

Ethics and Society

Introductory-Level Course Outline

What is this course?

Ethics, or moral philosophy, is a branch of philosophy that is concerned with questions of right and wrong. The primary goal of our course is to have you wrestle with various competing (and sometimes overlapping) moral theories. Our course will address two key components of ethics: *normative ethics* and *applied ethics*.

Normative ethics asks questions about the foundational principles of morality. In other words, it asks questions like: What makes an act morally right or morally wrong? How can we agree on moral principles, if at all? Why ought we prefer one moral theory over another? These kinds of questions are also associated with questions about how one can live a good life.

Applied ethics takes answers to questions about normative ethics and applies them to real world issues. After all, we don't make moral decisions in a vacuum! Applied ethics therefore asks questions like: Ought we obey unjust laws? Should we treat non-human animals as moral equals? Do we have moral obligations to our natural world, to future generations, to the global poor?

Questions about ethics requires both deep personal reflection as well as collective discussion and decision-making with a community of others. To that end, our course will focus on both the personal and political aspects of morality and moral decision-making. Students should walk away from this course having a grasp on various ethical theories, their application to the real world, and a deeper sense of one's own moral commitments and the effect those commitments have on the world around them.

Learning Objectives:

By the end of this course, all students will have developed the following knowledge and capacities:

- Students will be able to identify and express the basic tenets of popular ethical theories discussed in class
- Students will develop the capacity to present clear, cogent arguments in favor or against certain ethical theories and their relation to contemporary political issues
- Students will be able to clearly articulate their own values in writing, in person, and in concert with others
- Students will build a capacity to respectfully discuss and debate core moral commitments with their fellow students

Reading Schedule:

[Moral Philosophy: In Theory!](#)

Week 1 – What is the purpose of moral philosophy?

Day 1 – Introductions and initial intuitions about moral dilemmas

Day 2 – Russ Shafer-Landau, “Introduction” and “Hedonism: Its Powerful Appeal”

Week 2 – Why be moral?

Day 1 – Joel Feinberg, “Psychological Egoism” and James Rachels’ “Ethical Egoism”

Day 2 – Plato, *Euthyphro*

Week 3 – Consequentialism

Day 1 – John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chapters 1 and 2

Day 2 – John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chapters 3, 4, and 5

Week 4 – Consequentialism (Critiques)

Day 1 – Russ Shafer-Landau, “Consequentialism: Its Difficulties”

Day 2 – Bernard Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism” and Ursula Le Guin, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”

Week 5 – Deontology

Day 1 – Onora O’Neill, “A Simplified Account of Kant’s Ethics”

Day 2 – Russ Shafer-Landau, “The Kantian Perspective: Autonomy and Respect” and Thomas Nagel, “Moral Luck”

Week 6 – Virtue Ethics

Day 1 – Russ Shafer-Landau, “Virtue Ethics” Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I

Day 2 – Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books II, III, and IV, selections

Week 7 – Virtue Ethics

Day 1 – Richard Parry, “Ancient Ethical Theory”, read “Cynics” and “Stoics”

Day 2 – Confucius, *The Analects*, selections and Justin Tiwald, “Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Virtue*

Week 8 – Existentialist Ethics

Day 1 – Jean Paul Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism”

Day 2 – Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, “Ambiguity and Freedom”

Week 9 – Existentialist Ethics

Day 1 – Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, “Personal Freedoms and Others”

Day 2 – Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, “The Positive Aspect of Ambiguity”

[Moral Philosophy: In Action!](#)

Week 10 – Civil Disobedience and Political Resistance

- Day 1 – Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail” and Howard Zinn, “Seven Guidelines for Civil Disobedience”
- Day 2 – Candice Delmas, “Political Resistance: A Matter of Fairness”

Week 11 – Animal Rights

- Day 1 – Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, Chapter 1, “All Animals are Equal” and Abbate, Cheryl, “Meat Eating and Responsibility: Exploring the Moral Distinctions between Meat Eaters and Puppy Torturers”
- Day 2 – Thomas Regan, “The Case for Animal Rights” and Rosalind Hursthouse, “Applying Virtue Ethics to Our Treatment of Other Animals”

Week 12 – Environmental Ethics

- Day 1 – Aldo Leopold, “The Land Ethic” and Henry David Thoreau, *Walking*
- Day 2 – Stephen Gardiner, “A Perfect Moral Storm: Climate Change, Intergenerational Ethics and the Problem of Moral Corruption”
Bill E. Lawson, “The Value of Environmental Justice”

Week 13 – Global Poverty

- Day 1 – Peter Singer, “The Singer Solution to World Poverty” and “Effective Altruism”
- Day 2 – Iris Marion Young, “Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model”

Week 14 – Revisiting our Moral Intuitions

- Day 1 – Revisiting moral dilemmas – individual, group, and classroom activities
- Day 2 – Susan Wolf, “Moral Saints”