

# PHIL 2010: Intro to Ethics: Living Morally

## Instructor

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## Course Overview

### Focus I

For many everyday situations, many of us are able to recognize the right thing to do, and we are able to identify good and bad character traits and practices. Lying is, for the most part, a bad practice. I shouldn't steal from others. I should be kind and compassionate. I should be the sort of person that feels indignation towards those that cause unnecessary suffering. Still, many of us – including myself – find it difficult to act morally in all situations. And, even more so, we struggle to cultivate the sort of character that compels us to reliably act morally. Learning how to, and *actually* beginning to, cultivate such character will be a primary focus of this course.

### Focus II

Ethical questions are everywhere. Some of these questions are concrete: Is it always wrong to break a promise? What limitations on free speech are morally permissible? But other questions are more theoretical. For instance, you might have wondered where moral rules come from. Do they come from God or are they grounded in something else—say, human nature or our cultural practices?

This course will provide you with an introduction to the philosophical study of moral questions like these. The readings, lectures, and assignments will not only introduce you to important ethical issues but will also help you develop the critical thinking skills you will need to understand and assess them.

To this extent, our investigation will focus on four central puzzles in moral philosophy:

- How much are we obligated to give to those in need? What sorts of factors might affect our obligations?
- Is it wrong to eat animals? What are the relevant considerations?
- What is friendship? Should we care for our friends before others? What does this say about morality?
- Is morality objective? Does it stay the same across time and culture? What grounds morality?

As we will see, there are no settled answers to the ethical questions that we will be exploring. So, in order to sort out which proposals might be better, we will need to investigate the associated

arguments. What answers have philosophers given to these questions and what reasons do they give to support their answers? Is their reasoning plausible? Asking critical questions like these is crucial; if we don't understand the reasoning given to defend a particular answer to an ethical issue, we will be unable to understand whether that answer makes any sense.

## Texts

Selected readings available in "Tentative Schedule" below.

## Assignments and Grading

This course will have five graded components:

- **Participation (20%).** You are expected to come to the lectures and discussion sections having read—and thought about—the assigned readings. You are also encouraged to participate in the group and class discussions. To help you work through the readings and prepare for our class discussion, I have provided a set of reading questions the papers in the first section of the course. If it is requested, I will provide reading questions for the rest of the papers of the course. You are not required to turn in responses to these questions, though I encourage you to look for answers while reading.
- **Engaged Reading Exercises (15%).** You will be asked to turn in five Engaged Reading Exercises (each worth 3%) over the course of the semester. You may turn in **one ERE per week**, and it must be turned in on the day of the assigned reading. For example, you could do an ERE with Singer's "Famine, Affluence, and Morality", and it would be due at the beginning of class on Tuesday, Jan 14. You may not do an ERE on Jim Pryor's "How to Read a Philosophy Paper."

To complete an ERE, simply print out one of the readings for an upcoming week and begin reading. As you are reading, underline what you take to be the important bits, note words you are unfamiliar with, write out questions you have about the material, write your own thoughts in the margins, etc. The guidelines are not too strict here. The goal of these exercises is to show me that you are thoughtfully engaging with the material. Don't forget to put your name on the top of the paper before turning it in!

- **Moral Acts with Friends (15%).** You, along with those in your group (decided in class), will be asked to begin practicing a moral life, and you will record your progress in the form of three short papers (approximately one or two double-spaced pages each). You will also be asked to provide photographs and/or other evidence that you completed these tasks. Each of these assignments is worth 5% of your overall grade. These exercises will be explained in more detail in the relevant assignments section on Elearning.

In brief, you and your group will be asked to carry out moral acts related to the first three sections of the course. In section two, for example, you will be asked to prepare a vegetarian meal and eat together. You will then describe your experiences (deciding on a meal, shopping, cooking, any difficulties, etc.) in a short group paper. Following the submission of your paper, you and your group will discuss your experiences with the rest of the class.

- **Short Writing Assignments (20%).** You will be asked to complete two short writing assignments (approximately two double-spaced pages each) throughout the semester. These assignments are designed to allow you to critically engage with the readings and our class discussions. These short

papers will be combined to determine your performance for this portion of the course (so it's 10% for each paper). These papers will be due by 11:59 pm on the appropriate Saturday as indicated in the schedule below.

- **Long writing assignment (30%).** You will be asked to complete one long writing assignment (approximately six double-spaced pages). This assignment will give you the opportunity to not only use the skills you cultivated from the short writing assignments, but you will have the option to do more expansive research and the freedom to argue for your own philosophical position. A rough draft of your paper will be due on Mar 28. I will then return your draft to you with feedback. You will have approximately a week to make changes and incorporate my feedback before turning in your final draft on April 18.

