

## **Phil 305: Business Ethics & Public Policy**

CSUN

Fall 2026

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Office hours: Mon & Wed 2:30-3:30pm, ST 526 (contact me to book a time slot)

### **Course Description**

What obligations does economic life place on us, and what do our economic arrangements reveal about who we take ourselves to be? This course examines business ethics not as a narrow set of corporate compliance questions, but as a long-running philosophical inquiry into the relationship between economic activity and human life — an inquiry that runs from Aristotle to the platform economies of the present.

We begin with ancient and early modern accounts of property, self-interest, and inequality (Aristotle, Locke, Rousseau, Smith), which ask what legitimately grounds ownership and exchange in the first place. The 19th and 20th century bring competing frameworks for evaluating economic life morally — Kant's duty, Mill's utility, Marx's critique, and Rawls' fairness — each proposing a different standard by which economic arrangements might be judged just or unjust. From there, the course turns to how economic systems shape human experience itself: technology, mass production, culture, surveillance, spectacle and self-exploitation.

The second half of the course examines specific domains where economic logic meets intimate or non-human life: the ethic of work, romantic relationships, and the boundaries of the human as tested by our economic relationships to animals and plants. Throughout, students are asked to consider a recurring set of questions: What does economic activity owe to the people (and beings) it touches? Can markets be made just through better distribution, or do they require more fundamental critique? And what happens to love, culture, work, and even non-human life once they are drawn into economic frameworks of value, exchange, and productivity? Students will engage with primary philosophical and literary texts through close reading, discussion, quizzes, a midterm exam, group presentations, and a final examination.

### **Expectations**

The student will be expected to complete readings prior to class, participate in class discussions, complete quizzes and examinations, and participate in a group project.

Submitted assignments and examinations should be completed on their respective dates. However, in the event of extenuating circumstances, the student can of course contact the instructor in advance in order to make special arrangements.

### **Evaluation**

The final grade will be determined by the student's achievement in class participation, quizzes, the midterm examination and the final examination, and the group project, according to the rubric listed below. For late submissions, 1 point will be deducted every day that the assignment is late.

(1) *Class Participation* (10%) – This includes attendance and class participation. The student will be asked to come to each class session, with attendance being taken each meeting. They will be allowed two unexcused absences, but the participation grade will be reduced by 2 points for any subsequent such absences. If five classes are missed without excuse, the participation grade will be reduced to '0'. If the student needs to miss class due to extenuating circumstances, please notify the instructor beforehand via email.

(2) *Quizzes* (10%) – Reading quizzes will be given throughout the semester as indicated on the schedule below. Seven will be given in total, but the two lowest quiz scores will automatically be dropped.

(3) *Group project* (35%) – The group project is meant to be a public presentation conducted collectively in groups of ~5 students. Students are encouraged to pick a type of group project suggested by the instructor and collaborate on it throughout the semester. The composition of the grade for the group project will consist of three parts:

- + Mid-term Presentation (10%) – Students are asked to pick a type of group project, select a topic, prepare a presentation together on the progress of the project and present it publicly in front of the class at the date indicated below. The grade is the same for all group members.

- + Final Presentation (15%) – Students are asked to prepare a presentation together on the results of the project and present it publicly in front of the class at the date indicated below. The grade is the same for all group members.

+ Self-evaluation – (10%) – At the day of the final group presentation, each student is asked to additionally submit a short self-evaluation of 500-700 words indicating what they believe their individual contribution to the group project to be.

(4) *Midterm Examination* (20%) – The midterm examination will be based on the course readings and lectures up to that point in the course. It will consist of multiple-choice questions, true/false questions, short-answer responses and an essay response.

(5) *Final Examination* (25%) – The final examination will be based on the course readings and lectures from after the midterm examination. It will also consist of multiple-choice questions, true/false questions, short-answer responses and an essay response.

