

# Philosophical Ethics

PHIL-3000 R18, TF 8:30–9:45, Keating 120

**Zita Toth**, Collins Hall B11 – **Office Hours:** TF 10–11 a.m. & by appointment.

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## Course Description

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Whether we realize it or not, we live make moral judgments every day. And whether we realize it or not, our world in the 21st century plays an important role in these judgments. The main aim of this course is to try to recognize these judgments, understand their background assumptions, and perhaps modify some of them if seems necessary. In the course we will look at some influential answers to ethical questions by Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill, who most importantly shaped our post-Enlightenment world today. We will also look at an alternative world-view, that of Virtue Ethics, which will underline the fact that this post-Enlightenment world and its intellectual heritage can itself be questioned.

## Course Objectives

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This course will help students to:

- Understand the normative character of ethical questions, and distinguish them from other, descriptive claims.
- Understand the central claims of the most important major approaches to ethics as discussed in the course, and the differences between these approaches.
- Be able to argue for or against these approaches.
- Apply the main claims of these approaches to real-life ethical questions.
- Recognize how these approaches are present in works of literature and in our day-to-day life.

## Required Materials

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**Course text:** There is one required book for this course. It will be available in the campus bookstore, or you can also purchase your copy online from elsewhere (which is probably the cheaper option). Besides this, there will also be some required readings on Blackboard.

**Christina Sommers and Fred Sommers, eds., *Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life*** (Harcourt Publishers, 1993 and further editions), ISBN: 0-15-500375-5.

## Course Policies

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**Attendance** **Attendance in class is mandatory**, and **more than four** unexcused absences will result in failure of the course.

- There will not be any make-up précis. If you miss one due to an unexcused absence, it will count as a 0 towards your précis grade. If the absence was excused, I will not count that précis.

You will have *one* absence that I will count as excused (i.e., no punishment), otherwise an absence will be considered excused only if you bring me some documentation from your dean.

- Electronic devices** **Electronic devices are not allowed in class** as they can be very distracting. This includes every internet-enabled device, such as phones, laptops, tablets, etc. Everyone is expected to leave these at home or keep them turned off and out of sight during class time.
- If I see you using your phone in class, I will take it and keep it till the end of the class. Sorry, no exceptions.
- For any special concerns about this policy, please ask me directly.
- E-mail** There will be some official communication via e-mail, and everyone is expected to check their e-mail accounts regularly *and read their e-mails carefully*. You can expect me to read and answer my e-mails within 12 hours; please do not send me e-mails at midnight expecting a response by the next morning class.
- Submitting the final** The final paper must be brought to the last class, **in hard copy**. At the top of the final paper please put the word count, your Fordham ID number (available on my.fordham.edu), and the date. **Do not put your name on the paper**. This helps facilitate blind grading to reduce the effect of grader bias.
- Academic integrity** Please familiarize yourself with Fordham’s academic integrity policy found in the Undergraduate Handbook. Any assignment with plagiarized material will receive a zero, and will be reported to your dean.
- In summary, from the Fordham Handbook: “Plagiarism occurs when individuals attempt to present as their own what has come from another source. *Plagiarism takes place whether such theft is accidental or deliberate.*”
- If you are unsure about whether something would count as plagiarism or not, please see me before submitting your assignment.
- Internet sources** Please note that you are not allowed to use internet resources for your papers. The main reason for this is that internet resources vary greatly in reliability, and unless you know the material very well already, it is difficult to assess how reliable they are in a given case. (E.g., wikipedia is very often mistaken.) You can always trust — and are allowed to use — the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, and anything you show me and ask me about.
- Disabilities** According to the Student Handbook, “Fordham University will make reasonable accommodations and provide auxiliary aids and services to assist otherwise qualified persons in achieving access to its programs, services and facilities in accordance with Section 504 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.”
- If you think you have a disability that will affect your ability to participate in class, please make an appointment to speak with someone at the Office of Disability Services, and bring me a letter from them **in the first week of the class**.
  - For more information, please see the Student Handbook.

## Requirements and Grading

Grade breakdown	Component	Percentage
	In class participation and response paper	15%
	Reading précis	20%
	Short paper	15%
	Presentation project	15%
	Final paper	20%
	Final exam	15%

**Participation:** Conversation is essential to Philosophy. Everyone, even if they are bored or shy or anxious is expected to participate in class. A few suggestions:

- Charity is very important in every engaging discussion. You should answer to your peers' suggestion according to the best interpretation you can give to them.
- Criticism can be very useful, but be careful not to direct it towards the person instead of the idea.
- Please be willing to change your mind if the evidence so dictates.

**To prepare for class participation**, be sure to make notes about: (1) the main reading; (2) the main thesis of the reading; (3) the main line of argument in the reading; (4) any questions, objections, or remarks having to do with (1)–(3).

**Response paper:** besides regular participation, each member of the class is asked once during the semester to prepare a response paper for one of the readings. The response paper should address the main thesis and argument of the reading, and assess it in a critical manner.

