

Phil 237: Contemporary Moral Issues

Winter 2021, McGill University
Prof. Stephanie Leary

SYLLABUS

Time and Location: M/W/F(ish) 2:35-3:25pm EST via myCourses and Zoom

Course Description

At the heart of three current social and political movements – the Movement for Black Lives (MBL), the #MeToo movement, and the ethical food movement – are moral issues related to race, gender, and species.

The primary moral issues that motivate MBL and #MeToo are obvious and uncontroversial: Black lives deserve equal moral consideration, racism (at both the individual and institutional level) is morally wrong, and engaging in sexual activities with someone without their consent is seriously morally wrong. But there are some moral issues within the vicinity of these two movements that are quite controversial and it's these issues that this course aims to discuss. For example, in relation to MBL, we will ask what is racism exactly, does having implicit racial biases make one racist, and should we adopt affirmative action policies and reparations as a way of counteracting racism? And in relation to #MeToo, we will ask how should we respond to accusations of sexual assault, and what conditions must be met in order for someone to genuinely consent to sex?

Finally, we will then discuss the primary moral issues that motivate the ethical food movement, which are more controversial than those that motivate MBL and #MeToo but are interestingly related: do nonhuman animals deserve equal moral consideration, is our practice of farming animals *speciesist* (akin to racism and sexism), and is it morally wrong to consume meat and other animal products?

Our discussion of these ethical issues will be primarily informed by reading contemporary philosophical articles, but these readings will be supplemented by podcasts, newspaper articles, and documentaries.

(CONTENT WARNING: This course discusses highly sensitive subject matter including racial and sexual violence and students should take proper care while engaging with these materials.)

Course Goals

The overall goals of this course are to improve your ability to think carefully and critically about ethical issues and to express your own views in a clear, well-reasoned way through both writing and conversation.

Lecture Format

Most weeks, there will be one or two pre-recorded lecture videos posted to myCourses on Monday and one live lecture session over Zoom on Wednesday at 2:35-3:25pm (there are a few exceptions – see schedule below). The live sessions will typically involve polling, breakout room discussions, and opportunities for students to ask questions about the material. Occasionally, we will have guest speakers join the live sessions (see schedule below). In order to promote a free exchange of ideas, these live sessions will not be recorded (though any materials used by the professor to help guide the

live session will be made available on myCourses). Regular attendance and participation at the live sessions will be critical for excelling in this course, but it will not count towards your final grade.

IMPORTANT INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE LIVE SESSIONS:

- (1) **POLLING:** We will use McGill's polling software during the live Zoom sessions to make them more interactive, to communicate during breakout rooms, and gauge students' understanding of the material. So, participation in polling will be critical for the live sessions (even though there's no participation grade). **Here are instructions for how to set up Polling:**
 - You will respond to questions from the instructor from a personal device (smartphone, tablet, or laptop). Students should come to class with their devices charged and [connected to the Internet](#).
 - To participate in Polling sessions, you **MUST** first register for an account by clicking on **Register Your Account** at www.mcgill.ca/polling and logging in with your McGill username and password. Follow the prompts to agree to the terms of use and create your account. For more information, please visit the **Getting Started for Students** section at www.mcgill.ca/polling.
 - For any technical problems with polling, please contact the IT Service Desk: <http://www.mcgill.ca/it/get-started-it/need-help>.
 - If you do not have a phone, tablet, or laptop to use to respond to polling questions, please contact the instructor immediately in order for appropriate arrangements to be made.
 - Please ensure that any polling responses you submit are appropriate and relevant to the question asked. Note that unless the poll is labelled as anonymous, your responses are identifiable to the instructor.
- (2) **VIDEO/AUDIO:** Please keep your microphone muted at all times, except when you have been called on to speak or during breakout rooms. Students are encouraged to keep their video on if their internet bandwidth can afford it, especially during breakout rooms.
- (3) **ASKING QUESTIONS:** Please use the raise hand function in Zoom if you would like to ask a question and the professor will call on you. The chat is set up so that students may only send messages privately to the professor and TAs. You may ask a question through the chat, but please use the chat *very sparingly* – for burning, important comprehension questions only – and keep in mind that the professor may not see or get to answer every question in the chat.

Conferences

Every student should register for a conference (which are on Thursdays or Fridays). Conferences will begin Thurs Jan 21st and Fri Jan 22nd and will be devoted to clarifying lecture content, answering student questions, and discussion. In order to promote a free exchange of ideas, conferences will not be recorded.

| Conf # | TA | Day | Time | Zoom Link |
|--------|---------------------|-------|-------------|---|
| 21202 | Jean-Francois Rioux | Thurs | 4:05-4:55pm | https://mcgill.zoom.us/j/87153861002 |
| 21213 | Jean-Francois Rioux | Thurs | 5:05-5:55pm | https://mcgill.zoom.us/j/87153861002 |
| 21214 | Boyu Xie | Thurs | 6:05-6:55pm | https://mcgill.zoom.us/j/85284534038 |

