

PHIL 2000N: Disaster Ethics

Summer I 2021

Eric Mathison, PhD

Drop-In Time: Mondays & Wednesdays, 5:00–6:00 pm and by appointment

Office: Zoom

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Class Time: Mondays & Wednesdays, 6:00–8:45 pm

Zoom

Description

Some disasters, such as hurricanes and terrorist attacks, occur quickly. Others, including pandemics and droughts, can stretch on for months or years. This course will explore some of the ethical challenges of disasters at both the individual and societal level. How should states prioritize disaster response? What changes to society are ethically acceptable? Is price gouging ever okay? How should persistent racial and socioeconomic inequalities be accounted for in disaster response planning? What are our obligations to non-human animals when they are affected by disaster? And how should we balance the risk of catastrophic but less likely disasters with preventing foreseeable but less damaging ones?

Requirements and Learning Objectives

At its core, philosophy consists of considering questions, thinking about possible solutions, and communicating one's ideas to others. In addition to your ability to communicate what others have written, this course is concerned with *your* ideas regarding the issues we will consider. This might be unlike your experience with other courses and subjects.

Some students find this refreshing. There is no need, e.g., to spend long hours in the library (or on the internet) reading unassigned books and articles so that your papers have lengthy bibliographies. In fact, you are strongly discouraged from consulting material outside of the course.

Instead, your main requirement for this course is easy to describe: you need to read the material, attend the lectures, and then, as Jeff McMahan, one of the philosophers we'll

be reading in this course, says: “you just have to sit and think about it for a terribly long time as hard as you can.” Doing well in this course requires demonstration that you have put considerable effort into the topics we will be considering. Philosophy progresses by communicating ideas to others, so once you have thought about these questions, the next step is to communicate your thoughts in a clear way. This is the purpose of the papers and the oral exam.

The learning objectives for this course include knowledge of ethical theory and the sorts of ethical issues that arise in disaster situations. Another objective is the ability to think critically about the issues we will discuss. Understanding the ideas of others is important, but you must also engage with that content in a critical way by criticizing and defending the ideas of others while proposing your own. The third category is communication. Summarizing and explaining difficult arguments is a skill, as is the ability to develop arguments with coherent positions and reasonable supporting justification. The ability to do this both verbally and in writing is important for the field.

Content Delivery

This course will use a ‘flipped classroom’ format, which means that the lectures are posted as videos for you to watch before class. Then, we’ll use the class time to discuss the material, answer questions, and apply what you’ve learned. The benefit of this approach is that you can work through the lectures and readings on your own time. However, you have to get through the material before class; otherwise, much of what we discuss won’t make sense. The classes will not be recorded. Each class will be no longer than two hours (and some will be shorter).

There’s no textbook for this course. All of the material will be available on Moodle.

Since this is a summer course, the semester is only six weeks long for the same amount of material. Be prepared! Missing a single class is the equivalent of missing a week’s worth of content during a full-length semester.

Grading

The first assignments must be no longer than 750 words. The second assignment must be no longer than 1,000 words. These are hard limits that include all body content and footnotes, but not the title or bibliography. Papers that breach these limits will receive a deduction of one letter point (e.g., from a B to a B-). I’m not kidding!

Please use standard formatting: 1 inch (2.54 cm) margins with 12-point, Times New Roman (or another suitable serif) font. Late papers will be penalized one letter point per day (e.g., a paper submitted one day late will go from a B to a B-). The assignment descriptions are on Moodle. Papers will be submitted on Moodle and must be prepared

for blind grading, which means that you must not include your name in the file name or the file itself.

The oral exam will take place during weeks three, four, and five. Students will be randomly assigned a week during the first class, then each student must sign up on the spreadsheet I'll provide. The content of the exam will be the previous week's material (readings, lectures, and class discussion). I will begin the exam by asking you some general questions, then we'll have a 10-minute conversation about it. Notes, books, etc. are not permitted. The goal of the oral exam is to assess your knowledge of the content in a way that is much harder to do with writing. Because it's an unfamiliar format, students are sometimes anxious about it, but it has advantages for you. For example, when I'm grading a paper, I have to assign a grade based on what you've written, even if I'm not sure what you mean. In the oral exam, I can ask follow-up questions. I'll give more info on the exam in-class. NB: The one downside of this format is that it involves some coordination. I'll make a sign-up list of available times well ahead of time and we'll do our best to stay on schedule, but please leave some buffer time in case of delays.