**Important Assignment Information:** To the extent that it's possible, I aim to grade the short and long writing assignments anonymously. So please put only your WIN/Student ID number—not your name—on your papers (see the assignment prompts for further details). Furthermore, I only accept Word documents. If you send me a pdf file or a Pages file, I will not grade your assignment. The details for the writing assignments (including instructions and grading rubrics) will be made available through Elearning.

#### Grading Scale:

- A: 93-100% (Excellent)
- BA: 88-92% (Highly proficient)
- B: 83-87% (Proficient)
- CB: 78-82% (Highly competent)
- C: 73-77% (Competent)
- DC: 68-72% (Developing)
- D: 60-67% (Weak)
- E: 0-59% (Did not meet assignment criteria)

## Advice and Resources

**Doing philosophy.** Many of the reading assignments for this course are short. But don't let that fool you—philosophy is hard. How do you deal with this? Well, here are some suggestions: (i) Read the material more than once. (ii) Use the reading question as a guide for what parts of the paper to focus on. After reading an essay, try and summarize the main claims and arguments in your own words—this will help you come up with questions and objections. (iii) Start the written assignments early (doing this will help you review your answers with a clear head). (iv) Most importantly, if you're puzzled about something, ask questions in class or come visit us during office hours! For more resources on doing philosophy, see:

- Jim Pryor, "[How to Read a Philosophy Paper](#)" and "[How to Write a Philosophy Paper](#)"

**Academic resources.** The [Academic Resource Center](#) provides valuable academic resources including College Success Seminars, Academic Coaching, and Supplemental Instruction. The [Writing Center](#) provides students with help on papers and writing assignments.

**Accommodations for disabilities.** I am happy to make accommodations to assist students with documented disabilities (e.g., physical, learning, psychiatric, vision, hearing, etc.). Those wishing to arrange accommodations must contact Disability Services for Students. A disability determination must be made by this office before we can provide any accommodations. More information can be found [here](#).

**Sexual Harassment, Assault, Contact, Exploitation.** Federal law and [WMU policy](#) prohibit sexual harassment, sexual assault, non-consensual sexual contact, sexual exploitation, harm to others, stalking, intimate partner violence and retaliation. By law, when campus officials are aware that such behavior occurs, they must investigate and take action to protect students' safety. According to WMU's new sexual assault policy, most WMU employees are not confidential resources, which means that information you reveal may be shared with campus investigators, whether you want this to happen or not. Many victims/survivors prefer to seek confidential support and services. The [YWCA](#) offers 24/7, free support, which will inform and empower you to decide what options to pursue—emotional support, evidence collection (rape kit), pregnancy and STI tests, emergency contraception, counseling, filing a police report, seeking a protection order, initiating criminal prosecution, and/or reporting to WMU. The YWCA crisis line, available 24 hours, is (269) 385-3587. If you've experienced sexual or gender-based violence, and wish to have WMU investigate and take action, you may contact the Office of Institutional Equity directly at (269) 387-6316 or ask someone (preferably someone you trust) to report on your behalf.

**Mental Health.** WMU's [Mental Health Services](#)' professional staff members work with students to resolve personal and interpersonal difficulties, many of which can affect the academic experience. These include conflicts with or worry about friends or family, concerns about eating or drinking patterns, and feelings of anxiety and depression.

## Course Policies

In order to help ensure a successful class, please heed the following rules and policies:

- **Due Dates & Late Papers.** Barring unusual circumstances, the due dates on the syllabus are non-negotiable. If you need to miss an assignment (for religious observances, illness, etc.), it is best to inform me in advance. Late papers will be subject to a grade penalty.
- **Religious Observances.** The University is a diverse, multicultural enterprise and—as a community—we jointly embrace both individual responsibility and dignified respect for our differences. It is our general policy to permit students to fulfill obligations set aside by their faith. It is our intent that students who must be absent from scheduled classes to fulfill religious obligations or observe practices associated with their faith not be disadvantaged. However, it is the student's responsibility to make arrangements with his or her instructors in advance. It is in the student's best interests to approach each instructor expeditiously and with sufficient notice that the rights and responsibilities of the instructor are not disrupted.
- **Civility Policy.** Each member of our academic community is encouraged to be thoughtful and sensitive in their choice of words and behaviors. We should be aware of how our behavior affects

others. Furthermore, we carry a responsibility to challenge those who communicate intolerance, hatred, and bigotry. Words and actions matter. Everyone is asked to do their part in creating a healthy and positive university community and a culture that truly values each member's uniqueness, experiences, and perspectives.

