

Instructor: Hannah Widmaier (hwidmaier@g.ucla.edu)
Class meetings: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1 – 3:05 pm, on Zoom
Office hours: Tuesdays, 3:10 – 5:10 pm, on Zoom

All class meetings and office hours will be held on Zoom at this link (also accessible through the course site's "Zoom" tab):

ZOOM LINK TBA

Course description:

The law has a profound and pervasive influence on our lives, affecting the actions that are available to us, the material and political conditions under which we act, and our relationships with each other. Especially important, and difficult to make sense of, is the law's impact on our *moral* lives – e.g., the relationship between our moral and legal obligations, permissions, and rights.

In this course, we will examine a number of related questions about legal morality and the law's impact on our moral lives:

1. On what basis do we have a moral duty to obey the law?
2. When and how might the duty of legal obedience be vitiated, such that we are morally permitted to disobey the law? Further: under what conditions might we be decisively obligated to disobey the law?
3. What are the morally significant differences between civil disobedience, uncivil disobedience, and conscientious refusal? When and how might these activities be morally justified? How should the state treat those who engage in these forms of disobedience?
4. What are the proper aims and justification of state-imposed punishment for lawbreaking? To what extent is punishment consistent with the aim of "restorative justice"?

Schedule

Week 1: Introduction; Transactional theories of legal obligation

- Lecture 1:
 - John Simmons (2005), "The Problem and its Significance"
- Lecture 2:
 - John Rawls (1964), "Legal Obligation and the Duty of Fair Play"

Week 2: Transactional theories of legal obligation, cont.

- Lecture 1:
 - George Klosko (1989), "Political Obligation and Gratitude"
- Lecture 2:
 - M.B.E. Smith (1973), "Is There a Prima Facie Obligation to Obey the Law?"

Week 3: Non-transactional theories of legal obligation

- Lecture 1:
 - Elizabeth Anscombe (1987), “On the Source of the Authority of the State”
- Lecture 2:
 - Joseph Raz (1994), *Ethics in the Public Domain: Essays in the Morality of Law and Politics*,
excerpts

Week 4: Disobeying the law

First paper due at 6 pm on 7/13/26

- Lecture 1:
 - John Rawls (1971/1999), *A Theory of Justice: Revised Edition*, Ch. VI, “Duty and Obligation,” pp. 319 - 343 [on civil disobedience and conscientious refusal]
- Lecture 2:
 - Candice Delmas (2020), “Uncivil Disobedience”

Week 5: Disobeying the law, cont.; Punishment

- Lecture 1:
 - Tommie Shelby (2016), *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform*, Ch. 6, “Crime”
- Lecture 2:
 - Tommie Shelby (2016), *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform*, Ch. 7, “Punishment”

Week 6: Punishment, cont.

- Lecture 1:
 - Joel Feinberg (1991), “The Classic Debate”
 - David Dolinko (1991), “Some Thoughts About Retributivism”
- Lecture 2:
 - Lucy Allais (2011), “Restorative Justice, Retributive Justice, and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission”

SECOND PAPER due at 6 pm on Wednesday, 8/5/26

Course requirements

Components of your grade:

Participation: 15%

Weekly online discussion posts and replies: 20%

1st paper: 30%

2nd paper: 35%

Attendance: Your final course grade will be *lowered by 5%* (i.e., half of a letter grade) for each unexcused absence.

Attendance:

You are required to attend every class meeting, arriving on time and staying for the whole meeting. If you must miss class because you are sick, for religious observance, or due to some emergency, please email me ahead of time and I will excuse the absence so that it does not impact your grade. You do not need to send me any documentation to prove your reason for absence, and you do not need to share any details that you are not comfortable sharing. Your final course grade will be lowered by 5% (i.e., half of a letter grade) for each unexcused absence.

Participation (15 points):

I assess participation based on the following three criteria:

1. *Preparation:* Come to class having read and thought about the day's assigned reading. (When a reading is listed in the schedule under a particular day, that means you should read it before that day's lecture.) I suggest printing the readings and having your printed copy of the day's reading with you when we meet on Zoom, so that you can refer to it easily. If that's not possible, then make sure to have the digital version of the day's reading open when we meet. Although I don't require you to annotate or take notes when you read before class, I strongly encourage you to do so. This can deepen your understanding of the reading and help you figure out what you agree with, what you disagree with, and what you have questions about; taking notes can also improve your in-class contributions, and eventually your papers, by helping you articulate your thoughts ahead of time. I also encourage you to have a pen and paper with you during class, so that you can take notes by hand while still looking at the other discussion participants on your screen.
2. *Engagement:* Make contributions that meaningfully engage with the readings, lectures, and your classmate's ideas. When you speak, remember that you are contributing to an ongoing conversation; try to respond directly to what others have said. When responding to a classmate, address them by name. Don't worry about making mistakes! Mistakes are a good opportunity for you to improve your understanding (and your classmates'), and when we engage deeply with difficult philosophical material, we will inevitably make some mistakes along the way.

