

# *Practical Ethics*

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## **Course Summary**

This course is an introduction to contemporary ethical thought with a focus on the morality of harming others and saving others from harm. It aims to develop your ability to think carefully about moral issues, to acquaint you with the state of the art of moral theory, and to encourage you to reach your own considered positions about important real-world issues. In the first part of the course, we will focus on the extent of our duties to aid others. Among other questions, we will ask: How extensive are your moral duties to improve the lives of the less fortunate? Should you typically direct your help to those who need it the most? If the expected contribution of your behavior is minuscule, does that mean it also has little moral significance? In the second part of the course, we will discuss the morality of doing harm. For example, we will ask: Does the morality of your behavior depend on your intentions? Is there a moral difference between killing and letting die? Along the way, we will rigorously examine questions in practical ethics. These include: Is abortion morally permissible? Is torture? When if ever is it morally impermissible to procreate? On what grounds may you kill another person in self-defence? Which moral principles should guide the conduct of soldiers in war? What are your obligations to non-human animals?

## **The Aims of This Course**

This course has three related goals. First, to give you a working knowledge of the state of the philosophical debate of some major topics in practical ethics. Second, to teach you how to think clearly about important moral issues. Lastly, and by way of the preceding ambitions, to help you develop well-informed opinions about some issues of profound ethical importance.

# Course Schedule

## The Moral Demands of Affluence

- Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”
- Travis Timmerman, “Sometimes There Is Nothing Wrong with Letting a Child Drown”

## Effective Altruism

### Tuesday, 4/6

- Peter Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do*, Ch. 1
- Amia Srinivasan, “Stop the Robot Apocalypse”
- Jeff McMahan, “Philosophical Critiques of Effective Altruism”

## Will I Make a Difference? Does It Matter?

### Thursday, 4/8

- Jonathan Glover, “It Makes No Difference Whether or Not I Do It” (Sections 12 and 13 can be ignored)
- *Optional: Derek Parfit, “Five Mistakes in Moral Mathematics” (Sections 26 and 30 can be ignored)*

## The Doctrine of Double Effect and the Trolley Problem

### Tuesday, 4/13

- Judith Jarvis Thomson, “The Trolley Problem”
- Michael Otsuka, “Double Effect, Triple Effect, and the Trolley Problem: Squaring the Circle in Looping Cases”, pp. 107–110 (Section II)

## Killing in Self-Defense

- Judith Jarvis Thomson, “Self-Defense”

- Michael Otsuka, “Killing the Innocent in Self-Defense”

## **Punishment**

- McCleskey v. Kemp
- Stephen Nathanson, “Does It Matter If the Death Penalty Is Arbitrarily Administered?”

## **Abortion (1)**

- Judith Jarvis Thomson, “A Defense of Abortion”

## **Abortion (2)**

- McMahan, “Infanticide and Moral Consistency”
- The introduction and sections 1, 2, and 5 of Agnieszka Jaworska and Julie Tannenbaum, “The Grounds of Moral Status”. Available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/grounds-moral-status/>

## **Non-Human Animals (1)**

- Alistair Norcross, “Puppies, Pigs, and People: Eating Meat and Marginal Cases”
- Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, Ch. 1 (At one point Singer invites his reader to skip several pages of his argument, but please don’t accept his invitation)

## **Non-Human Animals (2)**

- Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, pp. 35–42
- Shelly Kagan, “What’s Wrong with Speciesism?”

## **Procreation and the Non-Identity Problem**

- Derek Parfit, “The Non-Identity Problem”. In §119, just read up to the claim Parfit calls “TD2”. You can also skip all of §126. (Read all of the other sections in full.)

- Seana Shiffrin, “Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm”

## **Human Enhancement**

- Michael Sandel, “The Case Against Perfection: What’s Wrong with Designer Children, Bionic Athletes, and Genetic Engineering”. Available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2004/04/the-case-against-perfection/302927/>
- Leon R. Kass “Ageless Bodies, Happy Souls: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Perfection”. Available at <https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/ageless-bodies-happy-souls>

## **Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide**

- James Rachels, “Active and Passive Euthanasia”
- J. David Velleman, “Against the Right to Die”

## **Killing in War**

- Jeff McMahan, “The Ethics of Killing in War”

## **Torture**

- Henry Shue, “Torture”

## **Death**

- Thomas Nagel, “Death”