

Philosophy 102: Moral Problems

Spring 2016

Section 01: MWF 9:30am–10:20am (Denny Hall 110)
Section 02: MWF 11:30am–12:30pm (East College 405)

Dr. James Sias

siasj@dickinson.edu

Office phone: (717) 245-1217

Office location: East College 210

Office hours: Wed, 12:30–2:30pm; or by appt

1 Description

Is morality our own invention? Is it a cultural phenomenon? Is moral goodness “in the eye of the beholder”? Or are there objective moral values, out there in the world for us to discern? Could some moral problems actually have *answers* beyond mere opinion? These are the sorts of questions that will occupy us for the first part of the semester. Next, we’ll examine theories of what it means for an action to be morally right (or wrong), what it takes for a person to be morally good (or bad), and the like. If some actions are morally wrong, what is it that makes them wrong? What sorts of qualities or traits make someone a good person? What is the good life? Finally, we’ll conclude the semester by discussing some “real-life” moral problems.

2 Required Texts

1. R. Shafer-Landau, *The Fundamentals of Ethics* [FOE]
2. R. Shafer-Landau, *The Ethical Life: Fundamental Readings ... Moral Problems* [EL]

* Additional readings will be posted online [*online*]

3 Assignments

There are two writing assignments for the course. The first is relatively short, and only requires you to summarize an argument from one of the course texts. The second is a full essay, and the assignment will actually have two stages. For the first stage, you’ll submit a completed rough draft of the essay. And for the second stage, you’ll submit a revised and polished draft of that same essay. Your essay grade will be based upon *both* (a) the quality of the final draft, and (b) the progress that you make between drafts. You’ll also take two exams—a mid-term exam and a final exam.

The final exam is not comprehensive. Failure to complete all assignments will result in a failing grade for the course. See below for a distribution of grades.

Grade distribution

Attendance & participation	10%
Argument summary	10%
Mid-term examination	25%
Final examination	25%
Essay	30%

4 Course Policies & Procedures

4.1 Academic conduct & integrity

Academic misconduct of any form will not be tolerated. All cases of suspected academic misconduct will be reported to the College. This includes plagiarism and other forms of cheating, as well as the re-use of work submitted for credit in another course. And according to the “Community Standards” page on Dickinson’s website, “The typical sanction for academic misconduct is an F in the course and stayed suspension.” If students have any questions about the standards for academic conduct and integrity at Dickinson College, they are encouraged either to consult with the professor or to review the college’s full policies, which are available online.

Plagiarism is a form of cheating that involves *any kind of presentation of someone else’s ideas as your own*. Students should note that this includes more than just direct quotation without proper citation. See the “Community Standards” page on Dickinson’s website for descriptions of different forms of plagiarism, as well as a list of examples of other forms of academic misconduct.

4.2 Attendance & participation

While I do not take attendance at each class meeting, I do keep track of who attends regularly and who does not. I also keep track of the frequency with which students participate in class discussion. Full credit (10%) is reserved for those students with perfect or near-perfect attendance, and who regularly participate in class discussion. Students who attend regularly, but rarely or never participate in class discussion, will receive a grade of 7% or lower.

For the record, philosophy is the sort of subject that gets more interesting as more people interact with both the material and each other. So *you* are partly in control of how interesting or boring this class will be. There are reasons *beyond* just your grade, then, for you to participate in class discussion. Do not, however, monopolize class discussion. Give your fellow students an opportunity to participate. If there is anything that you’d like to discuss in more depth than is allowed by class time, you are encouraged to visit me during my office hours.

4.3 Late work

Late work will be accepted without penalty *only* if the student can provide compelling evidence that the tardiness is due to illness, hardship, or required attendance at a school-sponsored event. Students must notify the professor (via email) as soon as they become aware of one of these possible causes of tardiness. In all other cases—i.e., cases in which a student’s work is late for reasons that are not recognized as valid excuses—the student will be penalized one-third of a letter grade for each day (including weekends) that the assignment is late—e.g., from a B+ to a B, then from a B to a B-, etc. (And for the record: New days are counted from the end of class on the day the assignment was due. So, for instance, if an assignment is due in class on a Friday, and that class period ends at 10:20am, the assignment will be considered *one day late* as of 10:21am on the same day.)

