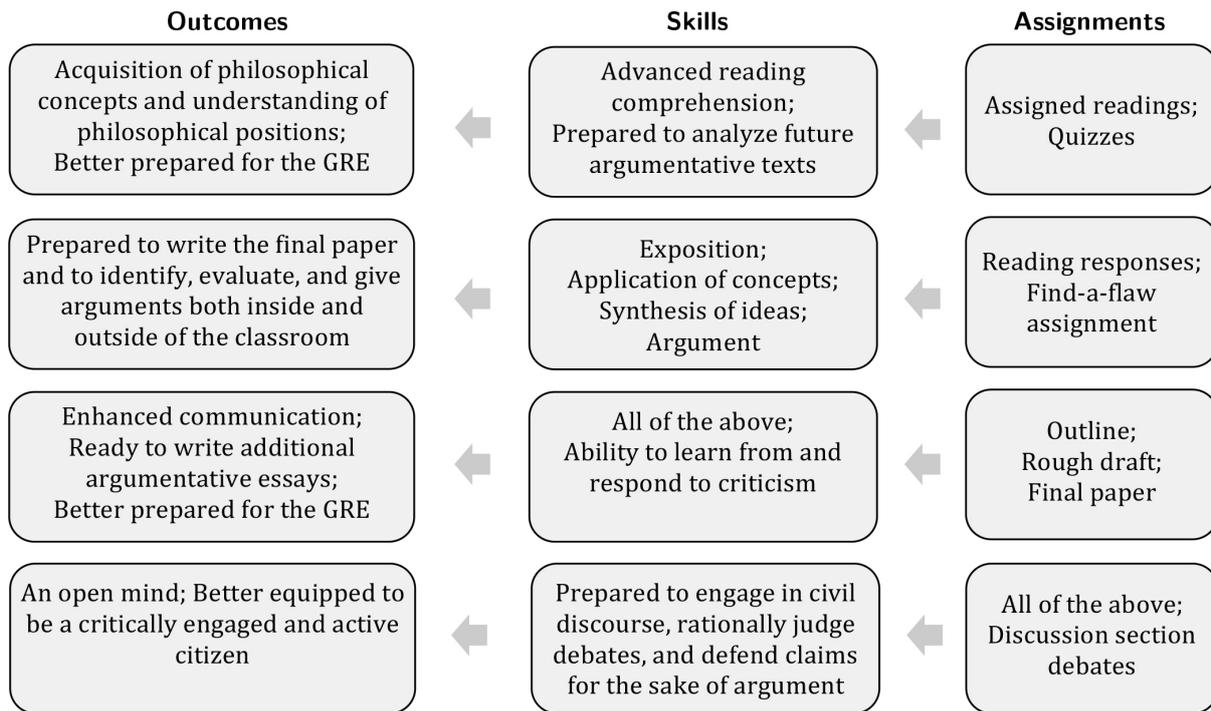
- As will become clear during the first three weeks of class, there are only two ways to rationally undermine an argument. One of them is to find some flaw in the reasoning. For this assignment, you will apply this skill to your everyday life by summarizing an argument for a position on a contemporary moral problem that you've encountered outside of class and explaining why the reasoning is flawed.
- Your target argument can be extracted from the news, social media, a public debate, a drunken party conversation, a Thanksgiving feud, or whatever, so long as you encountered the argument while enrolled in this course. This is meant to be a fun opportunity for you to apply the concepts and skills from this course outside of the classroom.
- The prompt will be administered through Canvas, and the assignment will be worth a total of **10 points**, or 10% of your final grade.
- Your written piece should be **700–1,000 words** in length (roughly 1.5–2 single-spaced pages). With prior special permission, alternative media may be accepted in place of prose.

FINAL PAPER – 45 points

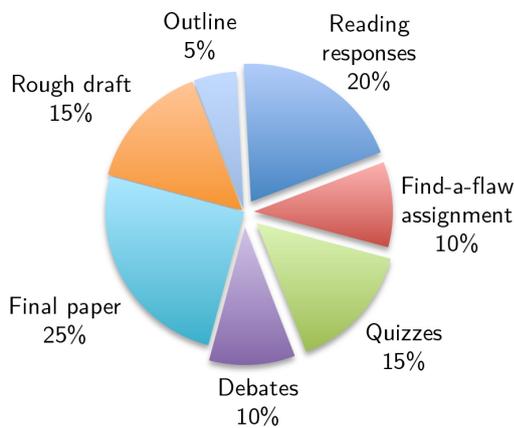
Instead of taking a final exam, you will write a **1,600–2,000 word** paper (roughly 6–8 double-spaced pages) in response to a pre-assigned prompt. The prompts (together with a grading rubric) will be administered through Canvas and discussed in class no later than Week 4, and you will be required to choose a prompt by Week 6. The paper will then be completed in three stages:

1. You will write an outline, which will be graded for a total of **5 points**, or 5% of your final grade.
2. You will write and submit a rough draft for substantive comments and up to **15 points**, or 15% of your final grade.
3. You will revise your paper in light of those comments and submit it (together with a cover letter explaining your revisions) for final grading at the end of the semester. The final draft is worth **25 points**, or 25% of your final grade.

COURSE OBJECTIVES



GRADE DISTRIBUTION



GRADE SCALE

100.0–93.0	= A
92.9–90.0	= A–
89.9–87.0	= B+
86.9–83.0	= B
82.9–80.0	= B–
79.9–77.0	= C+
76.9–73.0	= C
72.9–70.0	= C–
69.9–67.0	= D+
66.9–63.0	= D
62.9–60.0	= D–
59.9–0.0	= F

GRADE CUTOFFS

To get an A, you must earn a 93.0 or up. In other words, **neither** a 92.5 **nor** a 92.9 is sufficient for an A. And so on for the other letter grades. However, in exceptional cases, I may choose to round up borderline grades. Such cases may include (but are not limited to): you actively participated in class and frequently came to office hours to discuss the readings; you received poor grades early in the semester but demonstrated noticeable improvements later in the semester; your grade is not due to excessive absences or failed assignments; and/or I feel you've done better or worked harder than your score suggests. This is a courtesy, not an entitlement.

LATE ASSIGNMENTS & ACADEMIC DISHONESTY

There will be 20 in-class quizzes for a possible total of 15 points (see above). **This is meant to accommodate both unexcused and excused absences (including illness, religious observance, military service, etc.).** So, if you miss an in-class quiz, you will not be permitted to take it later. **Excused** absences from the discussion section debates will be handled on a case-by-case basis, but you must provide your instructor with documentation. Failure to meet all other assignment deadlines will result in the subtraction of half a letter grade from the assignment per day—in the case of Pass/Half-credit/Fail, that means a potential Pass turns to a potential Half-credit after the first day late and a Fail after the second day late.

Any assignment that exhibits plagiarism or any form of academic dishonesty whatsoever will be given an automatic 0, and the student will be reported to the Office of the Dean of Students. **For the purposes of this course, co-authoring with or copying from a classmate counts as academic dishonesty.** Students who are uncertain as to what constitutes academic dishonesty are encouraged to meet with me. **All suspicious submissions will be thoroughly investigated.**

For general information on plagiarism, visit the following webpage:

<http://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/services/instruction/learningmodules/plagiarism>

Expectations

- You are expected to show up to class on time and to stay for the entirety of each session. **If you are late to a given class (or leave early), there is a good chance that you will miss a quiz, which you will not be permitted to take later (see above).**
- You are expected to show up to class and discussion sections prepared. That means working through the assigned readings and readying yourself to ask questions and/or make comments in the classroom.
- You are expected to bring your student response technology to class and be ready to use it. If you forget it, and there is an in-class quiz, then you will be unable to take it.
- **You are expected to keep quiet during any graded in-class quizzes.** Unless stated otherwise, you are **not** permitted to ask classmates for the answers. If you are caught illicitly talking to or sharing answers with a classmate during a graded quiz, you will receive a 0 for that day. Second offenders will be reported to the Office of the Dean of Students for academic dishonesty (see above).
- You are expected to be ready to move into groups, interact with other students, and/or participate during activities both during the lectures and in discussion sections.
- You are expected to show respect to other students, your TAs, and myself. **Since many of the topics we will discuss are emotionally charged, you are expected to be sensitive to the viewpoints and experiences of your peers.**
- You are expected to be responsible for your own education, which means keeping track of your assignment deadlines and grades, submitting assignments on time, requesting outside help when you need it, and not waiting until the last minute to ask assignment-related questions.

