

# **POLS 4190: Special Topics in Theory/Methods: Moral Progress**

University of Georgia, Department of Political Science

Fall 2023

T TR 9:35-10:50am

Baldwin 102

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Office Hours: T TR 2-3pm and by appointment

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We often hear about “the right side of history,” or Martin Luther King Jr.’s declaration that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice” (a paraphrase of a minister, Theodore Parker), but we don’t often stop to think through the set of assumptions that operate behind these statements: (i) there is such a thing as moral progress, (ii) that we are currently making such progress, and (iii) such progress is inevitable or, at the very least, a natural tendency. This course seeks to critically scrutinize these assumptions. To get at these issues, we will look at three separate questions.

- What is moral progress?
- If moral progress does happen, how does it occur?
- Should we be skeptical about the prospects of moral progress?

The syllabus describes (1) course objectives, (2) course materials, (3) grades and assignments, (4) rules and requirements, and (5) a course schedule.

The course syllabus is a general plan for the course; deviations announced to the class by the instructor may be necessary.

## **1. Course Objectives**

- Sharpen analytical thinking and debating skills.
- Understand the nature of moral progress.
- Practice engaging with viewpoints different than one’s own.
- Confront difficult moral questions about the way we organize our social life.
- Come to understand one’s personal values better.

## **2. Course Materials**

The following books will be available for purchase from the UGA bookstore.

Appiah, K. A. 2010. *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen*, W. W. Norton & Company. ISBN: 978-0393340525  
Ord, Toby. 2020. *The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity*, Hachette Books, ISBN: 978-0316484916

All other readings will be available on eLC.

### 3. Assignments and Grading

The following components will make up your grade in this course:

1. Reading Quizzes (20%)
2. Group Project: Part I (15%)
3. Group Project: Part II (15%)
4. 2 Papers (25% each)

#### *Participation:*

Participation does not appear as a formal portion of your total grade. That being said, participation is a key element of succeeding in the class. Exceptional participation can result in a boost of your final grade by a third of a letter grade.

#### *Reading Quizzes:*

There will be 9 quizzes based on the reading administered randomly throughout the semester at the beginning of class. No make-ups will be administered – so it is important to be on time! These quizzes will ask you to write a few sentences in response to a question about the reading for that day. The questions will not be trick questions, but track main features of the readings.

To prepare for such quizzes, it is a good idea to write notes for each reading. Include in these notes information such as: What is/are the main claim(s) in this reading? How does the author support this/these claim(s)? Are there any key examples/cases? What are these examples/cases supposed to do for the author?

These quizzes will be graded on a pass/fail basis. Your letter grade for this part of your total grade will be based on the number of passes as follows:

7-9 Passes: A  
6 “”: A-  
5 “”: B+  
4 “”: B  
2-3 “”: C+  
1 “”: D+

*Group Project*

See section 6 below the course schedule.

*On Group Work:*

My baseline assumption is that everyone in a group contributed his or her fair share. Based on this assumption, I will give each group member the group grade. However, this is a baseline, not an ironclad rule. At the end of the semester, I will ask you to assess each member of your group, including yourself. These assessments will be confidential. These assessments allow you to inform me whether someone did not contribute properly or if anyone went above and beyond. I will use this input in determining individual grades. It is best if you resolve any problems in your group without my intervention.

*Papers*

There will be two (2) papers due throughout the course. Deadlines are in the important dates section as well as the class schedule. These papers will have a 1500-word limit. The purpose of these papers is to give you an opportunity for you to advance an argument related to the course material. Good writing is good thinking, and my hope is that you will improve both through these assignments.

More details available on the assignments page on eLC.

*Revision Policy*

You can always re-write a paper in response to my comments for a different grade. You must get revisions back to me within two (2) weeks of receiving my comments. The only exception to this policy is the second paper. If you wish to get comments for the third paper and have an opportunity to revise, please get me that paper by December 5 at 5pm.

