



PHI 105:  
Contemporary Moral Problems  
with Dr. Sarah Vincent



Course Description

The advertised course description is as follows: “This course will explore contentious ethical issues. To set up our engagement with such issues, we will begin the course with an introduction to some basic terminology in ethics, as well as a brief overview of some major ethical theories (like virtue ethics, Kantianism, utilitarianism, and social contract theory). With that groundwork in place, most of the semester will involve delving into controversial issues like global poverty, immigration, hate speech, illicit drugs, euthanasia, abortion, sexual morality, and animal rights.”

To elaborate on the general description above, we will begin the course with an introduction to some basics about ethics and argumentation, followed by overviews of Virtue Ethics, Kantianism, Utilitarianism, and Social Contract Theory. To facilitate understanding and prevent this coursework from being overly abstract, we will apply these theories – as they are introduced – to an issue in the domain of sexual ethics. This semester, those introductory topics include pornography, sexual consent, having children, and same-sex marriage. The point here is to let you view a sample of each theory in action, rather than to carefully evaluate the merits of the particular positions on offer.

With this theoretical groundwork in place, we will then explore a wider variety of contemporary moral issues in greater depth. This semester, the applied topics on which we will focus include the following: ghosting, drugs, abortion, euthanasia, free speech, reparations, immigration, global poverty, animal ethics, and environmental ethics. For each of these topics, we will carefully read one philosopher’s perspective. Then, we’ll go on to evaluate the argument presented, highlighting strengths and weaknesses as well as constructing counter-arguments. There is no expectation that you will agree with each philosopher we will read; for what it’s worth, I don’t! Once we’ve done the work of discussing and evaluating the relevant assigned reading, you will have a chance to wrestle with some remaining questions about the relevant topic in routine group-work.