

Philosophical Dimensions of Personal Decisions: Personal Relationships
Phil 151, Spring 2021
Syllabus

Instructor: Laura Soter

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Class Meetings (all Zoom links on Canvas home page)

Tuesdays 4-6pm

Thursdays 4-5pm OR 5-6pm (check Canvas for section assignments)

Password (for all Zoom meetings): phil151

Office Hours: Wed 2-4pm or by appointment

Note: if enough people are in Ann Arbor and interested, I might consider adding an additional outdoor in-person office hour on the Diag. Let me know in the intro survey if you'd be interested in this!

Course Method: This course will be taught synchronously and will be heavily discussion-based. Students are expected to be available during the assigned class time and to come to class. If you miss class, it is your responsibility to go over the material you missed and check in with me or your peers about any questions or confusions. See Course Expectations and Remote Learning Policies section for more details.

Tuesdays will be full group meetings. They will be a combination of lecture, large, and small group discussions. Come prepared with any questions/confusions/thoughts on the readings!

Thursdays will be split into two 55-minute sections. I have assigned everyone to a section; you can find the breakdown on Canvas. These meetings will be heavily discussion-based, and will hopefully give you the chance to get to know a smaller group of your classmates a bit better.

Course Description

Some of our most difficult and important personal decisions involve other people, especially those with whom we share close personal relationships. Some of these decisions are the kinds of things people often agonize over – like whether we should end a friendship with someone who has starkly different moral beliefs. Others, people might take for granted – like whether it's possible to rationally decide whether to have children.

In this course, we will explore a variety of philosophical questions that arise in friendships, romantic partnerships, and family relationships. The topics we'll cover include: whether friendship requires us to be morally or epistemically partial; the moral dimensions of ending a friendship; whether deception undermines sexual consent; racial bias in (online) dating preferences; and whether there are good and bad (or rational and irrational) reasons to have children.

With each of these topics, we'll read and engage with both philosophical writing and “real-world” materials like magazine and newspaper articles, podcasts, and TV episodes. This balance reflects the nature of these issues: they are questions that are both challenging philosophical topics that engage professional academics, and also questions that are extremely relevant to our everyday lives, and thus that people from all walks of life care, think, and write about. The primary goal of this course is thus

to help students begin to see some of the intricacies of these questions, while also giving them the tools and space to think through them for themselves.

Course Objectives & Learning Goals

In this course, students will develop or improve the following skills:

- Engage in respectful and productive discussion of challenging personal and philosophical topics
- Identify and evaluate arguments and reasons
- Develop and explain their own arguments and reasons, verbally and in writing
- Read, understand, interpret, and summarize philosophical texts
- Critically reflect on the role of these questions and reasons in their own lives

A Note about ~The Times~

The past year has been incredibly difficult for all of us, in many different ways. For many people, online learning is far from ideal (to put it diplomatically). I am very aware that the challenges students have faced this year are hugely disproportionate to those of school years past (and that those challenges have not been evenly distributed across all students).

With that said, I hope that we can dive into this class with a goal of all doing our best to make the class as engaging and successful as it can be, and also with a commitment to supporting each other through what continues to be a turbulent and unpredictable time. I am fully committed to making this class the best experience it can be for you. If you are facing personal difficulties or situational challenges that affect your ability to be engaged with or complete this course, *please reach out to me*. If you have suggestions for how to improve online learning, let me know! My virtual door is always open, and I really do want to hear from you, whether it's to learn how to make this class better or to help find a way to support you through this term.

Course Expectations & Remote Learning Policies

This course will be taught synchronously. Students are expected to be available during the assigned course times. Because a) much of this course will often be discussion-based, and b) many of the topics we cover will be personal and/or heavy, I will generally not be recording classes (and nobody else is permitted to record either). In some cases, I may record the beginning lecture-y or information session-y parts of a class if I am giving out information I want everyone to be able to have; but this will be the exception. I will post any slides, handouts, or other documents we use to Canvas after class. Additionally, [course notes](#) (see the Participation section) may be a valuable resource for reviewing what was discussed in class.

Please see the [Discussion Norms](#) document (linked in Canvas) for general guidelines around interactions in this class.

Zoom norms:

- Please display your preferred name and pronouns on Zoom. Try to use names when in conversation with your classmates.

