

Introduction to Ethics

QUARTER YEAR

Instructor information

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Course description

This course will introduce students to some of the central concerns of moral philosophy, some of its most influential texts, and the different ways of doing moral philosophy. We will begin by looking at how different writers have thought about the point of doing moral philosophy, and consider what we want to gain from it ourselves. In the second part of the course, we will discuss three of the most influential approaches to ethics in western philosophy: Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, and the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. In the third part of the course, we will discuss some famous criticisms, and close by looking at some philosophical arguments about death and the meaning of life.

Texts

All texts will be made available online.

Course requirements

- Thoughtful participation in discussion: 20%
- A 10 minute in-class presentation: 30%
- Final 10–15-pages essay: 50% (due Month/Day)

Assessment

Thoughtful participation in discussion means that you regularly attend class and come prepared to each meeting ready to discuss the material. This not merely involves articulating your own point of view but also the ability to take in what others are saying and to genuinely engage with it. An excellent in-class presentation conveys the content of the reading concisely without overly simplifying, is presented clearly, raises interesting questions and/or criticism, and connects the reading with previous course material. You can find a short guide on how to write a good philosophy paper [here](#), and you can find the rubrics for the assessment of your oral presentation and essay [here](#) and [here](#) respectively. You can also find a brief guide on using AI tools in philosophy papers [here](#).

Accommodation for Students with Disabilities

If you need accommodation, please inform me as soon as possible. All discussions will remain confidential.

Schedule

Week 1: Introduction; the different aims of doing moral philosophy

Day/Month. Moral philosophy: a merely intellectual pastime?

Jennifer Morton, 'An Antidote to Injustice'

Zena Hitz, 'Why Intellectual Work Matters'

Kant, Notes (excerpts)

Day/Month. Moral philosophy: more like science or like archeology?

Peter Singer, 'Philosophers are back on the job'

Jerome Schneewind, 'Understanding the history of moral philosophy' (excerpts)

Week 2: Aristotle's ethics: the good and motivation

Day/Month. Motivation and the good

Aristotle, *NE* book 1

Optional: Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (chapter 1)

Day/Month. Moral agency and motivation

Aristotle *NE* book 2, sections 1-6

G.E.M. Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy'

Week 3: Aristotle's ethics: choice and deliberation

Day/Month. Virtue and voluntary action/choice

Aristotle, *NE* book 3

Day/Month. Virtue and deliberation

Aristotle, *NE* book 6

Week 4: The good without limitation

Day/Month. Virtue and contemplation

Aristotle, *NE* book 10

Optional: Gabriel Richardson Lear, *Happy Lives and the Highest Good* (chapter 8)

Day/Month. Kant on the good will

Kant, *Groundwork*, preface and section 1

Optional: Marcia Baron, 'Acting from Duty'

Week 5: Kant's conception of practical reason

Day/Month. Kant's conception of obligation

Kant, *Groundwork* section 2 (4:406-420)

Optional: Christine Korsgaard, 'Kant's Analysis of Obligation'

Day/Month. Practical reason and universality

Kant, *Groundwork* section 2 (4:421-424)

Optional: Onora O'Neill, 'Consistency in Action'

Week 6: Kant on the form of practical reason

Day/Month. Practical reason and humanity

Kant, *Groundwork* section 2 (4:424-450)

Optional: Christine Korsgaard, 'Kant's Formula of Humanity'

Day/Month. Practical reason and autonomy

Kant, *Groundwork* section 2 (4:430-450)

Optional: Karl Ameriks, 'Vindicating Autonomy'

Week 7: Kant on consequences; utilitarianism

Day/Month. Kant on consequences and rigorism

Kant, *On a supposed right to lie from philanthropy*

Kant, *On the Common Saying* (section 1)

Optional: Jens Timmermann, 'Simplicity and Authority: Reflections on Theory and Practice in Kant's Moral Philosophy'

Day/Month. Bentham's utilitarianism

Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (chapters 1-4)

Optional: Peter Singer, 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality'

Week 8: Mill's utilitarianism and critiques

Day/Month. Mill's utilitarianism

Mill, *Utilitarianism* (chapters 1-4)

Optional: Epicurus, *Letter to Menoecus*

Day/Month. Pleasure and consequences

Robert Nozick, 'The Experience Machine'

James Lenman, 'Consequentialism and Cluelessness'

Week 9: The end of life

Day/Month. The end of life: death

Thomas Nagel, 'Death'

Optional: Martha Nussbaum, 'The Damage of Death'

Day/Month. The end of life: meaning

Susan Wolf, 'Meaning in Life'

Albert Camus, 'Absurd Freedom'

Week 10: Moral over-demandingness; summary

Day/Month. Can morality be too demanding?

Susan Wolf, 'Moral Saints'

Day/Month. Summary

No required reading

Academic Integrity

Academic work is an author's original contribution and properly cites all sources used (such as articles, books, interviews, films, podcasts etc.). This matters for both epistemic and moral reasons. For epistemic reasons, it is crucial that academic work can be double-checked by academic peers, so readers must be able to easily identify all sources an author relied on. For moral reasons, it is crucial that other authors receive the credit they deserve.* Feel free to consult with me before completing your assignments if you should have any concerns about the correct way to reference the work of others. The consequence of plagiarism will be a failing grade. In the unfortunate event that a student is suspected of plagiarism, I also have to follow the university's official guidelines for responding to academic misconduct.

Climate and Inclusion

Philosophy involves the ability to formulate your own and carefully attending to others' arguments, both in writing and in conversation. Even when philosophers disagree, this is not an adversarial activity: philosophy can only be done well as a collective activity with the shared end of furthering our mutual understanding. This requires that all of us be prepared to listen carefully and seriously to what others have to say, no matter how strongly we may disagree. Creating such an inclusive environment matters not merely for moral reasons, but for epistemic reasons too. If some groups are left feeling unwelcome and their perspectives left unheard, we seriously impair our collective ability to make progress in knowledge. It is therefore my goal as an instructor to create an environment where everyone feels respected and welcome. I encourage you to reach out to me if you have suggestions for promoting a welcoming and open academic environment, and I will give them serious consideration. If there are any circumstances that make you feel uncomfortable in our classroom, please let me know. All discussion will remain confidential.

* For instance, these academic integrity and climate statements are modelled after Tyler Zimmer's syllabus on Philosophy of Economics (2022).