This is a discussion-intensive course, and discussions on Zoom tend to go better when the participants can see each other. For that reason, you are required to keep your camera on during the entire meeting. If a special circumstance arises that prevents you from keeping your camera on, please let me know via email, so that it does not impact your participation grade.

3. *Respect:* In this course, we'll discuss morally high-stakes questions that give rise to reasonable disagreement among people who are smart, thoughtful, and motivated to do the right thing. Show respect for your classmates by welcoming disagreement as an opportunity to deepen your thinking, offering reasons to support your own views rather than presenting your views as self-evident, remaining open to changing your mind, and directing criticism at ideas and arguments rather than at people.

Help facilitate others' participation by keeping your own contributions as concise as possible, leaving space for others to speak, and drawing others into the conversation. An especially good way to draw a classmate into conversation is to refer to something they said in their online discussion post, explain what you found valuable about it, and invite them to say more about it.

If you'd like to speak during class, please use the "Raise Hand" Zoom function (go to the toolbar at the bottom of the Zoom screen, click "React," and then click "Raise Hand"). I will sometimes call on people who do not have their hands raised. I do this to make sure you all have a chance to contribute and to learn from each other's contributions. It's always ok to say that you'd like to pass when I call on you; this will not hurt your participation grade.

In general, if you have something to say during our class discussions, it's better to say it out loud (once I call on you) rather than writing it in the chat, because it's better for us to have one conversation that we're all focusing on together, rather than having two conversations (an out-loud one and a written one) going on at the same time. However, if you have something to say that is brief, not too substantive, and will help the current speaker communicate their point - e.g., "Here's the page number of the passage you're referring to in the Shelby article..."; "The word you're trying to remember is 'reciprocity'" - then go ahead and put it in the chat.

I will email each of you by Monday, 7/14/25 to let you know what participation grade you are likely to end up with based on your participation up to that point. If your projected participation grade is less than 15/15, I will offer suggestions for raising it.

Weekly online discussion posts and replies (2 points each; 20 points total):

By each Friday morning (starting on the Friday of Week 1), I will create a new online discussion thread in which I'll post a prompt about the upcoming reading. You will write a post responding to the prompt by 6 pm the following Sunday, and you will write a reply to one of your classmates' posts by 6 pm the following Thursday. There will be five of these discussion threads, one for each of Weeks 2 - 6. So, you will write a total of 5 discussion posts and 5 replies over the course of the term; each post and each reply is worth 2 points. I will draw on your online posts to shape our conversations in class, and I might invite you in class to expand on something you wrote online.

In your reply to a classmate (due 6 pm Thursday), you are welcome to draw on anything we discussed in our Monday and Wednesday class meetings, and on any of the readings assigned for that week. But it's also fine to submit your reply to a classmate earlier in the week, rather than waiting until Thursday.

You're welcome to write more than one reply per week; students sometimes reply to multiple classmates' posts or have extended back-and-forth conversations in the replies to one single post, and these online conversations can add a lot to our discussions in class. Writing extra replies will not earn you extra points, but I may take it into account at the end of the term when deciding whether to bump up a borderline course grade.

Posts and replies must be submitted on time in order to receive any credit, except in extraordinary circumstances (e.g., if some emergency arises). You will receive full credit for a post if it fully answers the prompt and shows a good effort to read and understand the relevant article(s). You will receive full credit for a reply if it is respectful of the classmate to whom you're responding and makes a substantive contribution engaging with your classmate's ideas (rather than just expressing agreement or disagreement). Since one purpose of the online discussion threads is to give you a low-stakes opportunity to engage with the readings and articulate your thoughts, you will not lose points for making mistakes (e.g., making an invalid argument or incorrectly explaining an author's view) in your posts or replies. Indeed, mistakes in discussion posts and replies can help me see what I should be focusing on and clarifying in class. So don't be inhibited from saying something just because you're not sure it's right.

Two papers (30 points and 35 points, respectively; 65 points total):

Your first paper should be 1200-1800 words long and is worth 30% of your final grade; it is due at **6 pm on 7/13/26 (Monday of Week 4)**. Your second paper should be 1600-2400 words long and is worth 35% of your final grade; it is due at **6 pm on Wednesday, 8/5/26 (the first Wednesday after course instruction ends)**. I will provide paper prompts and rubrics closer to the deadlines.