- Please keep your cameras on, if you're able to. There are legitimate reasons for turning them off at times, and I am not going to micromanage individuals about this. But...
 - I'll be honest: it's really depressing to teach to a grid of black squares. And it makes both my teaching, and the discussion among classmates, significantly worse. Especially because this class will be very discussion-based and cover a lot of personal topics, I am confident that the experience will be *much* better when we are able to see each other's faces. So, in the spirit of us all doing our best to make this class a good experience...
 - There will be a strong—but overridable—request for you to keep your cameras on. You are welcome to use any kind of (reasonably school-appropriate) virtual background you would like, and I am always happy to see pets join in class (my dog will undoubtedly make some appearances). I only ask that you are clothed (and masked if in public indoors).
- Keep the chat focused and relevant. You're welcome to post questions and comments there (and respond to each other!) but please avoid side conversations and other things that might distract your instructor and classmates.
- Try to minimize distractions to help you stay focused during class: close other tabs, hide your phone in another room, etc. (Seriously, I do this whenever I really need to focus, it's very helpful.)
- Arrive on time! The Zoom tardiness creep is real. Resist it!

Assignments

For full assignment details/descriptions, see the Canvas page.

Participation – 10%

This is a heavily discussion-based course. In part, this is because a key goal of this course is for you all to get the chance to think and talk through questions that are likely to be present in your own lives; this is not a class where I will be delivering answers to you. This is also because the skills and methods of philosophy are best understood as things we *do*: engaging with ideas, people, and texts critically and curiously.

Thus, “participation” will be a non-trivial part of your grade, and will not be merely based on regular class attendance. Instead, participation will be understood as what you do to **actively contribute to the classroom community**; in other words, how you **engage with your classmates and contribute to their experience with this course**. There are a number of ways to do this, explained in more detail in the participation document linked on Canvas. Briefly, they include: contributing to large and small group discussion, class note-taking, breakout room note-taking, and coming to office hours.

Participation will be graded by two structured self-assessments. I'll ask you to reflect on your engagement in the course—in terms of the participation modes listed above—and assign yourself a score using a rubric. **I will get the final say on these grades**, but the intention is to a) give you a bit more autonomy with respect to an often opaque part of your grade, and b) encourage you to reflect thoughtfully about what good participation requires beyond attendance box-checking.

Assessments Due: May 30, June 20, at midnight

Weeklies – 10%

When you spend all your time staring at a screen, everything can begin to blend together. These weeklies are a chance for you to practice thinking back about what we did during the week and getting out some of your thoughts on the topic. These are low-stakes reflections in which you'll write a short summary about what we covered that week, and then engage with the ideas in some way: write down your own thoughts on the question, reflect on something that challenged or surprised you, respond to something a classmate said, etc. I may also include specific (but optional) prompts to respond to some weeks, if you're having trouble figuring out what to write about.

These are graded for credit/no credit. If you have both components—a summary, and some kind of sincere engagement—you'll get credit. If you have just one part, you'll get half credit. Weeklies will start in **week 2**; you may miss one week without losing any points (or, if you get partial credit one week, you may submit all five and your lowest score will be dropped). There will be no weekly due Week 6, so that you can focus on the writing assignment. (In other words: you'll need to complete **four** throughout the semester through weeks 2 and 4-7).

Due: Sunday at midnight, each week (except week 6)

Guided Reading Quizzes – 15%

Reading philosophy papers can be challenging. These quizzes will serve two purposes: a) to make sure you're doing the readings, and b) to guide you towards some of the key ideas of the papers. They will involve a combination of multiple choice and short answer questions, and are intended to be done in consultation with the readings (i.e., they'll help guide you through them and make sure you focus on some of the key points).

There will be **five quizzes** throughout the term; one each week starting Week 2 (but excluding Week 4, since you also have a writing assignment due that day). Your lowest score will be dropped.

Due: Tuesday at noon, each week. (i.e, 4 hours before class) (except week 4)

Miscellaneous – 5%

a) Canvas Introduction Post – credit/no credit

b) Introduction Survey – credit/no credit

Note – your final writing assignment will refer back to your answers on this introduction survey. So it's very important that you complete it!

[[Additional small tasks may be added here throughout the term if necessary.]]

Writing Skills Assignments – 35% (17.5% each)

There will be two writing skills assignments of ~500 words (~2 pages). Specific instructions and prompts will be released closer to the dates. Both will work on important philosophical skills, such as explaining and applying an author's position, responding to a view, and generating an objection.

