

Introduction to Ethics

PHI 014 (Spring 2021)

Professor: Dr. Christopher Eliot, Associate Professor of Philosophy
 Office: 104F Heger Hall (516-463-4516), *this semester intermittently there*
 Office hours: Mon & Wed 3–4 pm and by appointment, via Zoom Room
 Email: Christopher.Eliot@hofstra.edu (Christopher.H.Eliot@hofstra.edu also works)
 Texts: Blackburn, *Being Good: A Short Introduction to Ethics* (2008)
 other readings will distributed on the course site or Blackboard
 Course time & place: Sec. 4: Mon & Wed 11:20–12:45 via Zoom
 Course site: <https://chreliot.github.io/phi14/>

What we're doing here:

Philosophical Ethics consists of two parts. One part is the study of how to live, and what to do, including what is right, good, and best for human beings. The other part analyzes whether and how we can know what is right and wrong. It does so by analyzing the meanings of moral terms like “right,” “wrong,” “good,” “bad,” “duty,” “obligation,” “rights,” and “moral climate,” and by analyzing what (if anything) justifies claims like “murder is wrong” and “helping helpless victims is good.” These two parts of Philosophical Ethics are called *normative ethics* and *metaethics*, respectively. We will discuss both those parts of ethics in this course, separately and together.

Philosophical Ethics is an important part of English-speaking (“anglophone”) Philosophy. One way of defining “Philosophy” is as the analysis of questions that cannot be entirely answered empirically (which means through observation). Because answers to philosophical questions cannot be proved by observation alone, philosophers use and analyze *arguments* to gain understanding. In this course we will be examining important and influential arguments about ethics and also developing some arguments of our own. We will do that in order to understand the range of possible positions in Philosophical Ethics, and their strengths and weaknesses.

This course has four main goals. They are:

1. to familiarize you with some major historical and contemporary positions in normative and metaethics;
2. to enhance your ability to formulate questions and analyze arguments, especially about values;
3. to enhance your ability to express and defend ideas through arguments, in speech and writing;
4. to encourage the development and sophistication of your understanding of ethics and morality.

Dates you are responsible for:

Complete the first writing assignment: multiple dates, see site

Submit the second writing by upload to Blackboard: Apr 21

Take the first (midterm) test: Mar 24

Take the second (final) test: May 19 10:30–12:30

February	March	April	May
1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3	1
7 8 9 10 11 12 13	7 8 9 10 11 12 13	4 5 6 7 8 9 10	2 3 4 5 6 7 8
14 15 16 17 18 19 20	14 15 16 17 18 19 20	11 12 13 14 15 16 17	9 10 11 12 13 14 15
21 22 23 24 25 26 27	21 22 23 24 25 26 27	18 19 20 21 22 23 24	16 17 18 19 20 21 22
28	28 29 30 31	25 26 27 28 29 30	23 24 25 26 27 28 29
			30 31

Course requirements:

1. You will need to **access the texts** and, when they are provided electronically, figure out your strategy for reading them—print, tablet, screen?
2. You are expected to **read**, and **be prepared to discuss**, the assigned texts. You will receive a participation grade which figures in both your contributions to class and the apparent preparedness reflected in them. Participation is not mere attendance; it involves volunteering contributions. I may even call on you and expect you to have something relevant to say. Though presentations will help explain the readings, you cannot expect to understand our discussion without reading yourself. Much of the point of our meeting synchronously is that you bring you be able to engage *your independent scholarship* with that of other scholars—your peers and me. Obviously, that requires having both read and digested the text. Do it.
3. You are expected to **attend** the class sessions. I will record attendance. More than 2 sessions of missed attendance will be factored into your participation grade. You *do not* need to contact me about being absent! However, if you have doctors' notes or excuses from Hofstra officials, keep them on file until the end of the semester, in case you need to show why you had more than 2 absences.
4. You will need to attend and take a **first/midterm test** and a **second test/final exam** at the end of the term. The second test will be comprehensive, but will emphasize the second half of the course. More information about the test content will be posted under the "tests" button on the course website.
5. There will be two out-of-class **writing assignments**. One will consist of several discussion board posts, through blackboard, and one will be a paper submitted through a Blackboard upload link. Full instructions will be posted on the course site.
6. Finally, I always hope this goes without saying and am occasionally disheartened to find that it doesn't: I ask you to **be respectful** of the business of the class during class sessions. See the participation rubric on the course site for details.

Evaluation:

I would prefer to teach entirely without grades, but their existence has various kinds of value for you. So we have them. Here is where yours come from:

To the degree it is practically feasible, I evaluate your work anonymously, to eliminate unconscious biases and approach objectivity. (Obviously, under certain circumstances, it is not practically feasible.) Your grades will be calculated according to the University's standards, relative to course expectations, and relative to other members of the class. This does *not* mean your grade will be "curved" to a mean score, but it may be adjusted upwards depending on overall class performance. That is, you will earn at least the score you deserve according to University standards, but also one related to how other students performed. Writing assignments and exams will be graded using a 4-point scale. "Incomplete" status will also not be given automatically, nor in the absence of a compelling, written request.