- **Classroom Environment.** In order to maintain a classroom environment that promotes learning and discussion, I ask that you arrive to class on time. Additionally, [research](#) indicates that the use of computers, tablets, cell phones, and the like *undermine* attention, note taking, and learning. Despite these findings, I will allow the use of electronic devices for the purpose of referencing the readings. I will, however, advise you against the use of electronics as a reference tool and urge you to bring hard copies of the readings to class. If you decide to use a laptop, tablet, or phone in class and it becomes a distraction to you or your classmates, I may ask you to refrain from using it further.
- **Cheating & Academic Honesty.** As a student at WMU, you are responsible for making yourself aware of the University policies that pertain to Academic Honesty. These policies include cheating, fabrication, falsification and forgery, multiple submission, plagiarism, complicity, and computer misuse. In this class, you will be expected to abide by these obligations. This means that all work presented as original must, in fact, be original; the ideas and contributions of others (be they quotes, summaries, or paraphrases) must be appropriately acknowledged. More information about the WMU Academic Honesty rules, as well as the rights of accused students, can be found [here](#).

## Tentative Schedule of Readings and Assignments

Unless otherwise noted, the *readings should be done before our Tuesday class* meeting.

### Course Introduction

#### Week 1 (Jan 7)

- Meet and greet
- Go over syllabus
- What is philosophy? What is ethics?

#### Week 1 (Jan 9)

- Jim Pryor, "[How to Read a Philosophy Paper](#)"
- cursory glance at syllabus
- Introduction to philosophical methodology
- Identifying arguments in written prose.

## Puzzle 1: Are you morally required to give all your resources to charity?

Most people would agree that if you can help someone in need at little cost to yourself, you should do it. But why? What grounds our obligation to help others? Relatedly, when is it morally permissible to say, “I’ve done enough”? That is, how much of a sacrifice are we required to make to help with things like famine relief? In this section of the course, we will look at the ethics of altruism in an effort to better understand what morality demands that we do for others.

### Week 2 (Jan 14 & 16). Answer 1: Morality requires extreme altruism

- Peter Singer, “[Famine, Affluence, and Morality](#)”
- Q: What do you see as the main claim that Singer is defending in his paper (hint: look at the bottom of p. 230)? On p. 231, Singer introduces the two central premises of his core argument. What are they? Do you find them plausible? What conclusion does Singer take to follow from the combination of (i) his two central premises and (ii) the existence of massive famine in places like Bengal (look at p. 234, 235, 241)? On p. 233, Singer gives an example of a drowning baby. How does the example work and what point does he use it to make? Do you agree?

### Week 3 (Jan 21 & 23): Answer 2: Morality permits extreme altruism

- Andrew Cohen, “[Famine Relief and Human Virtue](#)” (focus on pp. 431-440)
- Q: What do you see as the main claim that Cohen is defending in his paper? How is his view different than Singer’s? According to Cohen, how does the drowning baby case differ from the famine case? Why does he think these differences matter? Cohen takes charity to be a virtue. What does this mean? What, for instance, are the characteristic features of a charitable person? How does someone develop them? What does Cohen mean in saying we have a right to do the wrong thing (pp. 435-6)?

### Jan 26 – Moral Acts with Friends 1 due by 11:59 pm.

### Week 4 (Jan 28 & 30): Answer 3: Morality forbids extreme altruism

- Jean Hampton, “[Selflessness and Loss of Self](#)” (Section II can be skipped, as can pp. 14-16 of Section V)
- Q: Why does Hampton think that selflessness is a problem and how does she illustrate this with her example of Terry? What are the two conceptions of morality that Hampton draws out through the discussion of Jake and Amy? What do these two views say about altruism (see p. 5)? When does Hampton think that altruistic actions are morally wrong and why does she think this conclusion is plausible? Hampton identifies three ways in which morality involves “self-regard” (pp. 8-9)—what are they? What is “self-authorship” (p. 9) and why does Hampton think it is important (look at the clown/MBA example on pp. 11-12)?

### Feb 1 – Short Writing Assignment 1 due by 11:59 pm.

## Puzzle 2: Are you morally required to be a vegetarian or a vegan?

We generally agree that killing humans is wrong except in extreme cases. There is even greater agreement that it's wrong to kill humans for the sake of consumption. It isn't just that it's gross – there's something *genuinely* bad about the practice. Assuming, then, that it is wrong to kill and eat humans, are there good reasons to defend the practice of killing and eating nonhuman animals? That there is seems to be taken for granted given that we are accustomed to eating meat in our culture. This section will challenge us to take a critical look at this practice in order to determine whether we are morally permitted in consuming meat and other animal products.

