

Moral Dilemmas
PHIL 457F
Spring 2022
Meets T/Th 1:15 - 2:40 in FA 348

Professor Lisa Tessman

Pronouns: she/they.

ltessman@binghamton.edu

Office hours on Zoom: Mon 4:30-5:30 PM & Wed 9:00-10:00 AM or by appointment.

Zoom link for office hours: <https://binghamton.zoom.us/j/99619382395>

Course Description:

Have you ever had the experience of being morally obligated to do two different things, while realizing that it was impossible to do both? After you chose which obligation to fulfill and you acted on it, what happened to the obligation that went unfulfilled? Did you consider yourself to have morally failed in some way, even if you couldn't have avoided the situation? Should people be blamed for this kind of failure? Questions like these have led philosophers to ponder the concept of a *moral dilemma* as a situation of unavoidable moral wrongdoing. We'll think about lots of real examples of moral dilemmas and ask both theoretical and practical questions about them. In the second half of the course we will focus on "dirty hands" cases, particularly in the context of politics. We will also examine cases of "moral distress" experienced by health care workers. For the seminar paper, students will each identify (from reliable news sources) a situation that has arisen in relation to the pandemic and that at least appears to involve unavoidable moral failure; the paper will analyze the situation in light of the literature on moral dilemmas.

In addition to discussions, this course will include regular writing workshops. There is a strict prerequisite of two prior philosophy courses.

Course Objectives:

The course objectives are for students to:

- study philosophical work on the topic of moral dilemmas.
- develop their own original, critical thinking about each of the works studied, and identify and articulate their own positions on related questions.
- learn and practice philosophical skills, with an emphasis on writing.

This course satisfies the Humanities ("H") General Education Requirement.

Learning Outcomes: Students in H courses will demonstrate an understanding of human experience through the study of literature or philosophy.

This course satisfies the Composition ("C") General Education Requirement.

Learning Outcomes: Students in C courses will demonstrate

1. The ability to write effectively and coherently, in ways appropriate to the discipline and the level of the course.
2. The ability to revise and improve their writing in both form and content.

Course Requirements:

This course is a 4-credit course, which means that in addition to attending and participating in class meetings, students are expected to do at least 9.5 hours of course-

related work *outside of class* each week during the semester. This includes time spent completing assigned readings, taking notes and reflecting on the readings, and completing all writing assignments.

Texts:

There is one book to purchase (because it is not available electronically for free):
Avishai Margalit, *On Compromise and Rotten Compromises*, Princeton University Press, 2010.

All other readings are available as PDFs on Brightspace (in the weekly folders under “content”), online via a link, or as an ebook through the BU library.

Office hours offer an opportunity for students to meet individually with me via Zoom. Please make use of this time to ask questions or engage in further discussion of the course material. You don’t need a specific reason to come to office hours – feel free to come to chat!

Class participation:

Students are expected to attend class unless you are ill or quarantining, etc. You do not need medical documentation for missing class, but you do need to email me at least one hour before class time to let me know if you must miss class, and your email must tell me your reason for missing class; if you are able, it may be possible to participate in class via Zoom, but you must arrange this with me via email at least an hour before class time. If I give you permission to attend via Zoom, I will send you a link. Non-emergency travel or other similar situations are not acceptable reasons for missing class or requesting to attend class via Zoom. Four or more missed classes without an acceptable reason will result in failure of the class.

Do give serious attention to the *quality*—not just the quantity—of your participation in discussions. If you find it difficult to speak in class discussions, please talk to me about this *during the first week or two of the semester* and we will devise a plan for you to practice this kind of speaking and for me to grade your participation appropriately. Otherwise, expect both to be called on and to volunteer regularly to speak.

If I, or your classmates, are pronouncing your name wrong, using the wrong pronouns for you, etc., please correct us! Also please let me know if there is anything I can do to facilitate your learning or accommodate your particular learning style.