Contacting the Instructor

I am happy to respond to emails to answer questions about course content or to schedule a meeting. I am also happy to discuss course content (and philosophy in general) during office hours. However, students are encouraged to direct practical questions concerning course material, assignments, or grades to their TA before contacting me via email or visiting me during office hours. And before you do that, please double check the syllabus to make sure that I haven't already answered them. Finally, while I will try my best to respond to emails in a timely manner, I may not respond to emails received after 10:00 PM and/or over the weekend until the next business day. Please do not email me with assignment-related questions except **at least three days in advance** of the assignment due date; in general, I will not respond to last minute emails to answer assignment-related questions.

Policy on Electronic Devices

Students are **prohibited** from using their phones in class and during discussion sections, **except** to use Squarecap (assuming that option wins the poll mentioned above). Laptops and tablets may be used for note-taking purposes, but in most cases, that shouldn't be necessary. There is empirical evidence that laptops and tablets are not effective learning tools in the classroom (see <https://tinyurl.com/y8puxjl4>). More importantly, the point of this class is not to memorize a bunch of information for exams, but rather to critically engage with the material and enter into philosophical dialogues. So, rather than attempting to copy down everything I say verbatim, you should instead ready yourself to ask questions, draw connections, and share your thoughts. Your TAs and I will be watching. If you are caught using electronic devices for any purpose other than taking notes or completing in-class activities, half a letter grade will be deducted from your final grade.

Course Content Note

Throughout the semester, we will explore a number of controversial issues in applied ethics. You may have a personal connection to some of these issues, and certain positions on these issues may conflict with your deepest held beliefs and values. I also show a number of video clips throughout the semester to illustrate certain philosophical concepts and issues. Some students may find some of this content (e.g., on animal ethics) to be disturbing, offensive, or even traumatizing. I will try my best to warn students about such clips before playing them. But if you suspect that a specific assigned reading or class session is likely to be emotionally challenging for you, I'm happy to discuss the situation with you in advance so that we can work something out.

Special Accommodations

Accommodations need to be formally approved by the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD), and students with accommodations will need to provide me with a letter of verification from the SSD. While no student is required to provide me with any details concerning their disability, students are encouraged to meet with me the first week of class to discuss what I can do to ensure that their learning needs are met throughout the semester. For example, for students who are entitled to extra time on assignments/exams or who anticipate that their disability may cause them to miss a number of classes, I am more than happy to work out an alternative to the time-intensive in-class quizzes and/or to grant certain extensions. We can also discuss options for keeping your accommodations private. I understand that some students might be reluctant to take advantage of these accommodations, but please keep in mind that they exist to ensure that students are afforded equal educational opportunities. In general, I am committed to ensuring that students get the most out of this course; providing all the appropriate accommodations is an important part of that.

For information on UT Austin's guidelines for students with disabilities and accommodations, visit the following webpage: <http://diversity.utexas.edu/disability/accommodations-and-services>

Mental Health

College can be extremely stressful, not only academically but also socially, emotionally, and physically. The UT Counseling and Mental Health Center (CMHC) has a number of resources designed to help you cope with these stresses, from groups, classes, and workshops to short-term individual counseling.

You can learn more about these resources by visiting the CMHC's website: <https://cmhc.utexas.edu>

Title IX

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 is a federal law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in education. Prohibited conduct includes sexual discrimination, sexual harassment, sexual assault, sexual misconduct, relationship (dating or domestic) violence, and/or stalking. Pregnant and parenting students are also protected from discrimination and guaranteed equal educational opportunities under Title IX; it is advised that they contact a Title IX coordinator (titleix@austin.utexas.edu) to learn more about their rights as pregnant or parenting students. As a Responsible Employee of UT Austin, I am required to support any individual who comes to me to report an alleged violation of the Title IX policy, offer that individual options and resources, and accurately report the alleged misconduct to the correct people in a timely fashion. Students can also report possible misconduct directly to Title IX Training and Investigations, either online, in person, or by phone.

For more information on Title IX or to report possible misconduct, please visit the following website: <https://titleix.utexas.edu>

Names & Gender Word-Forms

I once asked Derek Parfit, a renowned and [saintly](#) philosopher [who recently passed away](#), to sign his book for me. Even though I was in Parfit's class and had interacted with him for months, he responded, "Sure! But you shall have to remind me of your name, because I simply cannot remember them. I much wish people would consider names like they do phone numbers—no one would fault you for not remembering their phone number." I later told this story to [Ruth Chang](#), a philosopher at Rutgers University, and she told me that, despite knowing Parfit for years, he still had no idea what her name is.

I may not be as bad as Parfit, but I am very bad with names, in terms of both pronouncing them and remembering them. Having said that, I will try my best to remember your name. But if for some reason I resort to pointing at you, calling on you by some description, or simply asking you for your name, please do not take this personally—it's not you, it's me, really.

For the record, I go by "Zach" and use masculine word-forms (e.g., "he/his/him/himself" pronouns in English). I encourage you all to meet with me the first week of class to let me know how I, the TAs, and other students should refer to you—for example, by a nickname or specific gender word-forms or pronouns. I will be sure to make note of this information to ensure that it is respected in class. You can also let me know through the following Google form: <https://goo.gl/forms/fzntgyEZUkgmxWMB2>

Writing Resources

This is a writing intensive course, because philosophy is a writing intensive discipline. The TAs and I are here to help you all become better writers. But did you know that the University Writing Center (UWC) offers one-on-one consultations to assist you at any point in the writing process, from brainstorming to final revisions?

For more information, visit the UWC's website: <http://uwc.utexas.edu>

Additional Resources

Philosophy Undergrad Advising:	https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/philosophy/undergraduate/advising.php Kevin Pluta (WAG 313, kpluta@austin.utexas.edu)
Division of Student Affairs:	http://www.utexas.edu/students
UT's guidelines for attendance:	http://catalog.utexas.edu/general-information/academic-policies-and-procedures/attendance
Philosophy resources:	http://www.iep.utm.edu http://plato.stanford.edu http://philosophy.hku.hk/think
Movie resources:	https://utexas.kanopystreaming.com/frontpage

Course Schedule (subject to revision!)

WEEK/UNIT	READING	DEADLINES/NOTES
Week 1 (Aug. 29–31) Introduction	Pryor, “Guidelines on Reading Philosophy”	Fri., Aug. 31: First discussion section
Week 2 (Sep. 5–7) Tools of the trade – ARGUMENTS – NECESSARY & SUFFICIENT CONDITIONS	Bowell and Kemp, “Introducing Arguments”	Mon., Sept. 3: No class, Labor Day Holiday
Week 3 (Sep. 10–14) – TYPES OF ARGUMENTS Methodology – METAETHICS	Lau, “Valid and Sound Arguments” & “Inductive Reasoning” Short excerpts on moral realism, emotivism, and error theory	Fri., Sept. 14: Last day to drop a class for a possible refund
Week 4 (Sept. 17–21) – MORAL EPISTEMOLOGY & THEORY – NORMATIVE ETHICS	McMahan, “Moral Intuition” (pp. 103–15) Kagan, “Moral Methodology” Short excerpts on consequentialism and deontology	Due: reading response #1
Week 5 (Sept. 24–28) Animal ethics – THE CONCEPT OF SPECIESISM – ARGUMENTS FOR & AGAINST ETHICAL VEGETARIANISM	Kant, “We Have No Duties to Animals” Singer, “All Animals are Equal” (pp. 1–9, 17–23) McPherson, “Why I am a vegan (and you should be one too)”	
Week 6 (Oct. 1–5) Reproductive ethics – ABORTION & MORAL STATUS	Pruss, “I Was Once a Fetus: That Is Why Abortion Is Wrong” (pp. 19–31) McMahan, “The Ethics of Killing: Summary”	Due: declaration of paper topic