Your grade will be calculated as follows:

Participation, including quizzes	24%
First writing	18%
Second writing	20%
First test	18%
Second test	20%

I will circulate partial/preview grades for participation at the one third and two thirds marks, so you have a clear sense of how I think you're doing. Grades for writing assignments, quizzes, and tests will be converted to Hofstra's 4-point scale before calculation.

- 4 = **A** represents exceptional work.
- 3 = **B** represents superior work.
- 2 = **C** represents satisfactory work.
- 1 = **D** represents below-satisfactory work.

Instructor's own academic honesty policy:

Representing someone else's work as your own, or any other form of scholastic dishonesty (as defined by the University), will automatically earn you an F for the course, beyond the required dishonesty form. So this is the key point you should internalize now: If you ever find yourself in circumstances where it seems like a good idea to be dishonest, please come talk to me about what we can do about the circumstances instead. You will find that while *after* I've detected scholastic dishonesty, the outcome is severe and automatic, *beforehand* I try to be as helpful as possible.

Syllabus adjustments:

Unexpected events can lead to changes in the schedule and syllabi. However, it's important to me that you not feel that the rules have changed on you mid-stream, so, if any changes are necessary, I will make them as fair as possible.

Contacting me:

The best way to contact me is by email; I check it regularly. If you have a quick question, often we can take care of it by email. But if you need more help, don't hesitate to visit my office hours, listed above, or ask (in person or by email) to set up another mutually-convenient time. Phoning is not a reliable way to reach me.

General university policies:

The page at this URL describes university policies about academic honesty, student access services, university-wide deadlines, incomplete grades, discriminatory harassment, relationship violence, sexual misconduct, and absences for religious observances: <http://www.hofstra.edu/about/administration/provost/provost-hofstra-policies.html>

Department's learning goals and objectives for this course:

Goals for Philosophy courses:

- ▷ Students understand major philosophical ideas accurately
- ▷ Students apply their understanding of ideas in novel contexts
- ▷ Students write effectively
- ▷ Students speak effectively
- ▷ Students argue with precision, balance, and insight
- ▷ Students read analytically, critically, and empathetically
- ▷ Students critically assess their own commitments and ideas

Specific learning objectives for Philosophy courses:

- ▷ Objective 1a: Students give accurate and relevant answers, complete with supporting details, to specific questions about philosophical ideas relevant to the course.
- ▷ Objective 1b: Students give accurate accounts of philosophical ideas relevant to the course in the context of criticizing or assessing those ideas.
- ▷ Objective 2a: Students speculate, in well-informed, well-supported, and plausible fashion, about what a given philosopher would say about a novel issue or problem.
- ▷ Objective 2b: Students extrapolate creatively and plausibly from their knowledge of philosophers or philosophical positions in developing their own related ideas.
- ▷ Objective 3a: Students write paragraphs that exhibit clarity, focus, a good command of the subject matter, and an orderly development of ideas.
- ▷ Objective 3b: Students write multi-paragraph pieces that exhibit clarity, focus, a good command of the subject matter and an ability to work with that subject matter creatively, and an orderly development of ideas both within and across paragraphs.
- ▷ Objective 4a: Students speak in clear, focused, well-informed, and orderly fashion.
- ▷ Objective 5a: Students state arguments accurately and clearly, and identify strengths and weaknesses of different arguments.

- ▷ Objective 5b: Students develop and defend their own arguments, taking into account a variety of philosophical positions but adding original insights or emphases.
- ▷ Objective 7a: Students explain difficult passages clearly, accurately, and thoroughly.
- ▷ Objective 7b: Students use apt quotations and creative, critical, plausible readings of texts in their writing.
- ▷ Objective 8a: Students are able to explain the weaknesses of their own present positions, and the strengths of competing positions.
- ▷ Objective 8b: Students are able to explain why their pre-theoretical commitments have or have not changed as a result of what they have learned in the course, and if they have changed how they have done so.

Course content outline:

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| 1. Arguments and reasoning | ▷ Kant |
| 2. Plato and the problem of justice | ▷ Criticisms of Kantianism |
| 3. Seven challenges to ethics | 5. Utilitarianism |
| ▷ Redundancy on religion | ▷ Mill |
| ▷ Relativism | ▷ Criticisms of Utilitarianism |
| ▷ Psychological Egoism | ▷ Applied Utilitarianism |
| ▷ Eliminative Naturalism | 6. Virtue theory |
| ▷ Determinism | ▷ Aristotle |
| ▷ False Consciousness | ▷ Criticisms of Virtue Ethics |
| ▷ Empiricism | 7. Conventionalism |
| 4. Kantianism | |

Final thought:

Inevitably, grades are a function of performance, not of effort in itself. I can't reasonably assess effort. What's challenging varies from student to student. You will need to figure out what *you* need to do to perform well. I will try to help you with what's hard for you, if I know you need help. In the end, you are responsible for your education, however, and if you are confused, you should ask a question, or I will assume you understand. Unless you discuss them with me in person or by email, I will also likely not be aware of any dissatisfactions you have with any aspect of the course. I hope you will not be dissatisfied. I think this material is fun and useful, and believe an important part of my job is trying to show you why it is.