For both papers, you may (but are not required to) use any of your online discussion posts as a starting point. This can include using some of the same wording in your paper that you used in your post. If you do this, please make a note of it in your paper.

For the second paper, you will have the option to write a co-authored, "conversation" paper with one of your classmates, instead of an individually authored paper. These co-authored papers should be 3200-4800 words long and should take the form of a back-and-forth dialogue, in which each author contributes roughly equally and puts their name next to the passages they wrote. My default approach will be to give both authors the same paper grade, but I'll be open to giving two different grades under unusual circumstances. I will provide more detailed instructions on this option closer to the second paper deadline.

Please email me as soon as possible if you need to ask for an extension on a paper; it is easier to grant extensions the sooner they are requested. If a paper is submitted late without an extension, the paper grade will be lowered 5% for each day the paper is late.

Grading Scale:

A+: 97% - 100%

A: 93% - 96.99%

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+: 67% - 69.99%

D: 63% - 66.99%

D-: 60% - 62.99%

F: 0% - 59.99%

I do not apply a curve to any grades for this course.

Academic honesty: It is your responsibility to know and adhere to UCLA's policies on academic dishonesty:

<https://www.deanofstudents.ucla.edu/individual-student-code>

I will report suspected cases of academic dishonesty to the Office of Student Conduct, whether the assignment in question is a paper or a discussion post/reply. If you are unsure whether something constitutes academic dishonesty (e.g., if you are unsure whether you have adequately cited a source), please ask me about it before submitting the assignment in question. I will never penalize you for asking about this.

Presenting AI-generated text as your own work is a form of academic dishonesty and is always prohibited.

I encourage you to talk with your classmates about your work for this class and to give each other advice and feedback. In addition to citing all sources you consult in completing an assignment, please include a note giving credit to anyone other than me who helped you with the assignment outside of class (e.g., "Thanks to X for talking with me about the ideas in this paper.").

Email: Feel free to email me at hwidmaier@g.ucla.edu with any questions or concerns you have about the course, including suggestions for how I can make our class meetings go better. Please include "Phil 6" in the subject line. If your questions are in-depth questions about the course material, assignments, or concerns outside of our course, I may ask you to discuss them with me during office hours. I respond to emails within 24 hours during the work week (Monday – Friday).

Office hours: Office hours are a good opportunity for you to ask questions and develop your thinking about the course material, talk about how the course is going for you, and talk about philosophy in general. Office hours are also a good opportunity for me to get to know you better and get a sense of what I can do to help you learn and succeed in this course. It is completely fine to come to office hours even if you don't have specific questions in mind; I encourage you to come either way. If you would like to meet but can't make the scheduled office hours (Mondays and Wednesdays, 11:30 am - 12:30 pm) or want to talk privately, without being interrupted by other students, please email me so we can set up a different time.

It is common for students to face academic and personal challenges. I'm happy to talk about difficulties you might be facing and to help you figure out next steps.

Please note that I am a “Responsible Employee” of the university, meaning that if a student divulges to me an incident of sexual harassment, sexual violence, or any other form of prohibited conduct, I am required to notify the Title IX Office. You can find more information here: <https://sexualharassment.ucla.edu/>

Learning Accommodations: If you are already registered with the Center for Accessible Education (CAE), please request your Letter of Accommodation on the Student Portal. If you are seeking registration with the CAE, please submit your request for accommodations via the CAE website. Please note that the CAE does not send accommodation letters to instructors – you must request that I view the letter in the online Faculty Portal. Once you have requested your accommodations via the Student Portal, please notify me immediately so I can view your letter. Students with disabilities requiring academic accommodations should submit their request for accommodations as soon as possible, as it may take up to two weeks to review the request. For more information, please visit the CAE website (www.cae.ucla.edu), visit the CAE at A255 Murphy Hall, or contact the CAE by phone at (310) 825-1501.

Additional resources:

UCLA’s Center for Accessible Education (CAE): A255 Murphy Hall

Website: www.cae.ucla.edu

Phone: 310-825-1501

UCLA’s Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS):

Address: John Wooden Center West, 221 Westwood Plaza, Los Angeles, CA 90095

Website: <https://counseling.ucla.edu/>

Phone (including 24/7 crisis support): 310-825-0768

UCLA’s Campus Assault Resources & Education (CARE) Program:

Address: 330 De Neve Dr., 205 Covell Commons, Los Angeles, CA 90024

Website: <https://careprogram.ucla.edu/>

Phone: 310-206-2465

Email: care@careprogram.ucla.edu