Due: Tues May 25, Sun June 13, at midnight

Final Reflection Paper – 25%

A final paper (roughly 3-3.5 pages) will ask you to reflect on and explain your own views on one of the topics covered in this course. More details and the prompt will be provided later in the term.

Due: June 25, 6pm. (This is the end of the last final exam period.)

Grading

A+: [99-100]	B+: [87, 90)	C+: [77, 80)	D+: [67, 70)	F: [0, 60)
A: [94, 99)	B: [83, 87)	C: [73, 77)	D: [63, 67)	
A-: [90, 94)	B-: [80, 83)	C-: [70, 77)	D-: [60, 63)	

Late Policy

Late assignments will typically be docked one third of a grade per day (e.g., B+ becomes a B), unless otherwise stated.

Quizzes cannot be turned in late, because answers will be released and because we will discuss the material in class. Your lowest quiz grade will be dropped.

Weeklies turned in late will be accepted for half credit, as long as they are turned in *before class on Tuesday*. Weeklies submitted later than that will not be accepted.

Written Assignments (papers, participation assessments, and final reflections) will be docked one third of a grade per day late (e.g., B+ becomes a B). Written assignments submitted more than four days late will not be accepted, due to grading turnaround constraints. The final paper, however, must be in by the deadline.

Intro materials (survey and Canvas post) will be given half credit if they are late. If these are submitted more than a week late they will not be accepted. (If you join the class late, you have up to 1 week from the date of your joining to get these in for full credit.)

Extensions

If you need an extension, you must request it **at least 24 hours before** the official deadline. The extension has not been granted until I confirm it. I know that this has been a difficult year, and I am generally willing to grant extensions, as long as you request it in advance.

Writing Draft Policy

I will not read writing drafts that are emailed to me. In an ideal world, I would love to be able to do this and give feedback, but there are simply too many of you and not enough time to do this in an equitable way in this course. I am very happy to talk about writing assignments, including working through particular writing passages you're having trouble with, in office hour meetings. If you need help with more "low-level" writing skills and editing, I recommend looking into the resources at Sweetland, or finding a buddy in the class to trade papers with.

Plagiarism

Please review the Academic Integrity Policy (<https://lsa.umich.edu/lsa/academics/academic-integrity.html>). Any time you submit work, make sure it is your own and that you give appropriate credit to works and individuals you consult. A good rule of thumb: there is no such thing as over-citing, and under-citing is plagiarism. If you are every unsure about matters regarding academic integrity, don't hesitate to ask me.

Accommodations

If you need any accommodations—either due to disability, pandemic circumstances, or the online instruction of the course—please let me know **within the first 10 days** of the course and provide any relevant documentation. Please note that it is the student's responsibility to make sure I have any necessary documentation of accommodations requests with sufficient time to make the necessary arrangements.

Request for accommodations by persons with disabilities may be made by contacting the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) Office located at G664 Haven Hall. The SSD phone number is 734-763-3000, and their website is <https://ssd.umich.edu/>. Once your eligibility for an accommodation has been determined you will be issued a verified individual services accommodation (VISA) form.

Communication & Email

You can call me “Laura.”¹

I will do my best to respond to all emails within 24 hours, though please wait at least 48 hours to send me a follow-up.

Please include “PHIL 151” somewhere in your subject line; this helps me make sure I don't accidentally miss an email.

Reading Schedule

Each week, we'll focus on a new topic. The reading for Tuesdays will generally be a philosophy paper. Because reading philosophy may be unfamiliar for many of you, I've included links to a “how to read philosophy” guide, and the guided reading quizzes will help you identify some of the important ideas in these papers. The readings for Thursdays will generally be more “popular” sources: magazine and newspaper articles, podcasts, and TV episodes. These should be easier reads that give us real-world perspectives and case studies to talk about in discussion sections.

All readings can be found uploaded on Canvas or linked here. Each reading is expected to be done *before* class on the day it is listed (so e.g., you should read Mull and Cohen before class on Thurs 5/6).

¹ Many years of Catholic school made me feel very uncomfortable calling my college instructors by their first name without explicit permission to do so. You all have my explicit permission to do so!