Course Schedule (continued)		
WEEK/UNIT	READING	DEADLINES/NOTES
Week 7 (Oct. 8–12) – ABORTION & BODILY RIGHTS – ACCESS & HEALTH	<i>Roe v. Wade</i> (pp. 113–15; 150–67; 171–77 [Rehnquist, J., dissenting]) Thomson, “A Defense of Abortion” Sherwin, “Abortion Through a Feminist Ethics Lens” (pp. 336–39)	Due: reading response #2
Week 8 (Oct. 15–19) – REASONS TO HAVE CHILDREN – ANTI-NATALISM	Overall, <i>Why Have Children?</i> (excerpts) Benatar, “Kids? Just say no!”	Due: reading response #3; paper outline
Week 9 (Oct. 22–26) Global justice and population ethics – OBLIGATIONS TO THE POOR – PUZZLES OF CHARITABLE GIVING	Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” McMahan, “Doing Good and Doing the Best”	
Week 10 (Oct. 29–Nov. 2) – CLIMATE CHANGE ETHICS – THE NONIDENTITY PROBLEM	Singer, “One Atmosphere” (pp. 31–46) Parfit, “Energy Policy and the Further Future” (pp. 112–14)	Due: reading response #4
Week 11 (Nov. 5–9) Race and sexuality – AFFIRMATIVE ACTION	Boxill, “The Color-Blind Principle”	Due: rough draft
Week 12 (Nov. 12–16) – CONSENT, COERCION, AND DECEPTION	Wade and Heldman, “Hooking Up and Opting Out” Dougherty, “Sex, Lies, and Consent”	Due: reading response #5
Week 13 (Nov. 19–23)		Thanksgiving holidays, no class
Week 14 (Nov. 26–30) Student selected topics	Some questions we might consider: Is cultural appropriation in the arts morally or aesthetically problematic? What moral questions are posed by developments in artificial intelligence? Can euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide be morally permissible? What are our moral duties when it comes to flirting or dating? Under what conditions is it morally permissible to constrain freedom of speech? Is pornography morally problematic? Does anyone deserve to be punished or killed?	Paper workshop Due: find-a-flaw assignment
Week 15 (Dec. 3–7)	TBA	Due: reading response #6
Last class day (Dec. 10)	TBA	Due: final draft and cover letter

The Mind–Body Problem

[semester]

[meeting times]

Zach Blaesi (instructor)

zblaesi@utexas.edu

[office address]

[office hours]

Course Description

Recall the last time you stubbed your bare toe on a piece of furniture. Millions of insentient neurons came together to generate the subjective feeling of a sharp flash of pain in your foot. But how could that be? In 1896, English biologist Thomas Henry Huxley wrote, “[H]ow it is that anything so remarkable as a state of consciousness comes about as a result of irritating nervous tissue, is just as unaccountable as the appearance of the djinn when Aladdin rubbed his lamp.” Many philosophers and scientists agree that consciousness is a mystery. But in what sense is consciousness a mystery, and if it is, how do we solve it?

In this course, we will aim to make progress on these questions by exploring some influential positions on the place of consciousness in the physical world. Along the way, we will consider issues such as the following: What is consciousness? Is consciousness physical? What can the empirical sciences tell us about consciousness? Do our experiences ever cause our behavior? Are electrons conscious? How might thought experiments involving zombies or a brilliant color scientist trapped inside a black-and-white room help us answer these questions?

We will also work toward cultivating a number of practical philosophical skills, such as:

- Understanding and expositing philosophical positions
- Critically evaluating arguments and viewpoints
- Assessing the philosophical significance of scientific research
- Communicating complex ideas in a clear and economical manner
- Presenting works-in-progress in a way that stimulates discussion and generates constructive feedback

Assignments & Grading

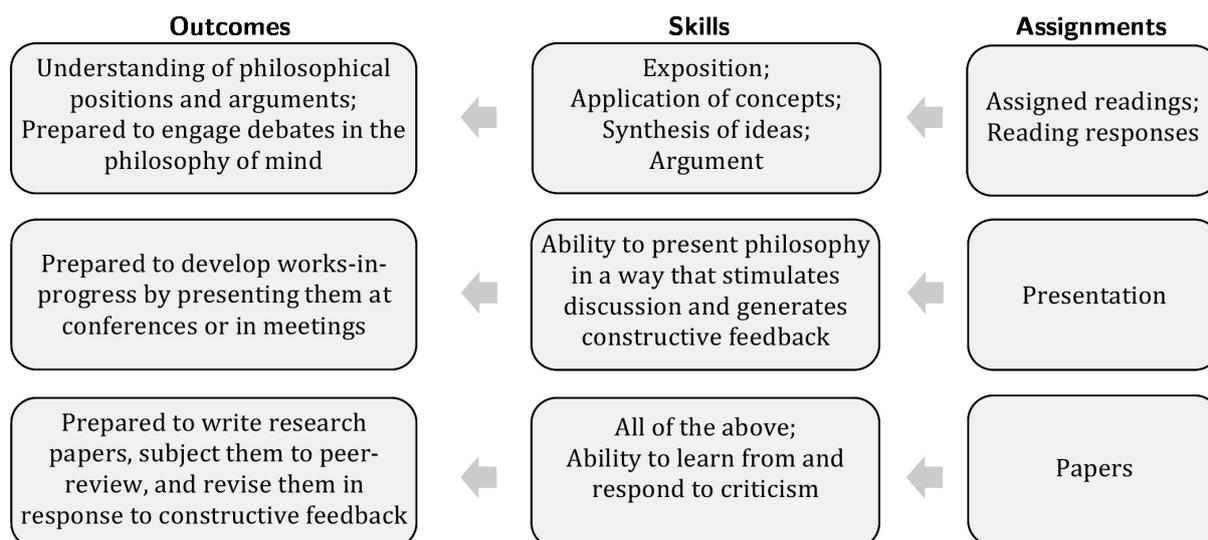
READING RESPONSES

- The course is divided into several units. You are required to submit one reading response per unit until you have completed a total of 5.
- Each reading response should be **500–700 words** in length (roughly one single-spaced page) and will be worth **2%** of your final grade. However, they will be graded as Pass, Half-credit, or Fail.
- To receive credit, you must upload your response as a PDF to Dropbox no later than 5:00 PM two days before the lecture for the assigned reading discussed in your assignment. For example, if you wrote on a reading assigned for Wednesday, September 5, you should upload your assignment no later than 5:00 PM on Monday, September 2.
- Everyone is encouraged to read each other’s submissions before coming to class. I may reference them during class discussions and invite students to discuss their submissions in class.

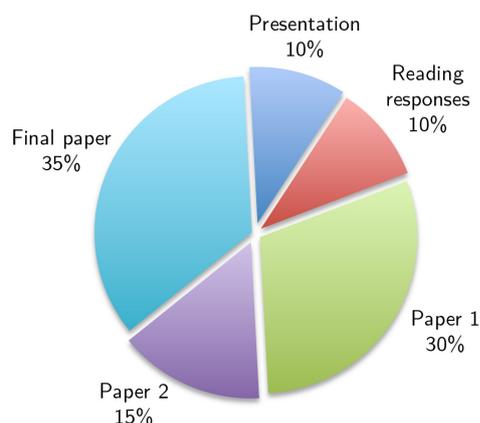
PAPERS & PRESENTATION

- You will write a total of three papers throughout the semester in response to pre-assigned prompts. The prompts (together with a grading rubric) will be administered through Canvas and discussed in class.
- Papers 1 and 2 should be **1,500–1,800 words** in length (roughly 5–6 double-spaced pages).
- You will complete Paper 1 in two stages by (i) writing and submitting a rough draft for feedback and grading and (ii) revising and resubmitting your paper as a final draft together with a cover letter explaining where, how, and why you revised it. You are required to revise your paper even if you receive an A on the rough draft. The final draft will be held to a higher standard than the rough draft. Each stage is worth **15%** of your final grade.
- You will write and submit Paper 2 in one stage for final grading. Paper 2 is worth **15%** of your final grade.
- During Week 14, you will give a **7–10 minute presentation** in which you will introduce the central thesis of your final paper and discuss how you plan to argue for it. The presentation is worth **10%** of your final grade.
- Your final paper should be **2,000–2,500 words** in length (roughly 7-10 double-spaced pages). It is worth **35%** of your final grade.

COURSE OBJECTIVES



GRADE DISTRIBUTION



GRADE SCALE

100.0–93.0	=	A
92.9–90.0	=	A–
89.9–87.0	=	B+
86.9–83.0	=	B
82.9–80.0	=	B–
79.9–77.0	=	C+
76.9–73.0	=	C
72.9–70.0	=	C–
69.9–67.0	=	D+
66.9–63.0	=	D
62.9–60.0	=	D–
59.9–0.0	=	F

LATE ASSIGNMENTS & ACADEMIC DISHONESTY

Failure to meet assignment deadlines will result in the subtraction of half a letter grade from the assignment per day—in the case of Pass/Half-credit/Fail, that means a potential Pass turns to a potential Half-credit after the first day late and a Fail after the second day late.