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| 21216 | Boyu Xie | Fri | 9:35-10:25am | https://mcgill.zoom.us/j/85284534038 |
| 21217 | Paul Xu | Fri | 2:35-3:25pm | https://mcgill.zoom.us/j/86552740867 |
| 21218 | Paul Xu | Fri | 10:35-11:25am | https://mcgill.zoom.us/j/85039717558 |
| 21219 | Thomas Minguy | Fri | 10:35-11:25am | https://mcgill.zoom.us/j/81516295476 |
| 21220 | Thomas Minguy | Fri | 11:35am-12:25pm | https://mcgill.zoom.us/j/84531599778 |
| 21221 | Eric Wilkinson | Fri | 1:35-2:25pm | https://mcgill.zoom.us/j/86551290237 |
| 21222 | Eric Wilkinson | Fri | 2:35-3:25pm | https://mcgill.zoom.us/j/86503996980 |
| 21224 | Mylene Hangdaan | Fri | 11:35am-12:25pm | https://mcgill.zoom.us/j/81977030482 |
| 21225 | Mylene Hangdaan | Fri | 12:35-1:25pm | https://mcgill.zoom.us/j/87232181945 |

myCourses

Everything for this course is accessible through myCourses, including the readings (there is no textbook for the course), the assignments, and the link to the live Zoom sessions. I will also be using myCourses to post announcements, return feedback on written work, post grades, etc. It's your responsibility to make sure that myCourses has your correct email so that you receive announcements and notifications.

Assignments & Grades

- (1) **Short Writing Assignment (20%):** You will complete a short writing assignment (2-3 pages, double-spaced), which will prepare you for writing the midterm and final papers.
- (2) **Midterm and Final Papers (40% each):** You will submit a midterm and final paper (each 5 pages, double-spaced), in which you will be required to defend a position on one of the issues we discuss in class. You will be expected to provide an argument for your position, defend its premises, and consider and respond to an objection to your argument. You will be provided with a selection of paper topics to choose from.

***Assignments will be posted on myCourses two weeks before the due date (see schedule below for due dates). You must submit every assignment in order to pass this course. Failure to turn in one of these assignments will result in an automatic F.**

Contacting the Professor and TAs

If you have substantive questions about the material or about your work for this course, please come to our office hours (don't email). If you have logistical questions about the course, please email your TA (NOT the professor). If you have logistical questions before you have been assigned a TA, please post your question on the discussion forum in myCourses – DO NOT EMAIL the professor. **And please make sure that your question isn't answered on the syllabus or in myCourses.**

| TA | Email | Office Hours | Zoom link |
|------------------|--|-----------------|---|
| *Mylene Hangdaan | mk.hangdaan@mail.mcgill.ca | Mon 1:30-2:30pm | https://mcgill.zoom.us/j/84890795302 |

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| Thomas Minguy | thomas.minguy@mail.mcgill.ca | Thurs 1:30-2:30pm | Sign up for a slot here and you will receive a Zoom link: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1p_hhuLgaeuRd5UtKVR50hy4YoVW-Vz_g3OJRWvXP62bw/edit?usp=sharing |
| *Jean-Francois Rioux | jean-francois.rioux2@mail.mcgill.ca | Tues 5-6pm | https://mcgill.zoom.us/j/82698857880 |
| *Eric Wilkinson | eric.wilkinson@mail.mcgill.ca | Thurs 12-1pm | https://mcgill.zoom.us/j/85698193436 |
| *Boyu Xie | boyu.xie@mail.mcgill.ca | Thurs 8:30-9:30am | https://mcgill.zoom.us/j/88495042653 |
| *Paul Xu | ruigang.xu@mail.mcgill.ca | Tues 2-3pm | https://mcgill.zoom.us/j/82034265996 |

| Professor | Email | Office Hours | Zoom link |
|------------------|--|------------------|---|
| *Stephanie Leary | stephanie.leary@mcgill.ca | Tues 11:15-12:30 | https://mcgill.zoom.us/j/89407734135 |

* = Our Zoom office hours have a waiting room and students are let in first-come, first-serve.

Written Work Policies

Language Policy

In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

Academic Integrity Policy

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures: www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/. Since polling records will be used to compute a portion of course grades, **responding as someone other than yourself is considered an academic offense**. During class, possession of more than one response device or using the credentials of another student will be interpreted as intent to commit an academic offense.

Late-Work Policy

Late work is only accepted if you have an extremely serious excuse. The writing prompts for the assignments will be posted very early so that you have plenty of time to complete them.

Protocol for contesting grades

- (1) You must first meet with the TA who graded your paper to discuss your grade
- (2) Write up a one-page appeal explaining why you believe your paper deserves a better grade, given the criteria on the grading rubric
- (3) Email your appeal to the professor and CC the TA who graded your paper

Meta-policy

I reserve the right to amend the readings, assignments, and policies as the semester progresses. I will only do so fairly, for good reasons, and with plenty of warning.