Writing workshops:

On most Thursdays we will spend class time doing writing exercises (on those weeks, all reading for the week should be completed before class on Tuesday). Please bring an electronic device to class on which you can do the writing exercises and access Brightspace (speak to me at the beginning of the semester if you don’t have a device that you can bring). The writing exercises will often be shared in class, either in pairs or small groups or as presentations to the whole class. I will be available for consultation and to give feedback during the workshops. Depending on the exercise, I may either grade the exercise without feedback, give feedback in writing, or discuss the exercise individually with students. In general, it will not be possible to complete the exercise unless you have done the reading carefully. No credit will be given for

work that is submitted late, unless I have given you an extension in advance; if you must miss class on a workshop day and have contacted me at least an hour before class time, we will work out an arrangement for you to complete the workshop. Students who need extra help on writing are encouraged to visit the [Critical Thinking Lab](#) regularly throughout the semester.

Grading of work completed during writing workshops:

- 0 = did not complete the assignment (on time), or showed little or no understanding of the reading, or very poorly written, etc.
- 1 = showed at least some understanding of the reading and at least moderate success at carrying out the writing task.
- 2 = showed excellent understanding of the reading and a high level of success at carrying out the writing task.

Total points on writing workshops

19 or 20	=	A
18	=	A-
16-17	=	B+
14-15	=	B
13	=	B-
11-12	=	C+
9-10	=	C
8	=	C-
6-7	=	D
5 or below	=	F

Seminar paper:

A 3,000 word (plus or minus 25 words) seminar paper is required. The paper will be due in stages, with revision required, as indicated on the syllabus. Students will receive verbal feedback (privately) on a preliminary draft before completing the final version; some students will also be required to visit the [Critical Thinking Lab](#) to improve the seminar paper. All students will do an oral presentation of the seminar paper at the end of the semester. More information about the seminar paper will be distributed part way through the semester. The seminar paper will be given a letter grade.

Grading:

- 50% Writing workshops
- 50% Final paper

The final grade may be raised or lowered by a plus or minus (e.g. from a B- to a B, from an A- to a B+, etc) depending on the quality of class participation.

Disability-related equal access accommodations:

I am happy to make accommodations (e.g. extended time) for any student with a documented need for it. Students needing accommodations to ensure their equitable access and participation in this course should register with Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) office as soon as they're aware of their need for such arrangements. Visit the SSD website or call 607-777-2686 for more detailed information. Students who are registered with SSD and who wish to make use of their accommodations should discuss with me the details of how the accommodations can best be implemented in this class.

Academic Honesty:

I follow the Philosophy Department guidelines on academic honesty (below). Students are responsible for being familiar with, and abiding by, the [Student Academic Honesty Code](#).

Philosophy Department Guidelines on Academic Honesty

The Philosophy Department considers plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty to be serious breaches of the code of ethics governing academic life. They are also violations of Harpur College and Binghamton University policies.

In order to contribute to a culture of Academic Honesty within both the Department and the University, the Philosophy Department has agreed on the following guidelines:

- 1) Instructors will include a statement describing their policy regarding Academic Honesty on all course syllabi.
- 2) When a student commits an act of academic dishonesty, the instructor will formally bring the violation to the attention of the Harpur College Academic Honesty Committee by either:
 - a. submitting an Admission of Dishonesty Form that has been signed by the student,
 - or*
 - b. initiating a hearing before the Harpur College Academic Honesty Committee.
- 3) When a student commits an act of academic dishonesty, the instructor for the course will not give the student credit for the assignment, whether or not the student re-submits honest work.
- 4) Instructors will decide what further grade consequences are appropriate in response to the dishonesty at their own discretion; the typical consequence is a grade of 'F' for the course.

Schedule

Week 1:

Tues, Jan. 25

No reading in advance. In-class discussion of: Kant's murderer, Sartre's student, Sophie's choice, the trolley problem.

Thur, Jan 27

Terrance McConnell, entry on "Moral Dilemmas" in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-dilemmas/>

Week 2:

Tues, Feb 1

Bernard Williams, "Ethical Consistency," chapter 11 in *Problems of the Self*, 1973. [Available as a PDF]

Thur, Feb 3

Writing workshop 1.

Week 3:

Tues, Feb 8

Martha Nussbaum, "The Costs of Tragedy: Some Moral Limits of Cost-Benefit Analysis." *Journal of Legal Studies* 29 (2): 1005-1036. [Available as a PDF].