Any assignment that exhibits plagiarism or any form of academic dishonesty whatsoever will be given an automatic 0, and the student will be reported to the Office of the Dean of Students. **For the purposes of this course, co-authoring with or copying from a classmate counts as academic dishonesty.** Students who are uncertain as to what constitutes academic dishonesty are encouraged to meet with me. **All suspicious submissions will be thoroughly investigated.**

For general information on plagiarism, visit the following webpage:

<http://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/services/instruction/learningmodules/plagiarism>

Expectations

- You are expected to show up to class on time and to stay for the entirety of each session.
- You are expected to show up to class prepared. That means working through the assigned readings and reading yourself to ask questions, make comments, and discuss your reading responses with the rest of the class.
- You are expected to be ready to move into groups, interact with other students, and/or participate during activities.
- You are expected to show respect to other students and myself and be sensitive to viewpoints and experiences that may differ from your own.
- You are expected to be responsible for your own education, which means keeping track of your assignment deadlines and grades, submitting assignments on time, requesting outside help when you need it, and not waiting until the last minute to ask assignment-related questions.

Contacting the Instructor

I am happy to respond to emails to answer questions about course content or to schedule a meeting. I am also happy to discuss course content (and philosophy in general) during office hours. However, before asking questions concerning course material, assignments, or grades, please double check the syllabus to make sure that I haven't already answered them. Finally, while I will try my best to respond to emails in a timely manner, I may not respond to emails received after 10:00 PM and/or over the weekend until the next business day. Please do not email me with assignment-related questions except **at least three days in advance** of the assignment due date; in general, I will not respond to last minute emails to answer assignment-related questions.

Policy on Electronic Devices

Students are **prohibited** from using their phones in class and during discussion sections. Laptops and tablets may be used for note-taking purposes, but in most cases, that shouldn't be necessary. There is empirical evidence that laptops and tablets are not effective learning tools in the classroom (see <https://tinyurl.com/y8puxjl4>). More importantly, the point of this class is not to memorize a bunch of information for exams, but rather to critically engage with the material and enter into philosophical dialogues. So, rather than attempting to copy down everything I say verbatim, you should instead ready yourself to ask questions, draw connections, and share your thoughts. If you are caught using electronic devices for any purpose other than taking notes or completing in-class activities, half a letter grade will be deducted from your final grade.

Special Accommodations

Accommodations need to be formally approved by the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD), and students with accommodations will need to provide me with a letter of verification from the SSD. While no student is required to provide me with any details concerning their disability, students are encouraged to meet with me the first week of class to discuss what I can do to ensure that their learning needs are met throughout the semester. For example, for students who are entitled to extra time on assignments/exams or who anticipate that their disability may cause them to miss a number of classes, I am happy to discuss the possibility of extensions and/or strategies for staying up to date with the course. We can also discuss options for keeping your accommodations private. I understand that some students might be reluctant to take advantage of these accommodations, but please keep in mind that they exist to ensure that students are afforded equal educational opportunities. In general, I am committed to ensuring that students get the most out of this course; providing all the appropriate accommodations is an important part of that.

For information on UT Austin's guidelines for students with disabilities and accommodations, visit the following webpage: <http://diversity.utexas.edu/disability/accommodations-and-services>

Mental Health

College can be extremely stressful, not only academically but also socially, emotionally, and physically. The UT Counseling and Mental Health Center (CMHC) has a number of resources designed to help you cope with these stresses, from groups, classes, and workshops to short-term individual counseling.

You can learn more about these resources by visiting the CMHC's website: <https://cmhc.utexas.edu>

Title IX

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 is a federal law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in education. Prohibited conduct includes sexual discrimination, sexual harassment, sexual assault, sexual misconduct, relationship (dating or domestic) violence, and/or stalking. Pregnant and parenting students are also protected from discrimination and guaranteed equal educational opportunities under Title IX; it is advised that they contact a Title IX coordinator (titleix@austin.utexas.edu) to learn more about their rights as pregnant or parenting students. As a Responsible Employee of UT Austin, I am required to support any individual who comes to me to report an alleged violation of the Title IX policy, offer that individual options and resources, and accurately report the alleged misconduct to the correct people in a timely fashion. Students can also report possible misconduct directly to Title IX Training and Investigations, either online, in person, or by phone.

For more information on Title IX or to report possible misconduct, please visit the following website: <https://titleix.utexas.edu>

Names & Gender Word-Forms

I once asked Derek Parfit, a renowned and saintly philosopher [who recently passed away](#), to sign his book for me. Even though I was in Parfit's class and had interacted with him for months, he responded, "Sure! But you shall have to remind me of your name, because I simply cannot remember them. I much wish people would consider names like they do phone numbers—no one would fault you for not remembering their phone number." I later told this story to [Ruth Chang](#), a philosopher at Rutgers University, and she told me that, despite knowing Parfit for years, he still had no idea what her name is.

I may not be as bad as Parfit, but I am very bad with names, in terms of both pronouncing them and remembering them. Having said that, I will try my best to remember your name. But if for some reason I resort to pointing at you, calling on you by some description, or simply asking you for your name, please do not take this personally—it's not you, it's me, really.

For the record, I go by “Zach” and use masculine word-forms (e.g., “he/his/him/himself” pronouns in English). I encourage you all to meet with me the first week of class to let me know how the other students and I should refer to you—for example, by a nickname or specific gender word-forms or pronouns. I will be sure to make note of this information to ensure that it is respected in class. You can also let me know through the following Google form: <https://goo.gl/forms/fzntgyEZUkgmxWMb2>

Additional Resources

Philosophy Undergrad Advising:	https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/philosophy/undergraduate/advising.php Kevin Pluta (WAG 313, kpluta@austin.utexas.edu)
Center for Teaching & Learning:	http://ctl.utexas.edu
Division of Student Affairs:	http://www.utexas.edu/students
UT's guidelines for attendance:	http://catalog.utexas.edu/general-information/academic-policies-and-procedures/attendance
Philosophy resources:	http://www.iep.utm.edu http://plato.stanford.edu http://philosophy.hku.hk/think
Movie resources:	http://utexas.kanopystreaming.com/frontpage

Course Schedule (subject to revision!)

WEEK/UNIT	READING	DEADLINES/NOTES
Week 1 (Aug. 29–31) Introduction	Pryor, “Guidelines on Reading Philosophy”	
Week 2 (Sep. 5–7) What does “mind” mean? – PHENOMENAL CONSCIOUSNESS – INTENTIONALITY	Siewert, “Consciousness and Intentionality”	Mon., Sept. 3: No class, Labor Day Holiday
Week 3 (Sep. 10–14) What is physicalism? – CHARACTERIZING THE PHYSICAL	Ney, “Defining Physicalism”	Fri., Sept. 14: Last day to drop a class for a possible refund
Week 4 (Sept. 17–21) – LOGICAL BEHAVIORISM	Putnam, “Brains and Behavior”	
Week 5 (Sept. 24–28) – THE MIND–BRAIN IDENTITY THEORY – THE MULTIPLE REALIZABILITY THESIS	Smart, “Sensations and Brain Processes” Putnam, “Psychological Predicates”	

Course Schedule (continued)		
WEEK/UNIT	READING	DEADLINES/NOTES
Week 6 (Oct. 1–5) – FUNCTIONALISM – THE CHINA–BODY PROBLEM	Levin, “Functionalism” Excerpts from Block, “Troubles with Functionalism”	Due: Paper 1 (rough draft)
Week 7 (Oct. 8–12) What is dualism? – SUBSTANCE DUALISM – PROPERTY DUALISM	Excerpts from Descartes, <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i> McWeeny, “Princess Elisabeth and the Mind–Body Problem” Gertler, “In Defense of Mind–Body Dualism”	
Week 8 (Oct. 15–19) Is the mind physical? – THE CAUSAL ARGUMENT	Papineau, “The Case for Materialism”	
Week 9 (Oct. 22–26) – CONCEIVABILITY ARGUMENTS	Excerpts from Kripke, <i>Naming and Necessity</i> Kind, “Chalmers’ Zombie Argument”	Due: Paper 1 (final draft)
Week 10 (Oct. 29–Nov. 2) – THE KNOWLEDGE ARGUMENT	Jackson, “Epiphenomenal Qualia”	
Week 11 (Nov. 5–9) – THE EXPLANATORY GAP – THE PHENOMENAL CONCEPT STRATEGY	Levine, “Materialism and Qualia: The Explanatory Gap” Balog, “Phenomenal Concepts”	
Week 12 (Nov. 12–16) Is everything fundamentally mental? – PANPSYCHISM – RUSSELLIAN PHYSICALISM	Strawson, “Realistic Monism: Why Physicalism Entails Panpsychism” Montero, “Russellian Physicalism”	Due: Paper 2
Week 13 (Nov. 19–23)		Thanksgiving holidays, no class
Week 14 (Nov. 26–30) Presenting in philosophy	Workshop on how to present works-in-progress in the field of philosophy	
Week 15 (Dec. 3–7)	Student presentations	
Last class day (Dec. 10)	Paper workshop	Final paper due Dec. 13 at 11:59 PM

Introduction to Aesthetics

While some of us may never have seen a play, attended a classical concert, or stepped foot inside a museum, it's likely that almost all of us have seen a movie in the last year alone. But how many of us have stopped to think about the medium of film from a philosophical perspective? What *is* a philosophical perspective, anyway?

