

PH 150: Intro to Ethics

Fall 2019 - M/W/F - 10:10-11 – CAS 224

Professor

Victor Kumar - victor.c.kumar@gmail.com

Office hours: Mon 11:00-12:00pm or by appointment (STH 536a)

Course website: www.victorkumar.org/ethics

Teaching Fellows

Merve Tapinc (Mon/Tues sections) - mtapinc@bu.edu

Office Hours: Tues 3:00-5:00pm (STH 502)

Eric Scarffe (Wed/Thurs sections) - escarffe@bu.edu

Office Hours: Wed 8:00-10:00am (STH 502)

Course Description

This course is about emerging ethical problems in the 21st century. The first half covers **technology and globalization**. We'll try to answer ethical questions about social media, biomedical enhancement, life extension, global poverty, and animal suffering. The second half of the course covers **sexism and tribalism**. We'll turn to ethical questions about oppression, identity, emotional labor, backlash, political tribalism, and the uncertain fate of democracy. Some of these issues have legal dimensions. Our focus will be primarily on their ethical dimensions. In general, we'll explore whether various social practices are morally right or wrong—and why. Because this is a philosophy course, we'll approach these issues through careful reasoning, argumentation, and open-minded debate.

Course Readings

Online articles and PDFs (no textbook)

Assessment

- **Shorties (40%):** You will be asked to write **10 short responses to the material max 300 words**. Submit on blackboard by Friday 8:00pm on selected weeks (see schedule below). Late shorties will not be accepted.
- **Essays (40%):** You will be asked to write **2 short essays max 750 words**. Due in October and December. Late essays will lose 1 point out of 20 per day.
- **Participation (20%):** You will be asked to contribute to **thoughtful collective dialogue** in class and sections.

Class Format

- The format of the class will be a mix of **lecture and discussion**. The aim of discussion is to analyze an author's ideas, evaluate his/her arguments, and explore implications.
- I expect you to read (or view) all assigned material before class and sections. To do well in this course you **must come to meetings prepared to critically discuss the material**. Active discussion is vital not just for understanding the material itself but also for learning how to do the sort of critical analysis that is essential to argumentative philosophical writing.
- The **schedule of readings** is on the [course website](#). Some **PDFs** will be sent by email. You'll use **blackboard** only to submit assignments and view grades.

Grading

- Assignments will receive numerical scores out of 4 (shorties) or 20 (essays).
- Calculation of letter grades follows a standard BU scale: A (>93), A- (90-92.99), B+ (87-89.99), B (83-86.99), B- (80-82.99), C+ (77-79.99), C (73-76.99), C- (70-72.99), D (60-69.99), F (<60).

Expected Classroom Behavior

- Please be respectful. In discussion you may disagree with your classmates, your teaching fellow, or me. But it is very important to express your disagreements with civility.
- Do not talk, sleep, text, or use any electronic equipment. You are not permitted to use a laptop, tablet, phone, etc. during class or sections (unless you have a disability accommodation). They are useful for taking notes but too much of a distraction in a discussion-oriented course.

Accessibility

Students with diverse learning styles are welcome in this course. If you have a health consideration that requires accommodations, please approach me and/or Disability Services.

Academic integrity

BU has a zero-tolerance policy regarding plagiarism. Plagiarism on any part of any assignment will result in automatic failure. I may use software to analyze your assignments for evidence of plagiarism. Knowing what counts as plagiarism is your responsibility. Your rights and responsibilities as a member of BU's academic community can be found here:

<http://www.bu.edu/academics/policies/academic-conduct-code/>

UNIT I: TECHNOLOGY AND GLOBALIZATION

1. Progress and Technology (no readings, no sections)

Sept. 4 – Introduction to the course

Sept. 6 – Technological revolutions

2. Social Media

Sept. 9 – [Jia Tolentino – “What It Takes to Put Your Phone Away”](#)

Sept. 11 – [Jia Tolentino – “The I in Internet”](#) (from *Trick Mirror*)

Sept. 13 – Jia Tolentino continued

Shorty 1 due

3. Biomedical Enhancement

Sept. 16 – [Documentary: “Fixed: The Science/Fiction of Human Enhancement”](#)

(watch before class)

Sept. 18 – [Allen Buchanan – “Will the Rich Get Biologically Richer?”](#) (from *Better Than Human*)

Sept. 20 – Allen Buchanan continued

Shorty 2 due

4. Life Extension

Sept. 23 – [Regina Rini – “The Last Mortals”](#)

Sept. 25 – [Nick Bostrom – “The Fable of the Dragon Tyrant” & “The Ethics of Life Extension”](#)

Sept. 27 – Nick Bostrom continued

Shorty 3 due

5. Effective Altruism

Sept. 30 – [William MacAskill – “Worms and Water Pumps” & “You Are the 1 Percent”](#) (from *Doing Good Better*)

Oct. 2 – [Amia Srinivasan – “Stop the Robot Apocalypse”](#)

Oct. 4 – Amia Srinivasan continued

Shorty 4 due

6. Animal Suffering

Oct. 7 – [David Foster Wallace – “Consider the Lobster”](#)

Oct. 9 – [Lori Gruen – “Eating Animals”](#)

Oct. 11 – Lori Gruen continued

Shorty 5 due

7. Gender and Identity (no readings)

Oct. 14 – NO CLASS (TF teaches cancelled Tues section)

Oct. 16 – The gay rights revolution

Oct. 18 – Lessons from the gay rights revolution

Essay 1 due – Friday, Oct. 18: 8:00pm

UNIT II: SEXISM AND TRIBALISM

8. Feminist Philosophy (no sections)

Oct. 21 – [Rebecca Solnit – “Cassandra Among the Creeps”](#)

Oct. 23 – [Marilyn Frye – “Oppression”](#)

Oct. 25 – Marilyn Frye continued

9. Identity and Sex

Oct. 28 – [Rachel Syme – “Selfie”](#)

Oct. 30 – [Amia Srinivasan – “Does Anyone Have the Right to Sex?”](#)

Nov. 1 – Amia Srinivasan continued

Shorty 6 due

10. Backlash

Nov. 4 – [Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt – “The Coddling of the American Mind”](#)

Nov. 6 – [Freddie deBoer – “When Good Political Arguments Go Bad”](#)

Nov. 8 – Freddie deBoer continued

Shorty 7 due

11. Political Tribalism

Nov. 11 – [Andrew Sullivan – “America Wasn’t Built for Humans”](#)

Nov. 13 – [David Roberts – “Donald Trump & the Rise of Tribalist Epistemology”](#)

Nov. 15 – David Roberts continued

Shorty 8 due

12. The Internet Destroys Democracy

Nov. 18 – [Thi Nguyen – “Escape the Echo Chamber”](#)

Nov. 20 – [Video: Regina Rini – “Everyone is Wrong on the Internet”](#) (watch before class)

Nov. 22 – Regina Rini continued

Shorty 9 due

13. Online Classes (no readings, no class meetings, no sections)

Nov. 25 – TBA

Nov. 27 – TBA

14. Emotional Labor

Dec. 2 – [Jess Zimmerman – “Where’s my Cut? On Unpaid Emotional Labor”](#)
[Metafilter thread on emotional labor](#) [long, curated testimony]

Dec. 4 – Metafilter thread continued

Dec. 6 – Metafilter thread continued

Shorty 10 due

15. TBA (no sections)

Dec. 8 – TBA

Dec. 11 – TBA

Essay 2 due – Friday, Dec 13: 8:00pm