

KILLING THINGS

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Course Description

Imagine the following: you are walking in a field when suddenly, and out of nowhere, a trolley appears. The trolley slowly drifts serenely through the meadow, disturbing the birds as they sleep, sending up small flocks of butterflies, and then makes a b-line straight towards you. At the wheel is a Villainous Aggressor who intends to run you over for no good reason at all. In your pocket is a handy-dandy Vaporizer 3000. Question: Are you allowed to vaporize the trolley in self-defense?

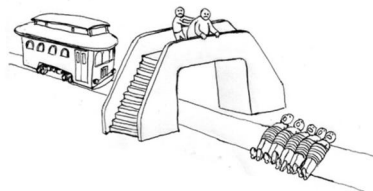
From the mosquito that was going to bite you, the chicken nuggets you ate at McDonalds, or the evil trolley driver chasing you through a corn field, one thing is consistent: a question of life and death. In general, most people think it is morally permissible to kill some things at least some of the time. However, very rarely do we ask *why* or *if* it is permissible. This course asks those difficult questions and investigates topics that, arguably, most of us would rather not talk about or like to stay ignorant about. In doing so, students can expect to be presented with materials that will, plausibly, challenge views you didn't know you have and present you with tools to philosophically defend and motivate the views you find most plausible. We may never be chased by trolleys and have to decide to vaporize a trolley or not, but we all make other choices that involve killing things.

Some Questions We May Discuss

While we won't be killing things in class (aside from a few chalkboard blue whales, in helmets, filled with water, on trolley tracks) we will be taking up questions about the killing of various things such as:

- Is death is actually bad? If yes, then why?
- If and whom you can kill in self-defense?
- Are abortions permissible always, sometimes, or never?
- Is euthanasia/physician assisted suicide permissible?
- Whom can we kill in war? Are all killings in war just?
- Is permissible to kill animals to eat them?
- Is it permissible to kill animals for medical testing?
- It is okay to kill some non-human animals to feed other non-human animals?

While we will start with the first question, we will decide, together, what other questions to investigate during the first week of class.



Opportunities for Engagement

Given that folks learn, and excel, in learning, improving, and applying the concepts we discuss in various ways, there will be a number of opportunities for you to choose the path you take through the course. Some things I will make common among all the different tracks, but otherwise you get to pick what you do to work towards the goal you have for this class and semester.

Opportunities:

Common (50%):

- **Intake Form**— This is a space for you to reflect on your current positions.
- **Goal Statement**—Eventually you'll tell me what you want to do/what your goals are.
- **Reflection/Self-evaluation**—This is a space to reflect on if/how your views have changed and a time for us, together, to reflect on how you have improved in the class in the process of working towards your goals.
- **Exam 1 (0%)**—Take home exam. Does not count towards final grade but will give you valuable feedback and help you work on time management and writing philosophy in a clear and concise manner.
- **Final Exam (40%)**—Can be written in class, an oral exam, or a combination of the two.
- **Rhetorical Précis (10%)** (see details below)
- **[Attendance (- value)]**—(see policy below)

Individualized (50%):

- **Exam 2 (20%)**— Exam with variable format
- **Research Paper (40%)**— (10% draft, 5% peer review, 25% final) (15-20 pages)
- **Developmental Essays (15% and 20%)**—For those who want to focus on writing more concise essays you will be asked to do two. The first is expository and you more or less have to identify the central argument of a paper, show how the author motivates the argument, identify and formulate an objection, and make a response on behalf of the author. The second is the opportunity for you to do all of these things but for an argument that you create about a topic we discuss.
- **Group Presentation (20%)**— Groups of 2-3 students will facilitate a conversation for a portion of the class on the topic of their choice.
- **Participation (variable, not more than 20%)**— Can include in-class participation, emails, office hours, attendance, and participation pages. The higher the percentage the higher the expectations.
- **Community Outreach (15%)**— Involved in a student group and want to put on an event that incorporates elements of what we're discussing? Want to help design and run a philosophy department sponsored conversation for the public around our university? You can do that with this option.
- **Creative (variable)**—If you have an idea that I haven't listed, let me know and we can see if it can work towards your end goal.

Evaluation

While this may seem as if it is covered in the section above, I see evaluation and the above opportunities as not necessarily one in the same. In addition to the traditional “grade based” model that I am required to do for the university, I also take into account *improvement* over the span of the semester with respect to a myriad of elements including: writing, explaining concepts, philosophical tools, etc. How and if you have improved is taken into consideration for your overall “grade” in addition to a self-evaluation that we will discuss towards the end of the semester.

Attendance

Attendance is **required** for the first two weeks of the semester. You absolutely *cannot* miss class during this time period without a good reason. The first few weeks are crucial for creating and connecting with the intellectual community in our classroom hence this expectation. After the first two weeks we will revisit the attendance policy collectively to see what would work best for the first half of the semester. If we keep it, then folks will be permitted a certain number of absences and after exceeding the allotted number will be penalized with respect to their final grade (or something). If we keep it we will also revisit it again around halfway through the semester.