- Tues 5/4 *Intro, Background, & the Concept of Friendship*
- No reading
- Thurs 5/6 *Kinds of Friendship*
- Amanda Mull: “The Pandemic Has Erased Entire Categories of Friendship”
 - <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2021/01/pandemic-goodbye-casual-friends/617839/>
 - Rhaina Cohen: “What If Friendship, Not Marriage, Was at the Center of Life?” (CW: mention of suicide)
 - <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2020/10/people-who-prioritize-friendship-over-romance/616779/>
- Tues 5/11: *Moral Partiality: Should we favor our friends morally?*
- How to Read Philosophy Papers: *[read this first!]*
 - <https://sites.google.com/a/wellesley.edu/pinkguidetophilosophy/how-to-read>
 - Simon Keller: “Special Relationships and Special Reasons” (Ch. 1 of *Partiality*), pp. 1-21
- Thurs 5/13: *Epistemic Partiality: Does friendship demand irrationality?*
- Simon Keller: “Friendship and Belief” sects. I, II, III, and VI (pp. 329-334; 338-340)
- Tues 5/18: *Ending Friendships over Beliefs*
- Barrett Emerick: “Love and Resistance”
- Thurs 5/20: *Ending Friendships Cont.*
- Tovia Smith: “‘Dude, I’m Done.’ When Politics Tears Families and Friendships Apart”
 - <https://www.npr.org/2020/10/27/928209548/dude-i-m-done-when-politics-tears-families-and-friendships-apart>
 - Hamby, Martin, & Mullis: “‘Full of Hatred and Fear’: Disinformation on YouTube Divided a Dad and Daughter”
 - <https://www.npr.org/2021/04/25/988860971/full-of-hatred-and-fear-disinformation-on-youtube-divided-a-dad-and-daughter>
- Tues 5/25: *Consent & Deception*
- Tom Dougherty: “Sex, Lies, and Consent”, pp. 717-736 (CW: discussion of sexual assault/rape)
- Thurs 5/27: *Consent & Deception, Cont.*
- *I May Destroy You* Episode 8: “Line Spectrum Border” (CW: talk of sexual assault/rape; slurs)
 - *A note: This episode is not directly focused on rape and does not explicitly depict sexual violence; however, that is the topic of the show and it is referenced in the episode. If watching this episode will be too difficult for you, it’s okay to skip it.*

- Available on HBO with a subscription or \$2.99 on Amazon Video. If anyone finds ~other ways~ to get access to this you are encouraged to share that with the class.

Tues 6/1: *Racialized Preferences in Dating*

- Robin Zheng: “Why Yellow Fever Isn’t Flattering”

Thurs 6/3: *Racial Bias in Online Dating*

- *Invisibilia* podcast: “A Very Offensive Rom Com”
 - <https://www.npr.org/programs/invisibilia/710046991/a-very-offensive-rom-com> (CW: lots of racial tropes (being discussed as such, not being directly used))
- Thomas McMullen: “Are the Algorithms that Power Dating Apps Racially Biased?”
 - <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/racial-bias-dating-apps>
- [optional]: *StartUp Podcast*: “Profiled”
 - <https://gimletmedia.com/shows/startup/2oh9vb>

Tues 6/8: *Procreative Motives*

- Rivka Weinberg: *The Risk of a Lifetime* Chapter 1 [skip section IV]

Thurs 6/10: *Case Studies: Savior Siblings and Anti-Natalism*

- Josephine Marcotty: “Savior Sibling’ Raises a Decade of Life-and-Death Questions”
 - <https://www.startribune.com/savior-sibling-raises-a-decade-of-life-and-death-questions/103584799/?refresh=true>
- Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow: “I Wish I’d Never Been Born: The Rise of the Anti-Natalists”
 - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/14/anti-natalists-childfree-population-climate-change>

Tues 6/15: *Can We Rationally Decide to Have Children?*

- L.A. Paul: “What You Can’t Expect When You’re Expecting”

Thurs 6/17: *Hope, Aspiration, & Wrapping Up*

- Joshua Rothman: “The Art of Decision-Making”
 - <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/01/21/the-art-of-decision-making>
- Tom Whyman: “Why, Despite Everything, You Should Have Kids (if You Want Them)”
 - https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/13/opinion/baby-bust-covid-philosophy-natalism.html?fbclid=IwAR22fKbHi8INP2r3E1_aNMEk2N2YCDXDO0I_c1P9xqk0UA2eRLcZNIbV_ZA