The purpose of this course is to get you asking philosophical questions and to help you develop the skills needed to address them. To this end, we will look at a number of central issues in aesthetics and the philosophy of art, with special focus on the medium of film. Can a film be a work of art? Is a film aesthetically worse off for being immoral? Do Hollywood films implicate a “male gaze”? Is it possible to genuinely fear characters in horror movies, and if so, can we *enjoy* such horrifying experiences? Can a film *do* philosophy?

In asking these questions, we will investigate a number of substantive works in aesthetics and the philosophy of art as well as statements from philosophically inclined filmmakers and film theorists. By examining philosophical positions, we will both come to grasp what it is to do philosophy and learn how to do philosophy ourselves.

We will also work toward cultivating a number of practical philosophical skills, such as:

- Understanding and expositing philosophical positions
- Critically evaluating arguments and viewpoints
- Communicating complex ideas in a clear and economical manner

You can also expect to develop self-awareness for the movies you love, the movies you hate, and why you bother watching movies in the first place.

Course Schedule	
WEEK/UNIT	READING
Week 1 Tools of the trade – ARGUMENTS – NECESSARY & SUFFICIENT CONDITIONS	Pryor, “Guidelines on Reading Philosophy” Bowell and Kemp, “Introducing Arguments”
Week 2 – TYPES OF ARGUMENTS	Lau, “Valid and Sound Arguments” & “Inductive Reasoning”
Week 3 Film as an art form – ARGUMENTS FOR & AGAINST	Carroll, “Film as Art”
Week 4 – FILM, FREEDOM, AND CREATIVITY	Levinson, “Elster on Artistic Creativity” Screening: <i>The Five Obstructions</i>
Week 5 – CLASSICAL FILM THEORY, REPRESENTATION, AND REALISM	Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” Tarkovsky, <i>Sculpting in Time</i> (excerpts)
Week 6	Walton, “Transparent Pictures”

Course Schedule (continued)	
WEEK/UNIT	READING
Week 7 Art and aesthetics – FORMALISM VS. ANTI-FORMALISM	Walton, "Categories of Art"
Week 8 – THE (UN)ETHICAL FILM(MAKER)	Gaut, "Art and Ethics" Eaton, "Robust Immoralism"
Week 9 – FEMINIST AESTHETICS & THE MALE GAZE	Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" Carroll, "The Image of Women in Film"
Week 10	Eaton, "What's Wrong with the (Female) Nude?"
Week 11 Fiction – THE PARADOX OF HORROR	Gaut, "The Paradox of Horror" Carroll, "Enjoying Horror Fictions"
Week 12 – FICTION AND THE EMOTIONS	Walton, "Fearing Fictions"
Week 13 – THE METAPHYSICS OF FICTION	Van Inwagen, "Creatures of Fiction"
Week 14 Film as philosophy	Smuts, "In Defense of a Bold Thesis" Wartenberg, "Film as Philosophy"

Philosophy and Film

This course is part philosophy *of* film, part philosophy *through* film. For much of the course, we will consider a number of philosophical questions about the cinematic medium in particular and art more generally, such as: What is the relationship between the objects that appear on screen and those that appear in front of the camera? Can we literally see things in films, even though those things may no longer exist? What are the ethical implications of different approaches to filmmaking, and are films ever aesthetically worse off in virtue of being morally flawed? Do Hollywood films implicate a “male gaze”? Is it possible to genuinely fear characters in horror movies, and if so, can we *enjoy* such horrifying experiences?

Another question that we will consider is whether, as some have claimed, films can genuinely *do* philosophy. We will examine this question both in isolation and by attempting to treat particular films as philosophical “texts,” discussing the philosophical questions that they raise and how far they manage to address them. In the process, we will gain a deeper appreciation of what it is to do philosophy and learn how to do philosophy ourselves.

We will also work toward cultivating a number of philosophical and academic skills, such as:

- Understanding and expositing philosophical positions
- Articulating and defending analyses of particular films
- Critically evaluating arguments and viewpoints
- Communicating complex ideas in a clear and economical manner

You can also expect to develop self-awareness for the movies you love, the movies you hate, and why you bother watching movies in the first place.

Course Schedule	
WEEK/UNIT	READING
Week 1 Tools of the trade – ARGUMENT	Pryor, “Guidelines on Reading Philosophy” Bowell and Kemp, “Introducing Arguments”
Week 2 – NECESSARY & SUFFICIENT CONDITIONS – ARGUMENT TYPES	Lau, “Valid and Sound Arguments” & “Inductive Reasoning”
Week 3 Film as philosophy – THE PROBLEM OF PARAPHRASE	Livingston, “Theses on Cinema as Philosophy”
Week 4 – DEFENSES OF FILM AS PHILOSOPHY	Smuts, “In Defense of a Bold Thesis” Assigned films: <i>October: Ten Days That Shook the World</i> (excerpt); “The Little People,” <i>The Twilight Zone</i> (Season 3, Episode 28)
Week 5 Representation and realism – PHILOSOPHY THROUGH <i>Blade Runner</i> – RE-PRESENTATION AND REALISM	Assigned film: <i>Blade Runner: The Final Cut</i> Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image”

Course Schedule (continued)	
WEEK/UNIT	READING
Week 6 – RE-PRESENTATION AND REALISM (CONT.) – PHOTOGRAPHIC TRANSPARENCY	Walton, “Transparent Pictures” Tarkovsky, <i>Sculpting in Time</i> (excerpts) Assigned film: <i>The Sacrifice</i>
Week 7 – PHOTOGRAPHIC TRANSPARENCY (CONT.) – MEDIUM SPECIFICITY ARGUMENTS Film, fiction, and the attitudes – GAMES OF MAKE-BELIEVE	Carroll, “Forget the Medium!” Walton, “Fearing Fictions”
Week 8 – THE PARADOX OF HORROR	Gaut, “The Paradox of Horror” Carroll, “Enjoying Horror Fictions” Assigned film: TBA (maybe <i>The Babadook</i> or <i>The Wailing</i>)
Week 9 Film and ethics – AUTONOMISM – ETHICISM – IMMORALISM Ethics through film – VIOLENCE AND SPECTATORSHIP	Gaut, “Art and Ethics” Eaton, “Robust Immoralism” McGettigan, “A Bleak Burlesque: Michael Haneke’s <i>Funny Games</i> as a Study in Violence” Assigned films: “College,” <i>The Sopranos</i> (Season 1, Episode 5); <i>Funny Games</i> (2007)
Week 10 – THE MALE GAZE	Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” Keane, “A Closer Look at Scopophilia: Mulvey, Hitchcock, and <i>Vertigo</i> ” Assigned film: <i>Vertigo</i>
Week 11 – VALUE THEORY – CONSEQUENTIALISM – DEONTOLOGY – APPLIED ETHICS	Nozick, “The Experience Machine” Grau, “Bad Dreams, Evil Demons, and the Experience Machine” Vaughn, “Truth-Telling and Confidentiality” Assigned films: <i>The Matrix</i> ; <i>The Farewell</i>
Week 12 Metaphysics of mind and gender through film – THE MIND–BODY PROBLEM – THE METAPHYSICS OF GENDER	Jackson, “Epiphenomenal Qualia” (only pp. 127–30 are required) Tye, “Why Consciousness Cannot Be Physical and Why It Must Be” (only pp. 33–35 are required) Barnes, “The Metaphysics of Gender” Assigned film: <i>Ex Machina</i>
Week 13 Creativity through film – CONSTRAINT AND CREATIVITY	Levinson, “Elster on Artistic Creativity” Hjort, “Dogme 95: A Small Nation’s Response to Globalization” Assigned film: <i>The Five Obstructions</i>

Reading Response (Contemporary Moral Problems)

Prompt

In “One Atmosphere” (pp. 28–31), Peter Singer provides a brief summary of the Paris Agreement, its history, and its intended purpose. At the time Singer’s book was published, the United States (under the leadership of then-President Barack Obama) was a signatory to the Paris Agreement. However, on June 1, 2017, President Donald Trump—despite objections from his then-Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson—announced that his administration planned to exit the Paris Agreement. President Trump claimed: “The bottom line is that the Paris accord is very unfair at the highest level to the United States.”