Christopher Gowans, "Moral Theory, Moral Dilemmas, and Moral Responsibility," in H.E. Mason, Ed., *Moral Dilemmas and Moral Theory*, 1996: 199-215. [Available as a PDF].

Thur, Feb 10

Writing workshop 2.

Week 4:

Tues, Feb 15

Lisa Tessman, "Moral Dilemmas and Impossible Moral Requirements," chapter 1 in *Moral Failure: On the Impossible Demands of Morality*, 2015. [Available as an ebook through the BU library].

Thur, Feb 17

Writing workshop 3.

Week 5:

Tues, Feb 22

Philip Tetlock *et. al.*, "The Psychology of the Unthinkable: Taboo Trade-Offs, Forbidden Base Rates, and Heretical Counterfactuals" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 78 (5), 2000: 853-870. [Available as a PDF].

Lisa Tessman, "Moral Intuition and Moral Reasoning," chapter 2 in *Moral Failure*.

Thur, Feb 24

Writing workshop 4.

Week 6:

Tues, March 1

Lisa Tessman, "Risking Confidence," chapter 3 in *Moral Failure*.

Thur, March 3

Lisa Tessman, "Witnessing Moral Failure," chapter 4 in *Moral Failure*.

Week 7:

Tues, March 8

Lisa Tessman, "Idealizing Morality," chapter 5 in *Moral Failure*.

Thur, March 10

Writing workshop 5.

Week 8: Spring Break

Week 9:

Tues, March 22

Thomas Nagel, "War and Massacre." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1 (2), 1972: pp 123-144.
[Available as a PDF].

Michael Walzer, "The Problem of Dirty Hands." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 2 (2), 1973: pp 160-180. [Available as a PDF].

Thur, March 24

Writing workshop 6.

Week 10:**Tues, March 29**

Michael Stocker, "Dirty Hands and Ordinary Life" and "Moral Immorality," chapters 1 & 2 in *Plural and Conflicting Values*, 1990. [Available as an ebook through the BU library].

Thur, March 31

Due before class time: link(s) to news source(s) about the situation (case study) that you wish to analyze in the seminar paper.

Presentations of case studies for seminar papers.

Writing workshop 7.

Week 11:**Tues, April 5**

Stephen Campbell, Connie Ulrich, and Christine Grady, "A Broader Understanding of Moral Distress," *The American Journal of Bioethics* 16 (12), 2016: 2-9. [Available as a PDF].

Responses to Campbell *et al.*: [All available as PDFs].

Moti Gorin, "The Role of Responsibility in Moral Distress": 10-11.

Carolyn April and Michael April, "Understanding Moral Distress Through the Lens of Social Reflective Equilibrium": 25-27.

Haavi Morreim, "Moral Distress and Conflict of Interest": 27-29.

Stephen Latham, "Moral Distress and Cooperation with Wrongdoing": 31-32.

Daniel Tigard, "Moral Distress as a Symptom of Dirty Hands," *Res Publica* 25 (3), 2019: 353-371. [Available as a PDF].

Thur, April 7

Due before class time: 150-200 word abstract for the seminar paper.

Writing workshop 8.

Week 12:**Tues, April 12**

Avishai Margalit, *On Compromise and Rotten Compromises*, 2010. Introduction and chapters 1 & 2.

Thur, April 14

Due before class time: 1,000 word "practice" draft of seminar paper.

Writing workshop 9.

Week 13: (paper consultations by appointment)

Tues, April 19: no class (Monday classes meet)

Thur, April 21

Avishai Margalit, *On Compromise and Rotten Compromises*, chapters 3 & 4.

Week 14:

Tues, April 26

Avishai Margalit, *On Compromise and Rotten Compromises*, chapters 5, 6 & Conclusion.

Thur, April 28

Writing workshop 10.

Week 15:

Tues, May 3

Due before class time: 3,000 word seminar paper.

Paper presentations.

Thur, May 5

Paper presentations.

Week 16:

Tues, May 10

Paper presentations.