Course Schedule

(*Materials subject to change, as course progresses)

| Topic | Main Questions | Date | Complete before class | During class time | Special Guests | Work Due |
|--|---|------------|--|---------------------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| Intro to course | | Fri Jan 8 | Syllabus | Lecture Video | | |
| THEME 1: The Movement for Black Lives | | Mon Jan 11 | <i>13th</i> (Netflix documentary) Content Warning: racial violence | Finish <i>13th</i> - no lecture video | | |
| Racism | What is racism? | Wed Jan 13 | J. L. A. Garcia's "Current Conceptions of Racism: A Critical Examination of Some Recent Social Philosophy" | Live Zoom session | | |
| | | Mon Jan 18 | Tommie Shelby's "Is Racism in the Heart?" | Lecture Videos | | |
| | | Wed Jan 20 | <i>Optional further readings:</i> see myCourses folder | Live Zoom session | Prof. Jorge L.A. Garcia (Boston College) | |
| Implicit Bias | What is implicit bias and how does it contribute to racism? | Mon Jan 25 | Hidden Brain podcast episode, "In the Air We Breathe": https://www.npr.org/transcripts/531587708 Content warning: police brutality | Lecture Videos | | |
| | | Wed Jan 27 | Albert Mosley's "A Defense of Affirmative Action" | Live Zoom session | Eugene Ofosu (McGill, Psychology PhD Student) | |
| Affirmative action | Should businesses and universities adopt affirmative action policies? | Mon Feb 1 | Celia Wolf-Devine's "Preferential Policies Have Become Toxic" | Lecture Videos | | Short Writing Assignment |

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| | | Wed Feb 3 | (1) Episode of Netflix's Explained: "The Racial Wealth Gap", season 1, May 23, 2018 episode (2) Sendhil Mullainathan's "Racial Bias, Even When We Have Good Intentions" in NYT: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/04/upshot/the-measuring-sticks-of-racial-bias-.html | Live Zoom session | | |
| Reparations | | Mon Feb 8 | Olufemi Taiwo's "Reconsidering Reparations: the Movement for Black Lives and Self-Determination" | Lecture Videos | | |
| | | Wed Feb 10 | <i>Optional:</i> Freakonomics podcast episode "The Pros and Cons of Reparations": https://freakonomics.com/podcast/reparations-part-2/ | Live Zoom session | Prof. Olufemi Taiwo (Georgetown University) | |
| THEME 2: The #MeToo Movement | What legal standards of evidence should we use in sexual assault cases? | Mon Feb 15 | Georgi Gardiner's "She-Said, He-Said: Rape Accusations and the Preponderance of Evidence" Content Warning: sexual violence | Lecture Videos | | |
| | | Wed Feb 17 | <i>Optional:</i> Hidden Brain podcast episode "In the Heat of the Moment": https://www.npr.org/2019/11/27/783495595/in-the-heat-of-the-moment-how-intense-emotions-transform-us Content warning: sexual violence | Live Zoom session | Prof. Georgi Gardiner (University of Tennessee) | |
| Sexual Assault Accusations | What should we believe about sexual assault accusations in private life? | Mon Feb 1 | Miranda Fricker's "Testimonial Injustice" from <i>Epistemic Injustice: The Power and the Ethics of Knowing</i> | Lecture Videos | | |
| | | Wed Feb 24 | Invisibilia podcast episode "The Callout": https://www.npr.org/2018/04/13/601971617/the-callout Content warning: sexual violence | Live Zoom session | | |
| | | FRIDAY Feb 26 | | | | Midterm Paper |

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| | | March 1-5 | McGill Reading Week | NO CLASSES | | |
| | | Mon Mar 8 | Sarah Stroud's "Epistemic Partiality in Friendship" | Lecture Videos | | |
| | | Wed Mar 10 | Tom Dougherty's "Sex, Lies and Consent" Content warning: sexual violence | Live Zoom session | | |
| Sexual consent | What does sexual consent require? | Mon Mar 15 | Hallie Liberto's "Intention and Sexual Consent" | Lecture Videos | | |
| | | Wed Mar 17 | | Live Zoom session | | |
| THEME 3: The Ethical Food Movement | Do animals have moral status? | Mon Mar 22 | Peter Singer's "All Animals are Equal" | Lecture Videos | | |
| Moral status | | Wed Mar 24 | <i>Start next week's reading!</i> | Live Zoom session | | |
| | | Mon Mar 29 | Matthew Liao's "The Basis of Human Moral Status" | Lecture Videos | | |
| | | Wed Mar 31 | Frans de Waal's TED talk, "Moral Behavior in Animals": https://www.ted.com/talks/frans_de_waal_moral_behavior_in_animals?language=en | Live Zoom session | | |
| Vegetarianism & Veganism | Is eating animal products morally wrong? | Wed April 7 | At the Fork (documentary): https://mcgill.kanopy.com/video/fork Content warning: animal suffering | Finish <i>At the Fork</i> - No live session this week! | | |
| | | Mon April 12 | Tristram McPherson's "The Ethical Basis for Veganism" | Lecture Videos | | |
| | | Wed April 14 | | Live Zoom session | | |
| | | Thurs April 15 | | Live Zoom session | | |
| | | FRIDAY April 16 | | | | Final Paper |