On pp. 31–46, Singer discusses four different *principles of fairness* that we might bring to bear on the question of which emitting countries (if any) should be required to take the lead on reducing their greenhouse gas emissions to address the threat of climate change. These include: the polluter pays principle (pp. 32–37); the equal per capita shares principle (pp. 38–42); the principle of aiding the worst off (pp. 42–44); and the greatest happiness principle (pp. 44–46). Given the same empirical facts, these principles may have different implications for how different countries (including the United States) morally ought to respond to the threat of climate change.

Use the following questions as the basis for your submission:

1. Which of these four principles, or which combination of them, should we bring to bear on the question of how different countries morally ought to respond to the threat of climate change? If you reject all of these principles, which principle (or combination of principles) do you propose that we accept in their place? In answering one of these questions, you should (a) clearly define and explain your preferred principle (or combination of principles) and (b) provide at least one reason to accept it.
2. What does your preferred principle (or combination of principles) imply for the Trump administration’s decision to exit the Paris Agreement, and what does it imply that the United States government should be required to do about climate change moving forward? Why?

Reading Response (Introduction to Aesthetics)

Prompt

Use these two closely related questions as the basis for your reading response:

1. Do we literally see past objects, places, and events through photographs?
2. Suppose you literally see a particular event unfold—for example, a loved-one's waving to you in the distance at the airport—and immediately store that event to memory. Exactly one week later, you recall that event in vivid visual detail and with almost complete accuracy. Your experience involves a memory image of your loved-one. Do you literally see your loved-one through this memory image?

Your task is to persuade your reader of your theses (answers yes/no) by providing **reasons** to accept those theses.

Reading Response Rubric

	PASS	HALF-CREDIT	FAIL
CONTENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The reading response satisfies the 500–700 word requirement and demonstrates full engagement with the prompt. For example, if the prompt asks more than one question, it shows an attempt to answer all of them. It exhibits a grasp of the relevant philosophical concepts, and the ideas that it expresses are sufficiently detailed and well-developed. The student is appropriately charitable and accurate in interpreting, analyzing, and/or presenting the readings or media. It is noticeable that the student examined the readings or media carefully before crafting his or her response. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An otherwise “Pass” reading response was submitted a day late. It falls short of the 500–700 word requirement or does not demonstrate full engagement with the prompt. For example, if the prompt asks more than one question, it is difficult to detect an answer to at least one of those questions. It exhibits only a partial grasp of the relevant philosophical concepts, and the ideas that it expresses are not detailed or sufficiently developed. The student is not appropriately charitable or accurate in interpreting, analyzing, and/or presenting the readings or media. Instead, the reading response shows signs of having been written at the last minute. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The reading response was submitted more than two days late, or an otherwise “Half-credit” reading response was submitted a day late. It does not meet the 500–700 word requirement at all or demonstrates almost no engagement with the prompt. It does not exhibit any grasp of the relevant philosophical concepts, and the ideas that it expresses come across as confused or muddled. The student does not attempt to interpret, analyze, or present the readings or media with any accuracy.
CRITICAL THINKING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The reading response successfully breaks the argument, issue, or problem into relevant parts and clearly indicates the connections between those parts. It provides vivid and interesting examples to illustrate its points or support its conclusions. It demonstrates at least some awareness of the kind of reasoning that it is employing or exposing, and when appropriate, it utilizes effective argumentative strategies, such as arguing by analogy, inferring to the best explanation, or providing counterexamples to opposing positions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The reading response does not clearly break the argument, issue, or problem into relevant parts or indicate the connections between those parts. It provides examples to illustrate its points or support its conclusions, but they are unclear or irrelevant. It does not show any awareness of the kind of reasoning that it is employing or exposing, and it does not utilize effective argumentative strategies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The reading response does not break the argument, issue, or problem into relevant parts at all. It provides little to no examples to illustrate its points or support its conclusions. It does not clearly reason through the argument, issue, or problem at all.
CLARITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The reading response is well thought out and easy to follow. Overall, it is focused; its sentences are logical and fully explicated; and its paragraphs are cohesive and fit into a coherent structure. It contains a clear statement of the conclusion/position it is meant to explore, clearly lays out the premises that are meant to support that conclusion/position, and explains how those premises are supposed to support that conclusion/position. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The reading response is not well thought out and is hard to follow. Overall, it is not focused and prone to irrelevant digressions; its sentences are illogical and/or not fully explicated; and its paragraphs are lacking in cohesion or do not fit into a coherent structure. It does not contain a clear statement of the conclusion/position it is meant to explore, or otherwise fails to clearly identify the premises that are meant to support that conclusion/position and/or explain how those premises are supposed to support that conclusion/position. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The reading response is incoherent and confusing. It does not contain any statement of the conclusion/position or premises and/or does not attempt to explain how the premises are meant to support the conclusion/position.
STYLE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The writing style is concise and clear. Sentences are complete and grammatical. The student uses words precisely and makes the meanings of technical terms clear. Paragraph breaks are appropriate and serve a purpose within the overall structure of the reading response. The student expresses the ideas from any assigned sources in his or her own words and employs quotations only when it is absolutely necessary. If the student decided to take the unnecessary step to confer with any sources other than those mentioned in the prompt, they are appropriately cited in the reading response in a clear and logical manner. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The writing style is neither concise nor clear, but instead comes off as “purple prose” or as a series of unconnected bullet points that do not flow well together. Some sentences are incomplete, awkward, and/or ungrammatical. The student does not use words precisely and fails to make the meanings of technical terms clear. Paragraphs tend to drag on or do not flow well together. The student expresses the ideas from any assigned sources in his or her own words, but relies too heavily on quotations. If the student decided to take the unnecessary step to confer with any sources other than those mentioned in the prompt, they are cited in the reading response but not in a clear and logical manner. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The reading response shows signs of having been put together at the very last minute. Typos and ungrammatical/awkward sentences are abundant. Paragraph breaks are nonexistent or completely illogical. The student copies from the assigned sources without indicating that he or she is quoting from those sources, or shows signs of having plagiarized outside sources. This is a possible ground for reporting the student to the Office of the Dean of Students.

Find-a-Flaw Assignment (Contemporary Moral Problems)

Prompts

OPTION #1

As we will discuss during the first three weeks of class, there are only two ways to rationally undermine an argument: point to some flaw in the reasoning, or provide reasons to reject one or more of the premises. For this assignment, you will apply the first of these skills to your everyday life by summarizing an argument for a position on a contemporary moral problem that you've encountered outside of class and explaining why the reasoning is flawed.

It is largely up to you to decide what you consider to be a contemporary moral problem. It can be anything relatively recent that raises moral questions (e.g., about what we *should* or *shouldn't* do), such as a type of action, inaction, or activity; a law, court decision, or public policy; an institution; a worldview; or a recent event.

Your *target argument*—that is, the argument that you will evaluate—can be extracted from the news, social media, political commentary, a public debate, a drunken party conversation, a Thanksgiving feud, or whatever, so long as (a) the argument is for a position on a contemporary moral problem and (b) you encountered the argument on your own time while enrolled in this course. The argument can be related to one of the topics we will discuss in class (e.g., animal ethics), but your target argument can't come from any of the readings uploaded to Canvas. This is meant to be a fun opportunity for you to apply the concepts and skills from this course outside of the classroom.

Some acceptable examples include (but are not limited to):

- You read an opinion piece in which the author argues that everyone has a right to health care. While the author's premises are clearly intended to logically entail their conclusion, their argument is logically invalid.
- You posted an article on Facebook about pejoratives, and someone objected to it in the comments on your wall, but the reasons she cited for her conclusion have no real bearing on the issue.
- A friend attempted to persuade you that you should adopt a vegan lifestyle, but he appealed to a moral principle that doesn't have the implications that he believes it does.
- You attended a public debate on whether universities should refrain from inviting controversial figures (whose views may be harmful) to speak on college campuses. One of the speakers argues by analogy, but the analogy is too weak to support her conclusion.