### **Week 5 (Feb 4 & 6). Answer 1: Morality permits eating nonhuman animals**

- Timothy Hsiao, [“In Defense of Eating Meat”](#)

### **Week 6 (Feb 11 & 13): Answer 2: Morality demands we eat far less meat**

- Jeff McMahan, [“Eating Animals the Nice Way”](#)

### **Week 7 (Feb 18 & 20): Answer 3: Morality forbids eating meat and other animal products**

- Tristram McPherson, [“Why I am a vegan \(and you should be one too\)”](#)

**Feb 23 – Moral Acts with Friends 2 due by 11:59 pm.**

## Puzzle 3: Is it morally wrong to give preferential treatment to our friends?

What is friendship? We all have people that we care about and would like to see flourish in life. The fact that we care about these individuals and are committed to their success plausibly explains our intuitions that we ought to give them preferential access to our care and resources. Another widely held intuition is that morality is impartial in that all are deserving of equal moral treatment. This raises an important question about the nature of morality and friendship: is it morally wrong to give preferential treatment to our friends? The aim of this section is to explore answers to this question along with the nature of friendship and what problems special duties to our friends might pose for prominent normative moral theories.

### **Week 8 (Feb 25 & 27): Answer 1: We do have special moral duties towards friends**

- David B. Annis, [“The Meaning, Value, and Duties of Friendship”](#)

**Feb 29 – Short Writing Assignment 2 due by 11:59 pm.**

### **Week 9 – Spring Break (Mar 2-6)**

- Chill
- Do a little work – but only a little!

### **Week 10 (Mar 10 & 12) Answer 2: We don't have special moral duties towards friends**

- Mark Bernstein, [“Friends without Favoritism”](#)

**Mar 15 – Moral Acts with Friends 3 due by 11:59 pm.**



### **Week 11 (Mar 17 & 19) Answer 3: That we have special duties has important implications**

- Michael Stocker, [“The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories”](#)

## Interlude: Research and Writing

### **Week 12 (Mar 24 & 26)**

- **Mar 24:** How to research philosophy
  - Time allotted for research and writing
- **Mar 26:** More detailed description of objections and responses
  - Time allotted for research and writing

**Mar 28 – Rough draft of Long Writing Assignment due by 11:59 pm**

## Puzzle 4: Is moral relativism true?

Is morality culturally relative? To investigate this question, consider that we take it to be true that it's wrong to torture an innocent child just for laughs. We can now ask what grounds this moral rule against torture—that is, we can ask: what makes it the case that torturing innocent people is wrong? A moral relativist (or subjectivist) will say that facts about what's right and wrong are grounded in facts about the moral rules that are endorsed by particular cultures. Those who reject relativism maintain that moral facts are grounded in something culture independent—say, the commands of God or basic facts of human nature. The readings in this section of the course will introduce us to some of the different—and conflicting—ways philosophers have tried to address this issue.

### **Week 12 (Mar 31 & Apr 2) Option 1: A Theistic Grounding**

- C.S. Lewis, [Mere Christianity](#) (excerpts)
- Q: What, in a sentence or two, is Lewis's core point in these chapters? What is the Law of Human Nature and what evidence does Lewis give for its existence? Why does he think the Law's existence is important? Do you agree?

### **Week 13 (Apr 7 & 9) Option 2: A Naturalistic Grounding**

- David Brink, [“The Autonomy of Ethics”](#)
- Q: What features of morality do Brink and C.S. Lewis agree on? What is Brink's argument against theistic accounts of moral objectivity (e.g., the Euthyphro Problem)? What is his naturalistic alternative and why does he think it's plausible?

### **Week 14 (Apr 14 & 16) Option 3: Skepticism**

- John Mackie, [“The Subjectivity of Values”](#) (focus on Sections 1-3, 5, 7-10)
- Q: Mackie maintains that “There are no objective values” (15). What does he mean by this and how does it contrast with the views of Lewis and Brink? How are moral standards different than the standards for “awarding prizes as sheepdog trials” (26) and what does this suggest Mackie means in saying that morality purports to be “objectively prescriptive”? What is the “argument from queerness” (38-42)? What does Mackie think the purpose of morality is (42ff)?

**Apr 18 – Final draft of Long Writing Assignment due by 11:59 pm.**