

Ethics through Contemporary Lenses

Professor: Taojie Wang (taojie_wang@brown.edu)

Course Meetings: The course is designed with two meetings/week, 13 weeks/semester timeframe in mind that fits a class size of over 30 students (adjustable to fit other timeframes & smaller class sizes).

Office Hours: Sign up in Google doc

Course Description

Ethics is concerned with the question “What should one do?” In this course, we will try to answer this question regarding various topics, including animal welfare, abortion, euthanasia, world hunger, free speech, climate change, moral obligation to obey the law, and war.

There are two main goals in this course. The first is to introduce you to the philosophical literature on the above-mentioned topics that are central to our contemporary ethical life. In this regard, you will have grasped some of the most popular arguments for both sides by the end of this class. We will read the assigned readings closely, developing the skills of extracting argument(s), reconstructing them, and responding to them in writing and conversation.

Additionally, since such topics are often ones about which people have strong and conflicting beliefs, it is also a goal of this class to help you learn how to engage with others on such matters in a respectful, productive, and rewarding way.

Course Materials

You are not required to buy any texts for this course. All readings will be made available electronically online.

Learning Activities and Assessments

Weekly Response Piece

As a weekly assignment, you are required to write either one response piece to one of the two readings of your choice or a response to one of your classmates’ response piece. A response piece should be between 200-300 words, submitted through Canvas under the Discussion post section. Response pieces are meant to be short notes to help you keep in mind what the structure of the text is and the question(s) you have regarding the text. It should be something that, once you look back at it during class, can help you have something to say, or some questions to ask, about the text.

If you are writing a response to someone else’s response piece, you are likely to do something different. In that case, if you find the point they made appealing, or that you share the questions they had, you can support them by saying your reasons for finding their point appealing, and saying why you think these questions matter. It would also be great if you could offer a potential answer to their questions. On the other hand, if you find that their understanding of the structure of the text differs from yours, you could compare the two readings and see which one is better supported. Or if you have an objection to a point they made, you can do that.

Doing these may take a little time at first. However, I will guide you by providing extensive feedback. As the course progresses and you become more familiar with the reading and reflective processes, writing this will become more comfortable and rewarding.

Papers

Students will be required to write three papers throughout the semester:

- Paper 1: 800 words
- Paper 2: 1000 words
- Paper 3: 1500 words

For each of the papers, you should choose one of the topics we have covered so far in class. In addition to the provided guidelines on how to write a philosophy paper, there will be a class session dedicated to that.

Grades Breakdown

Grades will be based on classroom participation, response pieces, and the three papers. Here's the weight each of these carries:

Classroom participation: 10%

Response piece: 20%

Paper 1: 15%

Paper 2: 25%

Paper 3: 30%

Attendance Policies

It is expected that you will be present at all course meetings. Please contact me if you cannot make it to class; students may have up to three such excused absences with no effect on the contributions to the participation grade (even without completing any additional work). Beyond three such absences, you will need to contact me to work out alternative arrangements for contributing to our collective work and class conversation (generally, additional comments in the Google Doc, but other options may be available). If you are more than ten minutes late to class, you will be counted as absent.

Diversity, Accessibility, and Accommodation

I strive to make this course a welcoming place for all perspectives, where all students are treated as valued and respected members of the class community regardless of gender, sex, ethnicity, religious affiliation, sexual identity, socioeconomic background, or ability. Please reach out to me early in the term if you have a condition, religious commitment, or extenuating circumstance that might require accommodations or modification of any of the course procedures.

Reading Schedule and Important Dates

Week 1: Introduction

Tuesday

- "About Ethics," Singer.
- Complete the Welcome Survey.

Thursday

- "The Virtue of Civility," Calhoun (Classroom climate building).

Part I: Theoretical Foundations

Week 2: Utilitarianism

Tuesday

- *Utilitarianism*, excerpts, Mill.

Thursday

- “A Utilitarian Approach to Ethics,” Hare.

Week 3: Deontology

Tuesday

- *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, excerpts, Kant.

Thursday

- “Deontology,” David McNaughton and Piers Rawling.

Week 4: Virtue Ethics

Tuesday

- “Virtue Ethics,” Annas.
- *Intelligent Virtues*, excerpts, Annas. (switch to Hursthouse *On Virtue Ethics* if Annas is too hard for students)

Thursday

- Writing Workshop before the first paper is assigned.
- Paper 1 assigned.

Part II: Practical Issues

Week 5: Animal Welfare

Tuesday

- “Puppies, Pigs, and People: Eating Meat and Marginal Cases,” Norcross.

Thursday

- “Eating Meat and Eating People,” Diamond.
- Paper 1 due.

Week 6: Abortion

Tuesday

- “Why Abortion Is Immoral,” Marquis.

Thursday

- “In Defense of Abortion,” Thomson.

Week 7: Euthanasia

Tuesday

- “Rule Utilitarianism and Euthanasia,” Brad Hooker.

Thursday

- “Against the Right to Die,” Velleman.

Week 8: World Hunger

Tuesday

- “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” Singer.

Thursday

- “Feeding People versus Saving Nature,” Holmes Rolston III.
- Paper 2 assigned.

Week 9: Free Speech

Tuesday

- “Is There a Right to Pornography?” Dworkin.

Thursday

- “Pornography, Civil Rights, and Speech,” MacKinnon.
- Paper 2 due.

Week 10: Climate Change

Tuesday

- “It’s Not My Fault: Global Warming and Individual Moral Obligations,” Sinnott-Armstrong.

Thursday

- “Climate Change, Collective Action, and Individual Action,” Hourdequin.

Week 11: Law

Tuesday

- “Legal Obligation and the Duty of Fair Play,” Rawls.

Thursday

- “Justice, Deviance, and the Dark Ghetto,” Shelby.

Week 12 War

Tuesday

- “A Realist Theory of International Politics,” War Hans Morgenthau.

Thursday

- “Just War: The Case of World War II”, Anscombe, in Goodin and Pettit eds..
- Paper 3 assigned (due by the end of next week).