

Philosophy 358
Spring 2024
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Course Overview

Ethical theory is the branch of philosophy where philosophers attempt to thematize the good. This class aims to proceed systematically through major theories of morality from both historical and contemporary sources. We will address questions such as: What is the good? What makes something good? Does morality focus on producing good actions, good persons, or good results? Are there ever exceptions to ethical rules? Can we know whether actions are right or wrong? Are we ever correct to make such judgments? Are emotions ever relevant to morality? What are moral facts? Do animals deserve moral consideration? What should I do? Working through these questions we will investigate figures in the history of ethical thought such as Plato, Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, Friedrich Nietzsche, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Peter Singer, Christine Korsgaard, G.E.M. Anscombe and Audre Lorde among others. Assignments will consist of an in-class presentation and a final paper.

Learning Outcomes and Objectives

My aims for this course are twofold. On the one hand, I want us to learn about how contemporary philosophers approach ethical problems. On the other hand, I hope that in seeing how contemporary philosophers deal with ethical questions we can thereby prepare you for the research environment and expectation of high-level humanities coursework. Hence many of our activities are structured around developing the skillset that is required for high-level humanities coursework (as well as many other professional environments): such as close reading of primary texts and writing an argumentative final paper.

Required Text

All readings will be posted to Canvas. I recommend but do not require you to buy the major books we are reading as our historical sources, like Hackett's publication of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Utilitarianism* or Cambridge's edition of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*.

Method of Evaluation

Your grade is composed of three parts.

1. Participation: 40%
2. Presentation: 20%
3. Final Paper: 40%

Your grade for the semester will be determined based on three components: your participation in class, a presentation, and a final paper.

Participation

Participating in the seminar means showing up having read and contributing to the seminar. This is not strictly speaking an attendance requirement or tasking you to speak up in class. It is not an attendance requirement since I will not take attendance everyday and do not need an excuse for why you might miss an individual session (you are an adult, live your life as you choose). It is also not a requirement to speak a lot in class. In my view, artificial incentives to speak up are antithetical to the core of philosophy. Therefore, the vast majority of students will receive a 100% for their participation score merely by showing up to class regularly, participating occasionally, and providing their perspective in some form or another. One easy way to participate, for example, is merely to ask a question. However, do keep in mind that if you plagiarize, or antagonize your classmates, or hurt the seminar environment in some way your participation grade may be affected.

Presentation

One of my aims for this class is for it to be student-driven, especially on Wednesdays and Fridays. Accordingly, rather than write a midterm paper, I am asking you all to lead a short discussion once this semester. The expectations for this presentation are fairly minimal: all I expect is that you provide a brief but informative introduction to the subject for your peers and lead a brief question and answer segment. **You do not need to be an expert in any way. All that is expected and assessed is your ability to steer the class into a productive conversation.** Your presentation alongside Q&A should run to about **20 minutes maximum** – therefore, I will cut you off at **15 minutes at the latest**, since we do not have much time together. Your presentation may **only** concern one of our ‘Contemporary’ rather than ‘Historical’ readings. You must confer with me and any other student presenting the same week to ensure that we use our time as efficiently as possible. Your grade is based almost exclusively on the content of your presentation, however, with the aim of skill-building, I will also provide brief comments on aspects of your presentation itself that could be improved.

If for some reason the idea of presenting in front of the class gives you horrible anxiety or dread, just come talk with me about it and we can find a way to make you more comfortable or provide an alternative assignment.

Final Paper

Your final paper is 8-12 pages, double-spaced in Times New Roman font (or equivalent). I will expect you to produce an argument on some issue we discussed in the course. A rubric will be posted closer to the due date.

Grading Scale

All grades except discussion posts are graded out of 100. The grading scale is provided below.

97-100 = A+
93-96 = A
90-92 = A-
87-89 = B+
83-86 = B
80-82 = B-

77-79 = C+
73-76 = C
70-72 = C-
66-69 = D
65 and below = F

Other Rules for the Course

1. All grades are final and non-negotiable. If you have a question about a grade for a particular assignment, eMail me to discuss it.
2. No incompletes will be given for the semester unless you can demonstrate valid and compelling reasons.
3. There will be no additional extra-credit assignments besides what is offered in the syllabus.
4. If you fail to turn in a midterm or a final, you will fail the course.
5. No form of academic dishonesty will be tolerated. All instances of academic dishonesty will be reported to the university administration. (If you plagiarize, I will catch you. I have caught people **almost every single semester** I have been an instructor!)
6. You must demonstrate the appropriate respect for all fellow inquirers.
7. I promise to do my best in responding to your eMails and questions right away, typically within 1-2 business days.
8. No use of ChatGPT or any other form of artificial intelligence at any stage will be permitted or tolerated.
9. I reserve the right to give you a 0 for an assignment if it plainly fails to address the question of the assignment, even if it contains some correct information.

Reading Schedule (see chart next page)

Dates	Historical Reading	Contemporary Reading
Week 1 (1/16): Introduction	Plato, <i>Euthyphro</i> . Plato, <i>Republic I-II</i> .	None.
Week 2 (1/22): Utilitarianism	Epicurus, "Letter to Menoeceus." Epicurus, "Letter to Herodotus." John Stuart Mill, <i>Utilitarianism</i> .	Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Entry on the History of Utilitarianism.
Week 3 (1/29): Utilitarianism	John Stuart Mill, <i>Utilitarianism</i>	Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality." Clive Crook, "'Effective Altruism' is as bankrupt as Sam Bankman-Fried's FTX."
Week 4 (2/5): Utilitarianism and Animal Welfare	Peter Singer, "Animal Liberation"	Johannes Kniess, "Bentham on Animal Welfare."
Week 5 (2/12): Deontology	Immanuel Kant, <i>Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals</i> , Chapter I.	Christine Korsgaard, <i>The Sources of Normativity</i>
Week 6 (2/19): Deontology	Immanuel Kant, <i>Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals</i> , Chapter II.	Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Lecture on Ethics." Christine Korsgaard, <i>The Sources of Normativity</i>
Week 7 (2/26): Deontology	Immanuel Kant, <i>Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals</i> , Chapter III. Immanuel Kant, "On the Supposed Right to Lie."	Christine Korsgaard, <i>The Sources of Normativity</i>
Week 8 (3/4): Deontology on Animals	Immanuel Kant, <i>Lectures on Ethics</i> (selections).	Christine Korsgaard, <i>Fellow Creatures</i> (selections).
Week 9 (3/18): Virtue Ethics (Motivations)	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> .	G.E.M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy."
Week 10 (3/25): Virtue Ethics (Naturalism)	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> .	Phillippa Foot, <i>Natural Goodness</i> . (selections).
Week 11 (4/1): Virtue Ethics (Emotions)	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> .	Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger"
Week 12 (4/8): Virtue Ethics (Courage)	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> .	<i>My Hero Academia</i> Screening.
Week 13 (4/15): Existentialism	Friedrich Nietzsche, <i>On the Genealogy of Morals</i> (selections).	Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism."
Week 14 (4/22): Care Ethics	Virginia Held, <i>Ethics of Care</i> (selections).	Carla Bagnoli, "The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, Global" review.
Week 15 (4/29): Buddhism	Dogen Zenji, <i>Shobogenzo</i> (selections).	Jay L. Garfield, <i>Buddhist Ethics</i> (selections).