For the final exam, you will be given approximate 25 short-answer questions and will have to answer 20. Any of the content from the syllabus, lectures, and class time is testable.

Assignment 1 (Due Friday, May 21st)	20%
Oral Exam (Weeks 3, 4, and 5)	15%
Final Exam (Wednesday, June 16th)	35%
Assignment 2 (Due Friday, June 18th)	30%

Academic Conduct

Plagiarism is a serious academic offence that students sometimes commit unintentionally. It is your responsibility to know what constitutes plagiarism and how to avoid it. In particular, for this course, you are required to give a citation whenever you discuss someone else's work. This is true regardless of whether you directly quote the author or, alternatively, summarize the author's ideas in your own words. This course, and philosophy in general, has no agreed-upon style guide. You can use whichever method you prefer, so long as I can find the relevant passage. Most importantly, *you must provide page numbers*. Here are two examples:

Direct quotation: In the introduction of *Reasons and Persons*, Derek Parfit says "Like my cat, I often simply do what I want to do" (p. ix).

Summarization: In the introduction of *Reasons and Persons*, Derek Parfit describes how he often behaves like his cat by acting however he wants (p. ix).

If you are unsure how to properly cite something, consult the [Writing Centre](#) or me, the instructor. For more information on academic integrity, please consult the [Student Discipline Policy](#).

Contacting the Instructor

I will do my best to respond to emails within 24 hours, but please note that I have a full-time pandemic-related job that can require me to change my schedule very quickly. Drop-in time is your opportunity to chat with me one-on-one about course content, your papers, or anything else of philosophical relevance (so basically anything!). If you are unable to attend my drop-in time (right before class), we can usually arrange to meet another time either in person or via Skype, Google Hangouts, or some other medium.

Schedule

Class 1: Introduction

Class 2: The Values

Class 3: Ethical & Political Theories

Class 4: Distributing Scarce Resources

- Nick Romeo, “The Grim Ethical Dilemma of Rationing Medical Care, Explained”
- Ari Ne’eman, “I Will Not Apologize for My Needs”
- Lilly Sullivan, “God Committee” (podcast)

Class 5: Restricting Liberty

- Alberta Public Health Act (52.6 and 52.61: pp. 42–44)
- Jessica Flanigan, “A Defense of Compulsory Vaccination”
- Alex Blumberg, “Forgotten, But Not Lost” (podcast)

Class 6: Inequities

- Mehmet Ulubasoglu, “Natural Disasters Increase Inequality. Recovery Funding May Make Things Worse”
- Annie Lowrey, “What the Camp Fire Revealed”

Class 7: Humanitarianism

- Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”

Class 8: Non-Human Animals

- Jeff McMahan, “The Meat Eaters”
- Catia Faria, “Making a Difference on Behalf of Animals Living in the Wild”
- Matthew Abbott, “Fires Left These Wallabies Nothing to Eat. Help Arrived from Above”
- Christian Cotroneo, “Man Drives Hours Every Day in Drought to Bring Water to Wild Animals”

Class 9: Price Gouging

- Elizabeth Brake, “In Texas, Price Gouging During Disasters is Illegal – It Is also On Very Shaky Ethical Ground”
- Donald J. Boudreaux, “On Price Gouging”
- Matt Zwolinski, “Is Price Gouging Immoral? Should It Be Illegal?” (video)

Class 10: Avoiding Disasters

- Giving What We Can, “Emergency Aid”
- Max Fisher, “Europe’s Vaccine Ethics Call: Do No Harm and Let More Die?”
- Chao Ma, abstract of “Be Cautious in the Last Month: The Sunk Cost Fallacy Held by Car Insurance Policy Holders”
- Amina Zafar, “AstraZeneca-Oxford’s COVID-19 Vaccine Safety Questions Answered”
- The Associated Press, “U.S. Recommends ‘Pause’ for Johnson & Johnson Vaccine in Response to 6 Clot Reports”

Class 11: Existential Risk

- Ezra Klein, “Toby Ord on Existential Risk” (podcast)
- Benjamin Todd, “Future Generations and Their Moral Significance”

Class 12: Review