

PHIL 20208: Ethical Theory

Geoffrey Hall

Fall, 2020

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Office Hours: M/W 10-12 (zoom)

Office: 313 Malloy Hall

Web: Sakai

Class Hours: 2:00-3:15 TR

Class Room: Geddes Hall B034/B036

Course Description

This course is an introduction to certain core issues in contemporary ethical theory. We will start by with some more theoretical reflections on the nature of ethical questions themselves. We will then look at competing theories of what it is for an action, or a person, to be morally right or wrong. In the second half of the course, we will then apply this knowledge to a variety of pressing moral problems in society.

Course Materials

- All readings will be made available on Sakai.
- Slides will be provided after each course.

Course Objectives

Philosophy, like many other inquiries, aims at knowledge. Our goal is to figure out what the world is like vis-a-vis morality. The method for doing this consists of putting forward arguments for various positions, looking at various objections, and formulating replies. This is what it is to do philosophy and what you will be expected to do. Here is some of what you will be doing and some of what I expect from you:

1. Investigating philosophical questions about the nature of rightness, wrongness and value. By the end of the course you should know what the most important theories in ethics are and why those who have held them did.
2. You should by the end of the course improved your ability to comprehend, dissect, and evaluate philosophical arguments. I will often do this in class for you, giving you many examples of how to do philosophy. While this way of thinking about questions may not be super familiar to you in the beginning, you should be able to pick it up as we go along. I will also provide exercises with to aid in this process.
3. You should also have improved your ability to articulate philosophical ideas/arguments clearly and persuasively in your own writing. While this will not be a class that has a heavy writing requirement, the examinations will require you to clearly articulate various philosophical arguments.
4. Lastly, some of the texts we are reading will be quite difficult. You should improve your ability to actually understand what these kinds of dense texts are communicating.

Grading

Final grades will be determined by four components:

- Participation: 15%
- TPQs: 10%
- Exam 1: 25%
- Exam 2: 25%
- Exam 3: 25%

The exams are required, in the sense that failure to complete them will result in a failing grade.

Participation

You are expected to take an active role in class discussion. In order to get full participation credit you must do the readings every week before class, make a comment every class and contribute positively to the overall conversation. There will also be short in class and out of class assignments completion of which contributes towards your participation in the course.

TPQs

You will be required to submit two questions each week prior to the first class period of the week. The questions must be submitted at least 8 hours before the class period for which they are due. The questions will be submitted on a google document that will be shared with you. The questions must be “Thought Provoking Questions” in the following sense: (i) they must demonstrate that you have actually engaged with the text. If I can settle the question by a quick google search or by looking briefly through the text itself, then you have not done this. (ii) they should engage with the main arguments and positions that are talked about within the text. You should be looking for parts of the argument that you do not understand or that seem to you to be ill supported. Spend some time trying to work it out for yourself before submitting the question. Some weeks, I may ask that you attempt to write out the main argument of the paper in standard form in lieu of the TPQ (the term ‘argument in standard form’ will be explained in class.)

Exams

A large part of your grade will be determined by three take-home, open book exams. In these exams you will be required to write three short philosophical essays on some provided prompts. The basic idea is to have you argue for some philosophical position that we have been discussing in class. You will be given 24 hours to complete the exam. The exams are scheduled on days we have class and class will be canceled. In reality you should only need an hour and half to complete the exams, and so you can use the class period to do that.

Grade Scale

Notre Dame has no official way of indexing numerical grades to letter grades. This is the system that will be used in this course:

<u>A</u>	94+
<u>A-</u>	90-93
<u>B+</u>	87-89
<u>B</u>	83-89
<u>B-</u>	80-82
<u>C+</u>	77-79
<u>C</u>	73-76
<u>C-</u>	70-72
<u>D</u>	60-69
<u>F</u>	59-

Course Policies

Laptop Policy

I do not allow the use of laptops (or any other gadgets) during class. There are three main reasons for this policy. First, laptops are commonly used for purposes unrelated to the class (e.g. checking email or Facebook), which can be distracting. Second there is research suggesting that students learn material more effectively when taking notes by hand than when taking notes on a laptop. Third, handouts will be made available to you electronically after the class period. These will often contain detailed accounts of the topics for that day.

Honor Code

In all of their assignments, students are responsible for compliance with the university's honor code, information about which can be found at <https://honorcode.nd.edu/>. You should acquaint yourself with the policies and penalties described there.

Additionally, the philosophy department has prepared a document explaining what the honor code requires of students visa-à-vis writing a philosophy paper. I **strongly recommend** that you read this document, which will be made available on Sakai. It is possible to violate the honor code without intending to do so; the best way to avoid this is to carefully read through the philosophy department's guidelines.

The most common honor code violations occur when students read an internet source while working on a paper and use material from that source without citing it. If you read something not assigned in this course as part of your work on a paper, you **must** cite the source, whether or not you quote anything from that source. Paraphrasing or summarizing the work of others without clear acknowledgement of that work is plagiarism.

Reading Schedule

0.1 Meta Ethics

Week 1 Introduction

8/11 Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, ch. 1 (Optional)

8/13 Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, ch. 2

Week 2 Relativism and Religion

8/18 Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism*, ch. 3 (skip 3.5)

8/20 Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, ch. 4.; Mark Murphy "Theological Voluntarism"

Week 3 Non-Cognitivism and Reductionism

8/25 Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism*, ch. 2 (skip 2.4-2.7)

8/27 Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism*, ch. 4 (skip 4.3.2-4.3.5, 4.4.3-4.4.4)

Week 4 Robust Realism and Nihilism

9/1 Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism* ch. 5 (skip 5.6-5.7)

9/3 Enoch, *An Outline of an Argument for Robust Metanormative Realism*

0.2 Normative Ethics

Week 5 Utilitarianism I

9/8 Mill, *Utilitarianism* (selections) (Exam I)

9/10 Singer, "Famine, Affluence and Morality"

Week 6 Utilitarianism II

9/15 Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, ch. 8; Nozick, "The Experience Machine"

9/17 Railton, "Alienation, Consequentialism and the Demands of Morality"

Week 7 Deontology I.

9/22 O'Neill, "Moral Perplexities of Famine Relief"; Rachels *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* ch. 9.

9/24 Ross, "What Makes Right Acts Right"

Week 8 Deontology and Virtue.

9/29 Huemer, "Paradox for Weak Deontology"

10/1 Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, ch. 12. (Exam II)

0.3 Applied Ethics

Week 9 Abortion.

10/6 Tooley, "Abortion and Infanticide"

10/8 Marquis, "Why Abortion is Immoral"

Week 10 Abortion continued; Animal welfare.

10/13 Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion"

10/15 Lomasky, "Is it wrong to eat animals?"

Week 11 Animal Welfare Continued.

10/20 Huemer, *Dialogues on Ethical Vegetarianism*, Day 1

10/22 Huemer, *Dialogues on Ethical Vegetarianism*, Day 2

Week 12 Poverty

10/27 Singer, "Rich and Poor"

10/29 Hardin, "Case Against Helping the Poor"

Week 13 The Non-Identity Problem

11/3 Parfit, "Non-Identity Problem"

11/5 Parfit, "Non-Identity Problem"

Week 14 The repugnant conclusion

11/10 Parfit, "Repugnant Conclusion"

11/12 Huemer, "In Defence of Repugnance"

Week 15

Final exam, TBD