

Introduction to Ethics: Ethical Theory, Social Realities, and Moral Dilemmas

Paul Anh McEldowney
pmceldow@gmail.com

I. Course Summary

Ethics examines the foundations of morality: what it means to live a good life, what persons ought to or ought not to do, and what counts as right or wrong. Ethics is also concerned with topics such as the nature of rights, justice, fairness, privacy, and human virtue and vice. As such, ethics has played a central role in shaping society and its laws, and moreover, it has played a practical role in debates regarding what counts as proper medical, legal, political, or business practice.

This course serves as a philosophical introduction to a variety of ethical theories so that we may evaluate their insights and limits. This course will test these ethical theories against the social realities of race and gender. In particular, we will expand our study of ethics by devoting attention to the moral dimensions of social injustices such as racism, misogyny, and colonialism. This course also aims to introduce students to methods distinctive of the *practice of philosophy* such as argumentative analysis and critical thinking, as well as cultural open-mindedness, intellectual fairness, and self-reflection.

II. Course Goals and Objectives

1. Students will read important and under-appreciated philosophical texts, some of which aim to diversify a philosophical canon that has historically ignored women philosophers and philosophers of color.
2. Students will be able to define a variety of prominent ethical theories and identify their strengths and weaknesses.
3. This class will focus on concrete examples and situations. Students will be able to apply the conceptual frameworks discussed in this class to their own lives and to a variety of social and ethical situations.
4. This class will examine particular applications of ethical theories to medicine, law, and business. Students will be well equipped to thinking critically and creatively about these fields.
5. This class will be discussion and writing centered. Students will write papers and work on a final creative project. As a result, students will develop their argumentative and critical thinking skills, as well as their written and verbal communication skills. The final creative project allows students to develop creative thinking in addition to analytical thinking.

III. Course Materials

We will be reading the following texts:

1. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands, La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987).
2. Christopher Bennett, *What is this thing called Ethics?* (2015).
3. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947).
4. Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (2017).
5. José Jorge Mendoza, *The Moral and Political Philosophy of Immigration* (2017)
6. Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (1997).
7. Naomi Zack, *The Ethics and Mores of Race* (2011).
8. Additional readings available on Sakai.

IV. Evaluation

1. Discussion boards. *Each week, I will post a discussion question Monday before 10am. Students will i) respond to the prompt by Friday 8pm and ii) reply to someone's response by Sunday 11:59pm. Grading is based on a detailed rubric (available on Sakai). Each response = 2 points, Each reply = 2 points; total = 4 points a week. 20% of total grade*
2. Four papers. *Four times during the term students will submit a 3-5 page paper responding to a prompt (see calendar below for dates). Grading is based on a detailed rubric (available on Sakai). 60% of total grade = each paper is 15% of total grade.*
3. Creative project. *Students will submit a creative project on a topic of their choice. This may take the form of a traditional research paper, a piece of creative writing (e.g., poetry or prose), a podcast, graphic novel, or short film. This project will proceed in two stages. First, students will submit proposals detailing and outlining their projects (see calendar for due dates). Second, students will complete their projects according to their proposals. Due by 5pm on the Friday of finals week. 20% of total grade.*

Grade scale: A+ \geq 97 > A \geq 93 > A- \geq 90 > B+ \geq 87 > B \geq 83 > B- \geq 80 >; etc.

V. Calendar

- WEEK 1: What is Ethics?

Tuesday: Introduction, Logistics

Thursday: Bennett, *Introduction*.

Paul Boghossian, “The Maze of Moral Relativism”, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/07/2/maze-of-moral-relativism/>

Martin Hägglund, “Why Morality Makes us Free”, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/11/opinion/w-mortality-makes-us-free.html>

- WEEK 2: Death and the Meaning of Life

Tuesday: Bennett, Chapter 1.

Thursday: Barry Lam, “YOLO Apologetics”, Episode of Podcast *Hi-Phi Nation*.

<https://hiphination.org/season-3-episodes/s3-episode-10-yolo-apologetics/>

Plato, *The Ring of Gyges* (Sakai).

- WEEK 3: Which Lives Matter?

Tuesday: Bennett, Chapter 2.

Thursday: Michael Cholbi and Alex Madva, “Black Lives Matter and the Call for Death Penalty Abolition” (Sakai).

- WEEK 4: Our Obligations to Each Other, **Paper 1 due Thursday**

Tuesday: Bennett, Chapter 3.

Thursday: Selections from Allison Jagger, “Transnational Cycles of Gendered Vulnerability: A Prologue to a Theory of Global Gender Justice” (Sakai).

- WEEK 5: On Immigration

Tuesday: Selections from Mendoza (2017).

Thursday: Selections from Anzaldúa (1987).

- WEEK 6: Utilitarianism

Tuesday: Bennett, Chapter 4.

Thursday: Selection from John Stuart Mill’s *Utilitarianism*.

- WEEK 7: Kantian Ethics

Tuesday: Bennett, Chapter 5.

Thursday: Selection from Immanuel Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*.

- WEEK 8: Virtue Ethics **Paper 2 due Thursday**

Tuesday: Bennett, Chapter 6

Thursday: Selection from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*.

- WEEK 9: Mid-semester break

- WEEK 10: Contractualism

Tuesday: Bennett, Chapter 8.

Thursday: Selection from John Rawls, *Theory of Justice*.

- WEEK 11: Charles W. Mill's Analysis of Contractualism
Tuesday: Mills (1997), Introduction and Chapter 1.
Thursday: Mills (1997), Chapter 3.
- WEEK 12: Critical Race Theory, Reparations, Affirmative Action **Paper 3 due Thursday**
Tuesday: Selections from Zack (2011).
Thursday: Selections from Ibram X. Kendi's *Stamped from the Beginning*.
- WEEK 13: Misogyny
Tuesday: Selections from Manne (2017).
Thursday: Selections from Manne (2017).
- WEEK 14: Existentialist Ethics and Radical Freedom
Tuesday: Selections from Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Selections from de Beauvoir (1947)
Thursday: Selections from Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Sakai).
- WEEK 15: Colonialism and Representation, **Creative Project Proposal due**
Tuesday: Selections from Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*.
Thursday: Selections from Edward Said, *Orientalism*.
- WEEK 16: Critiques of Morality, **Paper 4 due Thursday**
Tuesday: Selections from Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*.
Thursday: Selection from Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*
- FINALS WEEK: **Creative Projects Due Friday at 5pm**

VI. Student Wellbeing

Maintaining and promoting students' social, emotion, and mental wellbeing is a priority. If you or someone you know needs help, there are a variety of counseling and wellness related resources available at the student health center. Please contact me if you would like more information regarding such services. It is important to me that students take sleep and rest seriously; they should aim for about 8 hours of sleep each night. If a student needs an extension for any assignment, please talk to me before or after class or send me an email.