Your written piece should be **700–1,000 words** (roughly 1.5–2 single-spaced pages). The goal of the assignment is to explain why the *reasoning* behind your target argument is flawed, not to argue that the premises or conclusion of that argument are *false*. In other words, in your written piece, you should remain completely agnostic on whether the premises or conclusion of your target argument are true. Instead, you should attempt to persuade your reader that *even on the assumption that the premises are true*, they do not give us a *good reason* to accept that conclusion.

Let's suppose your interlocutor's name is Bob. Before you begin writing, you should ask yourself questions like the following:

- Is Bob most charitably interpreted as giving a single argument or instead a number of arguments to support the premises of a main argument? If the latter, what are those arguments?

- Is Bob most charitably interpreted as intending his conclusion to *logically follow* from his premises, or is Bob instead most charitably interpreted as merely intending his premises to *significantly raise the probability* that his conclusion is true? If the former, is his argument logically valid? If the latter, is his argument inductively strong?
- Does Bob commit any formal or informal fallacies?
- Is Bob assuming that a moral principle applies to a case he is discussing when in fact it doesn't?

OPTION #2

With **special permission** from the instructor, you may complete this assignment through alternative media instead of prose. For example, you might make a short documentary or podcast. This is **not** a substitute for rigorously engaging the assignment, but rather a different way of doing so.

Grading Information

You should treat this as an extended reading response assignment and hold yourself to the standard of the reading response rubric. However, you can also use the following breakdown as a rough guide to getting the full 10 points:

<u>1 point</u>	Shows proficiency with the relevant empirical, logical, philosophical, and ethical concepts.
<u>1 point</u>	Provides a concise introduction to the contemporary moral problem along with the necessary context for the reader to understand the dialectic (e.g., clearly explains the when/why/where of the target argument).
<u>2 points</u>	Describes a contemporary moral problem in sufficient detail and explains why it is a moral problem.
<u>2 points</u>	Presents the target argument in a precise, methodical, and charitable way.
<u>2 points</u>	Clearly explains why the reasoning of the target argument is flawed and fails to establish the conclusion (even if the premises are true).
<u>2 points</u>	Meets the word-count and contains no grammatical, spelling, or style errors.
= 10 points	

Final Paper Prompts (Contemporary Moral Problems)

Each of the following prompts is based on the same basic format. First, you will be asked to consider an assigned reading from the syllabus. Next, you will be asked to adopt a stance on whether the author's argument for their main conclusion succeeds. Finally, you will use your answer to this second question to develop and defend a thesis. Depending on the stance you decide to adopt, your thesis should take one of the following two forms:

Form 1

- (a) Since the best objections to it fail, the author's argument for their (main) conclusion succeeds.
- (b) The author's argument (or position) suffers from an important problem, but this problem can be satisfactorily resolved.

Form 2

- (a) The author's argument for their (main) conclusion fails for the following reasons . . .
- (b) The author's argument (or position) suffers from an important problem, namely . . .

While Form 1 mentions "objections" (plural), you are strongly encouraged to focus on *one* objection (or objections that suffer from a *common* problem). Similarly, while Form 2 mentions "reasons" (plural), you are strongly encouraged to develop one main argument for your thesis. In general, it is better to make fewer points but in significant detail than to make many points but without the space to sufficiently develop or substantiate them.

Regardless of the thesis you defend, you should anticipate and counter at least one objection. For example, if your paper focuses on refuting the best objections to an argument (Form 1), you should anticipate and counter at least one attempt to revive one or more of those objections. Similarly, if the thesis of your paper is that the author's argument fails (Form 2), you should anticipate and counter at least one objection to your thesis.

Keep in mind that you don't have to personally accept whatever thesis you decide to defend in your paper. There are other legitimate reasons to defend a thesis. Maybe developing a powerful argument for a problematic position is the best means to the end of refuting that position at a later time. Or maybe the thesis you personally reject is the one that will be the most interesting or fun to defend. Or maybe you want to use your paper as an exercise in open-mindedness.

Except in rare cases, your paper should more or less follow the following format:

- STEP 1: Provide a brief introduction to the issue and clearly state your thesis.
- STEP 2: Carefully exposit the argument(s) or position(s) that you will defend or criticize, and then bolster them by providing additional reasons to accept them.
- STEP 3: Develop your own argument(s) for your thesis.
- STEP 4: Consider and respond to objections.
- STEP 5: Tie up any loose ends and clearly explain what you have established.

Please proceed to the next page to review the prompts.

1. Animal ethics (Week 5)

Pick one of the following two options.

(a) In “All Animals Are Equal,” from his book, *Animal Liberation*, Peter Singer argues that racism, sexism, and other comparable prejudices are morally problematic because they violate the Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests. Correspondingly, he suggests that if we were to abandon this principle, we would be forced to give up the best defense against these prejudices. Supplementing these claims with additional premises, Singer concludes that just as we should condemn racism and sexism, so also should we condemn *speciesism*—a “prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species” (6). What is Singer’s argument for this conclusion, and does it succeed? If his argument succeeds, what is (in your view) the best objection to it, and why does that objection fail? If his argument fails, what are your reasons for believing that it fails?

(b) In “Why I Am a Vegan (and You Should Be One Too),” Tristram McPherson argues for *Modest Ethical Veganism*, the thesis that it is typically wrong to use animal products. He argues for this thesis by providing a number of sub-arguments for subsidiary conclusions. Focus on one (or more) of these sub-arguments. Does that argument fail? If so, what are your reasons for believing that it fails? If that argument succeeds, what is (in your view) the best objection to it, and why does that objection fail? Based on your discussion, what should we conclude about Modest Ethical Veganism?

2. The ethics of abortion (Weeks 6–7)

Pick one of the following two options:

(a) In “I Was Once a Fetus: That Is Why Abortion Is Wrong,” Alexander Pruss argues for the following conclusion: “abortion is wrong in the same circumstances in which it is wrong to kill an adult” (19). His argument has three main steps. In the first step, he argues for the subsidiary conclusions that (i) *he*—the individual named “Alexander Pruss”—is a biological organism, and (ii) the biological organism to which he is identical was once a fetus. His argument for conclusion (i) involves a process of elimination: he isn’t an immaterial soul, or a functional entity, or a brain, or a being constituted by a biological organism; therefore, he must be a biological organism. In the second step, he argues that it would have been wrong to kill the fetus that he once was for the same reason(s) that it is wrong to kill him now. Finally, in the third step, he argues that his conclusions generalize to other ordinary fetuses. Does Pruss’s main argument succeed? If so, what is (in your view) the best objection to it, and why does that objection fail? If his argument fails, what are your reasons for believing that it fails?

(b) In “A Defense of Abortion,” Judith Jarvis Thomson concludes that even if the typical fetus is a person who has a right to life, the typical abortion is still morally permissible. In arguing for this conclusion, she provides a thought experiment in which you are captured by the Society of Music Lovers and hooked up to a famous violinist who is suffering from a fatal kidney ailment. The director of the hospital then explains to you: “To unplug you would be to kill him. But never mind, it’s only for nine months. By then he will have recovered from his ailment, and can safely be unplugged from you” (49). Thomson argues that since it would be morally permissible for you to unplug yourself from the violinist in such a situation, and ordinary cases of pregnancy are relevantly similar to such a situation, it follows that ordinary abortions are also morally permissible. She also argues that careful reflection on this and other thought experiments reveals a number of morally important distinctions that we can use to explain why this is so. Does Thomson’s main argument succeed? If so, what is (in your view) the best objection to it, and why does that objection fail? If her argument fails, what are your reasons for believing that it fails?

3. Affirmative action (Week 11)

In “The Color-Blind Principle,” from his book, *Blacks and Social Justice*, Bernard Boxill opens the chapter by summarizing a landmark 1896 United States Supreme Court decision, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which upheld the constitutionality of racial segregation under a “separate but equal” doctrine. In his lone dissenting opinion, Justice John Marshall Harlan famously declared: “Our Constitution is color-blind.” Boxill uses this case to identify what he calls “the color-blind principle,” which states that “no law or public policy [should] be designed to treat people differently because they are of a different color [or gender]” (10). It seems to follow from this principle that many color- or gender-conscious policies—including those that give preference to certain groups, such as African Americans, women, and Hispanics, in the competition for enrollment at universities and colleges—should be eliminated. Boxill, however, argues that the color-blind principle is false and that certain color-conscious policies should be preserved or instated. Does Boxill’s main argument succeed? If so, what is (in your view) the best objection to it, and why does that objection fail? If his argument fails, what are your reasons for believing that it fails?