**Reading précis:** For each reading, you should prepare a précis about the reading that you would be willing to discuss in class, in *300 words maximum*.

- The précis should summarize the main thesis and argument of the reading, or be focused on an objection that you have about the reading. Perhaps the following technique will help: (1) sum up the main ideas of the reading without word limit; (2) distill your writing by looking at it carefully and erasing every unimportant detail.
- You should e-mail me your question every time by the end of the day (11:59 p.m.) before the reading is due (i.e., if something is due on Tuesday, you need to e-mail me your précis by Monday 11:59 p.m.). Please send your précis, together with the word-count, in the body of your e-mail. In the title of your e-mail, put the course number and your name (e.g., PHIL-3000-R18 John Doe). Whenever you send me a new précis, respond to the e-mail you sent previously (e.g., for your second précis, you should respond to your message in which you sent me the first précis).
- Grading: You will get 1 point for sending your précis for each reading. If you send one response for each class, you will get a C for this part of your final grade. Quality will make the difference between A, B, and C.

My e-mail address for the précis (*please use my regular address for other course-related matters*): ztoth@philosophy@gmail.com.

**Short paper:** There will be one short paper assigned for this course, related to the first two ethical theories we will consider. Detailed instructions will follow. **Note that there will be an oral component** for this assignment, where you will be expected to rehearse an argument.

**Final paper:** The final paper is a 5–7 page research paper in which you are expected to apply an ethical theory studied in class to a specific ethical problem. You can choose the topic of your final paper, but you need to consult me about it.

**Presentations:** There will be three, 30-minutes group presentations over the course, related to the historical/cultural background of some of the thinkers we consider. Topics will be distributed in the first class.

**Final exam:** The final exam date is set by the university, and it will take place on **May 13th**. Unlike perhaps in most of your classes so far, it will be an **oral exam**. This usually creates a good occasion for discussion.

- The final exam will cover all the material assigned throughout the course.
- Please do not leave NYC before the exam!

## Preliminary Schedule

Page numbers refer to those in the anthology. BB = on BlackBoard; *bring a hard copy!*

Introductory material		
Jan. 19	Introduction	C.S. Lewis, “On the Reading of Old Books” (BB) D F Wallace, “2005 Kenyon Commencement Address” (BB)
Jan. 22	Why be moral?	Dostoyevski, “Why Not Murder?” (471–495)
The Enlightenment		
Jan. 26	Why we need duties	Hume, <i>Treatise</i> (sel.) (BB) The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (203–209)
Jan. 29	Intro to deontology	Sophocles, <i>Antigone</i> (BB)
Feb. 2	Context	<b>Student presentation 1: the Enlightenment</b> W Berry, “Why I am Not Going to Buy a Computer” (BB)
Feb. 5	Enlightenment	Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” (BB) Terry Castle, “Just Don’t Pick Up” (BB)
Feb. 9	Good will and duty	Kant, <i>Groundwork</i> (150–155) Allen Wood, <i>Kantian Ethics</i> (BB)
Feb. 12	Categorical Imperative	Kant, “Groundwork” (155–159)
Feb. 16	NO CLASS	
Feb. 19	Some consequences	O’Neill, “Kantian Approaches. . .” (BB)
Utilitarianism		
Feb. 23	Context	<b>Student presentation 2: the 19th century</b>
Feb. 26	Introduction	LeGuin, “The Ones Who Walk Away” (133–139) Schafer-Landau, “Is Happiness All That Matters?” (BB)
Mar. 1	Utilitarianism	Bentham, “The Principle of Utility” (101–108)
Mar. 4	Some consequences	Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” (834–844) Wendell Berry, “Waste” (BB)
Mar. 8	Critique	Harris, “Survival Lottery” (BB) Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism” (123–132)
Mar. 11	Short review	Carr, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” (BB)
Mar. 15	<b>Paper writing workshop; DUE: short paper</b>	
Virtue Ethics		
Mar. 29	Context	<b>Student presentation 3: Ancient</b>
Apr. 1	Introduction	Chekhov, <i>The Bet</i> (BB) <b>DUE: final paper topics</b>
Apr. 5	Overview	Annas, “Being Virtuous” (BB)
Apr. 8	Virtues	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> I (BB) Cascio, “Get Smarter” (BB)
Apr. 12	Virtues and good life	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> (215–225)
Apr. 15	Some consequences	Slote, “Famine, Affluence, and Virtue” (BB) Turtle, “The Flight From Conversation” (BB)
Apr. 19	Relativism	Prinz, “Morality is a Culturally Conditioned Response” (BB) Midgley, “Trying Out One’s New Sword” (174–180)
Apr. 22		Nussbaum, “Non-Relative Virtues” (BB)
Apr. 26–29	Relativism and progress	C.S. Lewis, <i>The Abolition of Man</i> (BB)
May 3	<b>Final review</b>	
May 6	<b>Paper writing workshop; DUE: final paper</b>	