#### **Grading Rubric**

| <b>A – Exceptional</b> | <b>B – Above Average</b> | <b>C – Average</b> | <b>D – Below Average</b> | <b>F – Fail</b> |
|------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|
| A – 100 – 94           | B + – 89 – 88            | C + – 79 – 78      | D – 69 – 60              | F – 59 – 0      |
| A – – 93 – 90          | B – 87 – 84              | C – 77 – 74        |                          |                 |
|                        | B – – 83 – 80            | C – – 73 – 70      |                          |                 |

**\* Any act of plagiarism or academic dishonesty will result in the student receiving a failing ‘0’ grade for that assignment and will also put the student in jeopardy of failing the course. For more on the university’s academic honesty policy, please visit (<https://catalog.csun.edu/policies/academic-dishonesty/>).**

#### **Schedule**

##### **W1 – Framing the Question**

Aug 24 – Introduction to class (no reading)

Aug 26 – (no reading)

##### **W2 – Ancient views**

Aug 31 - Aristotle on oikonomia and chrematistics

Reading: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (selected pages)

Sept 2 – Aristotle (continued)

Reading: Aristotle, *Politics* (selected pages)

### **W3 - Modernity**

Sept 7 – no class

Sept 9 – Adam Smith on self-interest and sympathy

Reading: A. Smith *The Wealth of Nations* and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (selected pages)

*Quiz 1*

### **W4 – Modernity (continued)**

Sept 14 – John Locke on property and labor

Reading: J. Locke *Second Treatise on Government* (selected pages)

Sept 16 – Jean-Jacques Rousseau on the origins of inequality

Reading: J.-J. Rousseau *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (selected pages)

### **W5 – 19<sup>th</sup> century**

Sept 21 – Immanuel Kant and the formula of humanity

Reading: I. Kant *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (selected pages)

Sept 23 – John Stuart Mill on utility

Reading: J. S. Mill *Utilitarianism* (selected pages)

*Quiz 2*

### **W6 – 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century**

Sept 28 – Karl Marx on alienation

Reading: K. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (selected pages)

Sept 30 – John Rawls on justice and fairness

Reading: J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (selected pages)

### **W7 – Technology**

Oct 5 – Martin Heidegger on technology

Reading: M. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology* (selected pages)

Oct 7 – Yuk Hui on cosmotechnics

Reading: Yuk Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics* (selected pages)

Quiz 3

### **W8 - Review, presentations of group projects**

Oct 12 – Mid-term presentations of group projects

Oct 14 – Mid-term exam

### **W9 - Culture**

Oct 19 – Walter Benjamin on the ‘aura’

Reading: W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (selected pages)

Oct 21 – Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer on standardization

Reading: T. Adorno, M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (selected pages)

Quiz 4

### **W10 – Power**

Oct 26 – Michel Foucault on panopticism

Reading: M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (selected pages)

Oct 28 – Giorgio Agamben on the state of exception

Reading: G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (selected pages)

### **W11 - Spectacle and Self**

Nov 2 - Guy Debord on the society of the spectacle

Reading: G. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (selected pages)

Nov 4 - Byung-Chul Han on the achievement society

Reading: B.-C. Han, *The Burnout Society* (selected pages)

Quiz 5

### **W12 - Work**

Nov 9 – Max Weber on work ethics

Reading: M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (selected pages)

Nov 11 – no class

### **W13 - Love**

Nov 16 – Eva Illouz on romantic love in capitalism

Reading: E. Illouz, *Cold Intimacies* (selected pages)

Nov 18 – Moira Weigel on dating-app industry

Reading: M. Weigel, *Labor of Love: The Invention of Dating* (selected pages)

Quiz 6

### **W14 - Animals**

Nov 23 – Jacques Derrida on animality

Reading: J. Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (selected pages)

Nov 25 – Oxana Timofeeva on the relationship between humans and animals

Reading: O. Timofeeva, *The History of Animals: A Philosophy* (selected pages)

### **W15 - Plants**

Nov 30 – Michael Marder on life beyond humans

Reading: M. Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (selected pages)

Dec 2 – Final presentations of group projects

Quiz 7

**W16 – Final week**

Dec 7 – Final presentations of group projects

Dec 9 - Final examination study session

*\* Please note that the syllabus is subject to change at any point during the semester at the instructor's discretion.*