Tips and Resources

- **Reading Philosophy:** The readings for this course may be different from what you're used to in other non-philosophy courses. Reading philosophy is challenging! If you're lost on how to read philosophy, here's a helpful guide to start (<https://sites.google.com/a/wellesley.edu/pinkguidetophilosophy/how-to-read>). Some general tips: read slowly and carefully, and write down comments and questions as you go. Expect to read things (sentences, paragraphs, whole papers) more than once before you understand them.
 - Also: because reading philosophy is challenging, expect it to take you longer than reading a normal paper right. 20 pages of philosophy is actually quite a lot to bite off. So: **don't wait until the last minute** to start your readings!
- **Writing Help:** If you are having difficulty with written assignments, consider visiting the Sweetland Writing Center (<https://lsa.umich.edu/sweetland>). They also offer resources for students for whom English is not a first language, if you have concerns about that.
- **Office Hours:** Come to my office hours, even if you don't have a specific question! I love talking to students.
- **Stupid Questions:** There is no such thing as a stupid question in this class! Philosophy is hard. If you're confused, someone else is too! Asking for clarification, expressing confusion, etc. is a fantastic way to participate.
- **Student Resources:** See this helpful list of student resources (<https://www.maeganfairchild.com/um-student-resources.html>) compiled by UM Professor Maegan Fairchild. This includes information about various mental health and academic support resources available to you through the University.
- **Mindset:** Come into this class with an open, growth mindset. Be willing to be wrong, and to change your mind. Be ready to disagree with your peers (respectfully) and have your peers (respectfully) disagree with you. Expect to be confused sometimes. Look forward to learning from your mistakes. The thing about philosophy: there's often not a clear right answer to the questions we're discussing—that's exactly what makes the discipline fun, interesting, and also challenging. Get comfortable with this uncertainty!

Coursework Checklist

Week 1: May 3-9

- Read Mull (Thurs, class time)
- Read Cohen (Thurs, class time)
- Intro Survey (Sun 11:59pm)
- Intro Canvas Post (Sun 11:59pm)

Week 2: May 10-16

- Read “How to Read Philosophy Papers” (Tues, class time)
- Read Keller *Partiality* Ch. 1 “Special Relationships and Special Reasons” pp.1-21 (Tues, class time)
- Reading Quiz 1 (Tues, noon)
- Read Keller “Friendship and Belief” sect. I-III; VI (Thurs, class time)
- Weekly 1 (Sun, 11:59pm)

Week 3: May 17-23

- Read Emerick (Tues, class time)
- Reading Quiz 2 (Tues, noon)
- Read Smith (Thurs, class time)
- Read Hamby et al. (Thurs, class time)
- Weekly 2 (Sun, 11:59pm)

Week 4: May 24-30

- Read Dougherty; pp. 717-736 (Tues, class time)
 - Writing Assignment #1 (Tues, 11:59pm)
 - Watch *I May Destroy You* (Thurs, class time)
 - Participation Reflection #1 (Sun, 11:59pm)
 - Weekly 3 (Sun, 11:59pm)
- No reading quiz this week b/c of WA1 [though note this does NOT mean you don't have to read Dougherty – you do!]*

Week 5: May 31-June 6

- Read Zheng (Tues, class time)
- Reading Quiz 3 (Tues, noon)
- Read McMullen (Thurs, class time)
- Listen to *Invisibilia* “A Very Offensive Rom Com” (Thurs, class time)
- [optional] Listen to *StartUp* “Profiled” (Thurs)
- Weekly 4 (Sun, 11:59pm)

Week 6: June 7-13

- Read Weinberg [skip section IV] (Tues, class time)
 - Reading Quiz 4 (Tues, noon)
 - Read Marcotty (Thurs, class time)
 - Read Tuhus-Dubrow (Thurs, class time)
 - Writing Assignment #2 (Sun, 11:59pm)
- No weekly this week b/c of WA2*

Week 7: June 14-20

- Read Paul (Tues, class time)
- Reading Quiz 5 (Tues, noon)
- Read Rothman (Thurs, class time)
- Read Whyman (Thurs, class time)
- Weekly 5 (Sun, 11:59pm)
- Participation Reflection #2 (Sun, 11:59pm)

Finals Week: June 21-26

- Final Reflection Paper (Thurs 6/25, 6pm)