## **4. Rules and Requirements**

*Academic Freedom and Respect:*

We will be talking about controversial issues in this course. I expect students to disagree with each other, as well as with me. To that end, it is important to have an open, civil environment to explore and express a variety of positions. The point is to learn something from one another, not to “win.” This requires each of us to engage respectfully with one another, especially when we disagree.

*Electronic Devices:*

There is good evidence that electronic devices significantly distract from learning. I do not ban laptops because I understand that some people might have very good reasons to use them. That being said, unless you have a very good reason, I recommend not

using laptops. From my own experience, not having laptops makes time in classroom more engaging and valuable.

*Academic Integrity:*

UGA Student Honor Code: "I will be academically honest in all of my academic work and will not tolerate academic dishonesty of others." A Culture of Honesty, the University's policy and procedures for handling cases of suspected dishonesty, can be found at [www.uga.edu/ovpi](http://www.uga.edu/ovpi).

Unless explicitly stated, artificial intelligence-based technologies, such as ChatGPT, must not be used to generate responses for student assignments.

Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated on any assignment. *You* are responsible for knowing and following the honor code and all rules of academic integrity.

*Late Work:*

Papers submitted past the deadline will incur a penalty of a third of a letter grade for each 24-hour period the paper is late. If you need an extension for any foreseeable reason, please let me know at least 48 hours before the due date of the assignment.

Emergencies do happen. I will accommodate any that should come up. NB: Computer problems do not count as an emergency. Back up early and often. I recommend using a cloud service such as Dropbox or Google Drive.

*Important Dates:*

Fall Semester Begins – August 16

Add/Drop – August 16-22

Group Formation Deadline – September 1

Group Project, Part I Presentations – September 12 & 14

Paper 1 Due – October 12

Withdrawal Date – October 23

Fall Break – October 27

Group Project, Part II Presentations – October 31 & November 2

Thanksgiving Break – November 22-24

Classes End – December 5 (no class due to Friday schedule)

Paper 2 Due – December 13 (November 30 if you want feedback)

## 5. Course Schedule

Readings marked with a \* are available on eLC

### August 17 – Introduction

No reading.

## **Part I: The Idea of Progress**

August 22 – A View from the Modern Era

\*Immanuel Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?”

August 24 – Moral Progress and Moral Concepts

\*Michele Moody-Adams, “The Idea of Moral Progress”

August 29 – Broadening the Inquiry

\*Allen Buchanan and Russell Powell, “A Typology of Moral Progress”

August 31 – No class

Use class time to organize groups and work on group project.

September 5 – Inclusivist Progress

\*Allen Buchanan and Russell Powell, “Toward a Naturalistic Theory of Moral Progress”

September 7 – Liberalism and Progress

\*Michael Huemer, “A Liberal Realist Answer to Debunking the Skeptics: The Empirical Case for Realism”

September 12 & 14 – Group Project: Part I Presentations

In-class presentations

## **Part II: Mechanisms of Progress**

### ***(i) Honor and Social Norms***

September 19 – Honor and Violence

K. A. Appiah, *The Honor Code*, Preface & Chapter 1

September 21 – Footbinding

Appiah, *The Honor Code*, Chapter 2

September 26 – Footbinding, Cont.

\*Gerry Mackie, “Ending Footbinding and Infibulation: A Convention Account”

September 28 – Prof. Bicchieri Visit

TBD

## Progress Syllabus – Fall 2023

### October 3 – Slavery and Abolition

Appiah, *The Honor Code*, Chapters 3 & 5

### October 5 – Progress through Shaming

\*Katharina Berndt Rasmussen and Nicolas Olsson Yaouzis, “#MeToo, Social Norms, and Sanctions”

### October 10 – The Limits of Shame.

\*Harrison Frye, “The Problem of Public Shaming”

### October 12 – Paper 1 Due

Use class time for writing

## ***(ii) Law as Vehicle for Progress***

### October 17 – Freedom and Progress

\*J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*, Chapters 1 & 2

### October 19 – Freedom and Progress, cont.

\*J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*, Chapter 3

### October 24 – Morality and Law

\*Anthony Kennedy, Majority Opinion, “Obergefell vs. Hodges”

\*John Roberts, Dissent, “Obergefell vs. Hodges”

### October 26 – The Limits of Law

\*Jacob Barrett and Gerald Gaus, “Law, Norms, and Public Justification: The Limits of Law as an Instrument of Reform”

### October 31 & November 2 – Group Project, Part II Presentations

In-class presentations

## **Part III: The Future of Progress**

### November 7 – The Classic Skeptic

\*J. J. Rousseau, *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*

### November 9 – Economic Progress & Moral Progress?

\*John Maynard Keynes, “Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren?”