4. Consent (Week 12)

In “Sex, Lies, and Consent,” Tom Dougherty defines the Lenient Thesis as follows: “It is only a minor wrong to deceive another person into sex by misleading her or him about certain personal features such as natural hair color, occupation, or romantic intentions” (719). As Dougherty observes, some find this thesis to be intuitively plausible. Yet, according to Dougherty, the Lenient Thesis is *false*. He concludes that it is *seriously wrong* to deceive another person into sex by misleading that person about seemingly trivial aspects of oneself when those aspects “would be a deal breaker for the victim of the deception” (717). Dougherty attempts to establish this conclusion by arguing that such “deception vitiates the victim’s sexual consent, and it is seriously wrong to have sex with someone while lacking his or her consent” (717). Does Dougherty’s main argument succeed? If so, what is (in your view) the best objection to it, and why does that objection fail? If his argument fails, what are your reasons for believing that it fails?

5. Choose your own topic

Write a philosophy paper on a contemporary moral problem of your choice, including those listed on the syllabus that are not represented by the above prompts, such as the ethics of having children, global justice, puzzles of charitable giving, and climate change ethics. Another option is to write on one of the topics from Prompts 1–4, but with a different approach. In order to pick one of these options, you **must** meet with me during office hours to discuss your topic and the thesis you intend to argue for. If I decide that your thesis is appropriate for the assignment, I will approve you to write the paper.

Final Paper Rubric

	A	B	C	D	OUCH!
CONTENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Satisfies the word limit and formatting requirements Fully engages the prompt and puts forward an appropriate thesis Shows a complete grasp of the relevant philosophical concepts and develops ideas in detail Presents and analyzes the philosophical positions or issues accurately, charitably, and with nuance Gives original arguments, provides fresh examples, and/or joins more than one issue or argument together in a creative way 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Satisfies the word limit and formatting requirements Fully engages the prompt and puts forward an appropriate thesis Shows a decent grasp of the relevant philosophical concepts and develops ideas that are sometimes lacking in detail or specifics Presents and analyzes the philosophical positions or issues, but without much nuance and in a way that is occasionally inaccurate or minimally charitable Uses fresh examples, but provides arguments that are entirely lacking in originality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Falls somewhat short of the word limit or neglects formatting requirements Only partially engages the prompt and/or puts forward a thesis that is too broad to be sufficiently supported Shows a poor grasp of the relevant philosophical concepts and develops ideas in very little detail Presents and analyzes the philosophical positions or issues inaccurately or uncharitably Approaches the prompt with almost no originality and merely summarizes preexisting sources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Falls significantly short of the word limit and neglects formatting requirements Fails to engage the prompt and puts forward an inappropriate thesis Shows almost no grasp of the relevant philosophical concepts and puts forward ideas that are confusing and unclear Discusses the philosophical positions or issues with almost no accuracy Completely lacking in originality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ignores the word limit and formatting requirements Completely fails to engage the prompt Shows no grasp of the relevant philosophical concepts and fails to put forward any clear ideas Fails to discuss the philosophical positions or issues with any accuracy Shows signs of having been written at the very last minute
ARGUMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Successfully breaks the task into relevant parts and clearly indicates the connections between those parts Sufficiently expounds the relevant issue or position; supports interpretations of sources with textual evidence; and explores unmentioned alternatives in order to charitably strengthen the issue or position Provides vivid and interesting examples or reasons that illustrate its points or support its conclusions Demonstrates an awareness of the kind of reasoning that it is employing or expounding and utilizes effective argumentative strategies, such as isolating necessary and/or sufficient conditions to propose counterexamples, arguing by analogy, inferring to the best explanation, etc. When appropriate, discusses the best objections to its claims and provides thoughtful replies to those objections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Successfully breaks the task into relevant parts and somewhat clearly indicates the connections between those parts Exposits the relevant issue or position, but leaves certain aspects of that issue or position unclear; cites from sources, but falls short of showing how citations support a given interpretation; and/or shows only some concern for charitably strengthening the issue or position Provides examples or reasons to illustrate its points or support its conclusions, but not in a way that indicates awareness of the kind of support they provide Contains the occasional unsupported assertion Presents and replies to objections, but in a cheap or uncharitable way 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fails to break the task into relevant parts or to clearly indicate the connections between those parts Fails to make the issue or position clear; leaves interpretative claims unsupported; and/or shows little concern for charitably understanding the issue or position Provides examples or reasons to illustrate or support its points, but that are largely unclear or irrelevant Contains a number of unsupported assertions Even when appropriate, fails to anticipate or refute objections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fails to break the task into relevant parts Obscures the issue or position Provides few if any examples or reasons to illustrate its points or support its conclusions and frequently relies on unsupported assertions that are not directly related to the topic Even when appropriate, fails to anticipate objections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attempts to persuade by means of rhetoric rather than argument Consists of almost nothing but unsupported assertions

<p>CLARITY</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exceptionally well thought out, focused, and easy to follow • Contains a clear thesis statement; indicates how that thesis will be supported; and ties everything together in the end • Clearly distinguishes between main and subsidiary arguments, premises and conclusions, and so on • Uses sign posts to indicate which claims have been established within a given stage of the dialectic and how those claims relate to past or future stages of the dialectic • Frequently employs transition words and phrases to demarcate premises from conclusions and abet the flow from paragraph to paragraph • Utilizes sentences that are fully explicated and logically connected • Paragraphs are cohesive and fit into a coherent structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mostly well thought out, focused, and easy to follow • Contains a clear thesis statement, but fails to indicate how that thesis will be supported or to reach a clear conclusion by the end • Only somewhat clearly distinguishes between main and subsidiary arguments, premises and conclusion, and so on • Uses sign posts sparingly and requires undue effort from the reader to follow the arguments • Occasionally employs transition words and phrases to demarcate premises from conclusions and abet the flow from paragraph to paragraph • Typically utilizes sentences that are fully explicated and logically connected • Paragraphs fit into a coherent structure but sometimes the connections between them are unclear 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poorly thought out, unfocused, and difficult to follow • Lacks a clear thesis statement • Fails to distinguish between main and subsidiary arguments and confuses certain premises for conclusions or misleadingly conflates distinct premises into one • Sign posts are almost completely lacking • Rarely employs transition words and phrases to increase clarity • Utilizes sentences that are not fully explicated or logically connected • Prone to irrelevant digressions • Paragraphs are lacking in cohesion or do not fit into a coherent structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unorganized, convoluted, and extremely difficult to follow • Lacks a thesis statement altogether • Fails to utilize transition words and phrases • Relies on sentences that are obscure and unconnected 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exhibits almost no structure • Comes across as incoherent • Relies on sentences that are almost incomprehensible
<p>STYLE</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The writing style is clear and to the point • Sentences are grammatical, varied (from the simple to the complex) in an aesthetically pleasing way, and properly punctuated • Paragraph breaks are appropriate and serve a purpose within the overall structure of the paper • The meanings of technical terms are made clear and in general words are used precisely and consistently • Quotations are used only when absolutely necessary • Sources are properly cited in Chicago Author–Date or MLA style 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The writing style is typically clear but occasionally prone to “purple prose” digressions • Sentences are mostly grammatical and properly punctuated but occasionally monotonous or awkward • Paragraph breaks are typically appropriate and purposeful but the occasional paragraph is too long, difficult to follow, and/or lacking in flow • Quotations are occasionally used just to avoid paraphrasing the text and are only sometimes explained • Sources are properly cited in Chicago Author–Date or MLA style 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The writing style is mostly wordy, unclear, and prone to “purple prose” • A number of sentences are incomplete, awkward, and/or ungrammatical • Typos are present • Paragraphs tend to drag on or do not flow well together • The meanings of technical terms are typically unclear and words are often used imprecisely and inconsistently • Quotations are overused and rarely explained • Sources are sometimes improperly cited 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The writing style is almost exclusively wordy, unclear, and prone to “purple prose” • Awkward and ungrammatical sentences are widespread • Typos are prominent • Paragraph breaks are introduced with no clear intent • Words are used with almost no precision • Quotations are almost always used to avoid paraphrasing the text and are never explained • Sources are almost always improperly cited 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The writing style is exclusively wordy, unclear, and prone to “purple prose” • Typos and grammatical errors are widespread • Sources are never referenced and the paper shows signs of plagiarism; this is a possible ground for reporting the student to the Office of the Dean of Students