Accessibility/Accommodations

If there is anything I can do to make this class, and its content, more accessible let me know. I understand the hoops folks must go through to get things formally documented, so when possible I will not require formal documentation as a prerequisite for a request. For class presentations I will make all slides available online, videos will have captions, etc. It is expected that student presentations also are accessible to a variety of learners as well.

If you have a pronoun that I ought to be using, a name that I should be using, or another identity that I should be knowledgeable about let me know insofar as you are comfortable doing so.

Accommodations for students with disabilities: More formally, if you anticipate needing accommodations for documented disabilities and/or for health-related reasons, please let me know as soon as possible. This is exceedingly important if there are special arrangements that need to be made in the instance of a building evacuation, for example. You may also request assistance from Services for Students with Disabilities: <http://www.ssd.vt.edu/>

Religious Accessibility

If your faith practice has a holiday, holy day, or requires an accessibility move on my end please let me know as soon as possible. The sooner I know about possible conflicts the easier it will be to make the necessary arrangements and ensure that the course will not conflict with your other obligations insofar as it is possible.

The Classroom Environment

Creation and General Thoughts

- This is our classroom and we will make it together. We will navigate elements of tension, disagreement, expectations, and even failure in the process of making this space.
- There are some things that I will propose as starting points for guidelines, we will create guidelines and expectations together during the first few weeks and revisit them as needed.
- I am here as a facilitator. It is expected that students be accountable to one another and do right by one another. This includes honoring pronouns, names, and identities in this space.
- While I will step in to moderate conversations when needed, whenever possible I will allow students to converse with one another about the expectations they have for being respectful, conveying knowledge, and actively participating in the creation of our learning community.

By the end of the semester this class should, in theory, be able to run without me being in the room (though I will always be in the room since that's what I'm paid to do and I learn from you all just as you learn from me).

On the note of respect, in the discipline of philosophy it is not uncommon to find critiques and arguments that fail to be charitable. By this, I mean that we are often given incentives to assume that an argument is wrong, formulate a weak version of the argument, watch it fall, and celebrate. In this course we will be practicing a much-needed skills in interpreting charitably on behalf of our interlocutors—the authors we read and our colleagues in the classroom—and sometimes trying to defend an author's view even if, or when, we think that it is problematic. We will all be working on practicing charity in the classroom. A good default to have is to always **seek first to understand** the view at hand and **then to be understood** with respect to your own view and concerns about the view.

Dynamic Tension

Given the topics of this course it is very likely that tensions will arise during the semester. Some of the topics we are discussing will be personal for at least some of the people in our classroom and I do not request/require/recommend that people leave their experiences and past histories at the door. As such, there is a high likelihood that we may all negatively impact one of our colleagues, even if unintentionally, in the process of figuring out our own views and reasons for believing what we believe. This class will be a space where such tensions arise, but I want them to be dynamic. By this, I mean we ought to be able to process through the tensions, own the impacts, recognize the intents, and trust (eventually) that the dialogue will take us all into deeper levels of understanding about the topic at hand and more importantly about ourselves as interlocutors. The topics are not comfortable ones, but I ask that folks in this space notice a distinction between being uncomfortable and being unsafe. If at any point you feel unsafe let me know. If you feel uncomfortable, lean into that discomfort and know that you have the support of your colleagues, and me, in the process of working through that discomfort.

Inclusivity

If you are a woman, if you are a person of color, if you wear a hijab, if you are gay, queer, trans, family. If you are a regionally displaced person, an undocumented person, a person with a disability, a person from abroad, of a faith in the abrahamic tradition, a buddhist, a hindu, a native person, if you are any of these things and those we have not named—this is your home. We are your neighbors, and we welcome you.

Within the classroom I want to be both accessible and to intentionally foster an environment of inclusivity, acceptance, and *nurturance* for a myriad of viewpoints, identities, and experiences. While many classrooms settle for tolerance, in my experience simple tolerance often leads to historically marginalized identities continuing to be subordinated and silenced. That's not a good thing and I am open to any and all recommendations concerning inclusivity in this classroom and here at the university in general.

Outside of the classroom, I am [SafeZone](#) certified and certified with the [UndocuAlly](#) program through [Tech DREAMers](#) (a student group for undocumented students here at the university). I am committed to advocating and working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and undocumented communities and their allies in creating an inclusive and nurturing environment in the university writ large.

Structure

This is not a lecture course and, as such, do not expect to sit through death-by-powerpoint or a 50 minute lecture on what the authors said. This is a course for conversation and processing through the questions we are interested in and to learn from one another without necessarily coming to a consensus about the “right” answer.

A normal class day will include some of the following:

- Time for me as a facilitator to clarify points from the readings;
- Space for folks in the class to flag things that connect to other areas/topics;
- Small group activities/conversations;
- A peer led discussion some of the time;
- Discussion of how what we're reading relates to real world problems;
- A participation page

Participation Pages

A participation page is a space for you to share questions you still have, things that you are thinking about, objections you didn't get a chance to share during class, feedback about what is working/can be improved etc. They are very open-ended and is intended to give you a space to participate that is more amendable for some kinds of learners.