### November 14 – The Precipice, Part 1

Toby Ord, *The Precipice*, Introduction, Chapters 1 & 2

## Progress Syllabus – Fall 2023

November 16 – The Precipice, Part 2  
Ord, *The Precipice*, Chapters 4 & 5

November 21 – Writing Day  
Use class time to work on Paper 2.

November 22-24 – Thanksgiving Break  
No Class

November 28 – The Precipice, Part 3  
Ord, *The Precipice*, Chapters 7 & 8

November 30 – Review and Conclusion  
No Reading (Deadline for Paper 2 *if* you want comments and the opportunity to revise the paper before the December 13<sup>th</sup> final deadline)

Paper 2 Due December 13 at 5pm.

### 6. Group Project

As a relatively hands-on way of getting at the issue of moral progress, I require you to complete a group project in this course. The project will have two stages, with each stage requiring an in-class presentation by each of the groups as well as a 1-page memo with attached references.

The breakdown of the assignments (each of these are individual assignments, completed over the course of the class):

1. Diagnosis of a Moral Problem
2. Proposed Solution to Moral Problem

In the first few weeks of the course, your job is to form a group with 5 classmates. Once you have identified your group, please select one person to e-mail me ([hpfrye@uga.edu](mailto:hpfrye@uga.edu)) your group roster to me with all members cc'd by September 1<sup>st</sup> at 5pm.

#### *Part I: Diagnosing a Moral Problem*

You will diagnose a moral problem. I want the problem to be local in scale. That means likely a problem either at the university, in Athens or its general area, or perhaps a group member's hometown.

Here is the information I want provided:

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- Why exactly is the problem a *moral* problem? (e.g. identify how the problem involves a specific failing of morality – the course material in section I of the course should be helpful here)
- What is the severity of the problem? (e.g. is this a really bad problem or is minor?)
- What is the scale of the problem? (e.g. how many people are involved and/or affected?)
- Is there disagreement over the nature of the problem? If so, what is the nature of the disagreement?
- Has anything been tried to solve the problem?

You will be evaluated on the following criteria:

- How clear is your presentation?
- Does the presentation show sensitivity to the philosophical issues at play?
- What is the quality of evidence used to support claims about scale?
- Is the presentation overall convincing in identifying a moral problem that needs addressing?

Concurrent with the presentation, each group will submit to eLC a 1-page memo summarizing the presentation along with a formal bibliography in Chicago-style.

Presentation length: 10-minute presentation, followed by 5 minute Q&A.

### *Part II: Proposing a Solution*

Using the course materials discussed in section II of the course, I would like your groups to propose a solution to the problem identified in Part I. To that end, your presentation should include the following:

- A brief recap of the moral problem
- What is the solution, and how does it work?
- What resources would be needed to implement the solution?
- Whose cooperation would you need to implement the solution?
- In light of the previous two questions, how feasible would it be to implement the proposed solution?
- Are there any foreseeable problems with the solution, and, if so, how worrisome are they?

Concurrent with the presentation, each group will submit to eLC a 1-page memo summarizing the presentation along with a formal bibliography in Chicago-style.

You will be evaluated on the following criteria:



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- How clear is your presentation?
- Does the presentation show sensitivity to the philosophical issues at play?
- Does the presentation show awareness of the practical issues in implementation?
- Is the presentation self-aware of its limitations or lack thereof?
- Is the presentation overall convincing in proposing a solution to the problem at hand?

Presentation length: 10-minute presentation, followed by 5-minute Q&A.