4.4 Disabilities

Dickinson College makes reasonable academic accommodations for students with documented disabilities. Students requesting accommodations must make their request and provide appropriate documentation to the Office of Disability Services (ODS) in Biddle House. Because classes change every semester, eligible students must obtain a new accommodation letter from Director Marni Jones every semester and review this letter with their professors so the accommodations can be implemented. The Director of ODS is available by appointment to answer questions and discuss any implementation issues you may have. ODS proctoring is managed by Susan Frommer at 717-254-8107 or proctoring@dickinson.edu. Address general inquiries to Stephanie Anderberg at 717-245-1734 or e-mail disabilityservices@dickinson.edu.

For more information, see www.dickinson.edu/ODS.

4.5 Warning about course content

Discussions in ethics often focus upon potentially very serious and sensitive topics. Depending upon one’s personality and/or the circumstances of one’s life, it may be difficult for one to engage in discussion of these topics critically and dispassionately. While there is certainly nothing wrong with responding emotionally to some of these issues, students are advised that the professor has a vested interest in preventing those emotional responses from interfering with fruitful class discussion.

4.6 Other notes of varied importance

- Noisy or otherwise distracting electronic devices are not to be used in class. This applies especially to cell phones. Computers are allowed, but if I think that your use of a computer has become a distraction to *anyone* (yourself included), you’ll be told to put it away or leave the classroom.
- Do not talk with other students while either the professor or a fellow student is speaking. If you have a question or comment related to the material, raise your hand and you will be given an opportunity to speak. If you have a question or comment that is *not* related to the material, keep it to yourself (unless, of course, it’s some sort of emergency).
- “Aren’t 100-level courses supposed to be easy?” I’ve heard this question (or something like it) often enough to justify addressing it formally, here in the course syllabus. First, I don’t believe

there is *any such thing* as a college course that is “supposed to be easy.” You’re supposed to be challenged in college, and, as your professor, I intend to make sure that happens. And second, philosophy is an especially difficult discipline for those who are unfamiliar. So, of the 100-level courses that you take at Dickinson, you should expect this one to be among the most challenging.

4.7 What grades mean

Below you will find “definitions” of the five main letter grades.

- A** Mastery of course content at the highest level of attainment that can reasonably be expected of students at a given stage of development. The “A” grade states clearly that a student has shown such outstanding promise in the aspect of the discipline under study that he/she may be strongly encouraged to continue.
- B** Strong performance demonstrating a high level of attainment for a student at a given stage of development. The “B” grade states that the student has shown solid promise in the aspect of the discipline under study.
- C** A totally acceptable performance demonstrating an adequate level of attainment for a student at a given stage of development. The “C” grade states that, while not yet showing unusual promise, the student may continue to study in the discipline with reasonable hope of intellectual development.
- D** A marginal performance in the required exercises demonstrating a minimal passing level of attainment. A “D” grade indicates that the student has given no evidence of prospective growth in the discipline, and would be well advised not to continue in the academic field.
- F** An unacceptable performance. The “F” grade indicates that the student’s performance in the required exercises has revealed almost no understanding of the course content, and little or no proficiency with the skills required for success in this particular discipline.

4.8 How to contact the professor anonymously

Occasionally, students may want to contact the professor anonymously, e.g., to discuss something especially sensitive, to raise questions about course content that they were uncomfortable raising in class, to express concerns about in-class discussion, to report academic dishonesty, etc. In order to facilitate this, I’ve set up a generic Gmail account for the class. At any point during the semester, students are welcome to email me from this account, if they’d like the message to be received anonymously (the sender appears in my inbox as “Anon 102 Student”). Here is the relevant information:

email: phil102moralproblems@gmail.com

password: phil102@dickinson

Now, obviously, the anonymity restrains my ability to respond directly to the student who sent the email. So if the email is one that calls for a response (e.g., maybe it raises a question about course content), that response will have to be given publicly, to the class as a whole.