Regardless of your path, students should complete a participation page for every session they attend during the semester. I also use these to adjust components of the course as needed.

Tangible Takeaways From The Course

- A network of colleagues with whom you can continue these conversations;
- Recognition of the views you hold, and don't hold, and critical reflection on why you hold those positions;
- The ability to be honest with yourself and others about the views you hold;
- A willingness to be gentle with yourself and others in questioning views and opinions;
- The ability to charitably, clearly, and concisely explain arguments;
- Better express your arguments in clearer prose;
- Read more efficiently and more productively;
- Verbally communicate difficult concepts in a professional, and understandable, manner;
- Transferable skills including time management, critical reading skills, charity, communication, working with diverse groups of individuals, etc.
- The unknowns--There are always things that will be takeaways that we don't realize are important until after the class is over. Be open to the possibility of learning and improving on skills that I haven't named here.



Whale on a trolley track

Instructions for Writing a Rhetorical Précis

A Rhetorical Précis is a summary of a work that has a very concise, though not always short, format. The intentionality behind writing a précis is to practice critical reading skills which will serve you well both in future philosophy classes and in your other courses. Although they may be difficult at the beginning of the semester, over time they will become easier.

The format of the précis is intended to summarize the **thesis, argument, purpose,** and **audience** of a work. For the purposes of this class, writing précis for our readings will allow you to come to class prepared to discuss the articles/papers/selections. Additionally, these will give you a space to formulate “first drafts” of objections, questions, and thoughts and come up in the process of trying to concisely convey the four notions bolded above.

The Rhetorical Précis Format

- 1) In a single coherent sentence give the following:
 - name of the author, title of the work, date in parenthesis;
 - a rhetorically accurate verb (such as "assert," "argue," "deny," "prove," "disprove," "insist," etc.);
 - a that clause containing the major claim (thesis statement) of the work.
- 2) In a single coherent sentence give an explanation of how the author develops and supports the major claim (thesis statement).
- 3) In a single coherent sentence give a statement of the author's purpose, followed by an "in order" phrase.
- 4) In a single coherent sentence give a description of the intended audience and/or the relationship the author establishes with the audience.

[Adapted from: [Oregon State InterQuest Philosophy Course Précis Format](#)]

Example:

Charles S. Peirce's article, "The Fixation of Belief" (1877), asserts that humans have psychological and social mechanisms designed to protect and cement (or "fix") our beliefs. Peirce backs this claim up with descriptions of four methods of fixing belief, pointing out the effectiveness and potential weaknesses of each method. Peirce's purpose is to point out the ways that people commonly establish their belief systems in order to jolt the awareness of the reader into considering how their own belief system may be the product of such methods and to consider what Peirce calls "the method of science" as a progressive alternative to the other three. Given the technical language used in the article, Peirce is writing to an well-educated audience with some knowledge of philosophy and history and a willingness to other ways of thinking.

[Adapted from: [Oregon State InterQuest Rhetorical Précis Sample](#)]

Additional Administrivia

We will honor the [VT Principles of Community](#) within our course

- We affirm the inherent dignity and value of every person and strive to maintain a climate for work and learning based on mutual respect and understanding.
- We affirm the right of each person to express thoughts and opinions freely. We encourage open expression within a climate of civility, sensitivity, and mutual respect.
- We affirm the value of human diversity because it enriches our lives and the University. We acknowledge and respect our differences while affirming our common humanity.
- We reject all forms of prejudice and discrimination, including those based on age, color, disability, gender, gender identity, gender expression, national origin, political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation, and veteran status. We take individual and collective responsibility for helping to eliminate bias and discrimination and for increasing our own understanding of these issues through education, training, and interaction with others.
- We pledge our collective commitment to these principles in the spirit of the Virginia Tech motto of Ut Prosim (That I May Serve).

Academic Integrity

The Undergraduate Honor Code pledge that each member of the university community agrees to abide by states:

“As a Hokie, I will conduct myself with honor and integrity at all times. I will not lie, cheat, or steal, nor will I accept the actions of those who do.”

Students enrolled in this course are responsible for abiding by the Honor Code. A student who has doubts about how the Honor Code applies to any assignment is responsible for obtaining specific guidance from me before submitting the assignment for evaluation. Ignorance of the rules does not exclude any member of the University community from the requirements and expectations of the Honor Code.

If you have questions or are unclear about what constitutes academic misconduct on an assignment, please speak with me. I take the Honor Code very seriously in this course. The normal sanction I will recommend for a violation of the Honor Code is a 0 on the assignment with the possibility of an F* sanction as your final course grade. The F represents failure in the course. The “*” is intended to identify a student who has failed to uphold the values of academic integrity at Virginia Tech. A student who receives a sanction of F* as their final course grade shall have it documented on their transcript with the notation “FAILURE DUE TO ACADEMIC HONOR CODE VIOLATION.” You would be required to complete an education program administered by the Honor System in order to have the “*” and notation “FAILURE DUE TO ACADEMIC HONOR CODE VIOLATION” removed from your transcript. The “F” however would be permanently on your transcript.

For additional information about the Honor Code, please visit:

<https://www.honorsystem.vt.edu/>