

Moral and Social Problems

Instructor: Alec Stubbs

Meeting times: TuTu 12:30-1:45

Office Hours: email me at alec.stubbs@umb.edu and we will set up a time to meet!

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 three key components of ethics: *normative ethics*, *applied ethics*, and *philosophy as a way of life*.

Normative ethics (what we will discuss in our **theory** section) 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 (what we will discuss in our **practice** section) 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?

Philosophy as a Way of Life (what we will discuss in our **life** section) places our previous two discussions (normative ethics and applied ethics) in the context of our own lives. Questions about what is right and wrong, as well as how we apply those answers to social problems, are useful in helping us understand how we ought to live our lives. You may find that one of the moral theories we discuss is more convincing than another, and you might find yourself enamored with a particular contemporary moral problem. We ought to consider what it means to live a good, just, and moral life in light of those truths.

Questions about moral and social problems 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. My goal is that you will walk away from this course having a grasp on various moral theories, their application to the real world, and a deeper sense of your own moral commitments and the effect those commitments have on the world around you.

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 critique the basic tenets of popular moral theories discussed in class
- Students will develop the capacity to present clear, cogent arguments in favor or against certain moral theories and their relation to contemporary moral 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
- Students will be able to recognize and express the connection between morality and meaning in one's life

Reading Schedule:

Part I: Theory

Week 1 - What is the purpose of Moral Philosophy?

Sept. 6 - Introductions and discussions about moral intuitions/dilemmas

Sept. 8 - Plato, Euthyphro (selections)

Week 2 - Why be Moral?

Sept. 13 - Rachels, "Ethical Egoism"

Sept. 15 - Shafer-Landau, "Ethical Relativism"

Week 3 - Consequentialism

Sept. 20 - Mill, *Utilitarianism* (selections); Singer, "The Logic of Effective Altruism"

Sept. 22 - Shafer-Landau, "Consequentialism: Its Difficulties" and Le Guin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"

Week 4 - Deontology

Sept. 27 - Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (selections) with O'Neill - "A Simplified Account of Kant's Ethics"

Sept. 29 - Nagel, "Moral Luck"

Week 5 - Virtue Ethics

Oct. 4 - Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (selections)

Oct. 6 - Annas, "Being Virtuous and Doing the Right Thing"

Week 6 - Ethics of Care & Ethics of Love

Oct. 11 - Held, *Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, Global* (chapter 1)

Oct. 13 - hooks, "Living by a Love Ethic," in *All About Love: New Visions*

Part II: Practice

Week 7 - Oppression, Social Change, and Reparations

- Oct. 18 – Young, “Five Faces of Oppression”
- Oct. 20 - Coates, "The Case for Reparations"; Williamson, “The Case Against Reparations”

Week 8 - Civil Disobedience, Racial Injustice, and (In)Civility

- Oct. 25 - King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail”; Zinn, “Seven Guidelines for Civil Disobedience”
- Oct. 27- Lai, “Political Vandalism as Counter-Speech”; Cherry, “A Philosopher’s Defense of Anger”

Week 9 - Abortion

- Nov. 1 - Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion"
- Nov. 3 - Don Marquis, "Why Abortion is Immoral"

Week 10 - Animal Rights & Animal Welfare

- Nov. 8 - Norcross, "Pigs, Puppies, and People: Eating Meat and Marginal Cases"
- Nov. 10 - Hsiao, "In Defense of Eating Meat"

Week 11 - Leisure, Labor, & Capital

- Nov. 15 - Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844" (selections)
- Nov. 17 – Stronge & Lewis, *Overtime* (Chapter 2); Smith, “The Benefits and Dignity of Work”

Week 12 - Interlude: What will Future Generations Condemn Us For?

- Nov. 22 - Appiah, "What Will Future Generations Condemn Us For?"
- Nov. 24 - No Class

Week 13 - Climate Change & Environmental Ethics

- Nov. 29 - Leopold, “The Land Ethic”
- Dec. 1 - Gardiner, “A Perfect Moral Storm: Climate Change, Intergenerational Ethics and the Problem of Moral Corruption”

Part III: Life

Week 14 - Morality & Meaningful Lives

- Dec. 6 - Thomas, "Morality and a Meaningful Life"
- Dec. 8 - Wolf, “Moral Saints”

Week 15 - You Should Change your Life

- Dec. 13 - Sky, "Groundhog Day #1", "Groundhog Day #2", and Rilke, "Archaic Torso of Apollo" (all to be read with me in class)
- Dec. 15 - No Class

Assignments:

- **Daily Meditations:** These are daily assignments that you will turn in on Blackboard *before* coming to class. You will also bring a copy (digital or otherwise) to class. Daily meditations will consist of you finding quotes from the day's primary reading material and commenting on the quotes that you choose. You will also be asking *at least one* good *philosophical* question.
- **Philosophical Exercises:** These are weekly assignments that will ask you to act, think, and write creatively about the topic we are discussing that week. Philosophical Exercises will be made available by the Sunday before the week in question, and they will be due on Blackboard at the end of the week on Fridays at 11:59 pm EST. There will be a total of 11 exercises that will be made available, but only 5 completed at the "Satisfactory" level are required for an A (see specs grading rubric below for more details).
- **Moral Life Paper:** In lieu of a midterm, this assignment will ask you to pick a moral theory we have discussed *that you find most convincing or amenable to your own life* and write a 800-1000 word paper that (a) reconstructs the argument for the moral theory, (b) evaluates that argument, (c) presents an objection, and (d) responds to that objection. **Due Oct. 21st.**
- **Moral Toolkit:** In lieu of a final, this assignment will ask you to take one moral theory discussed in the course *that you find most convincing or amenable to your own life* and apply it to a contemporary moral issue of your choosing. Because I want you to make a toolkit that you will actually find useful and engaging, you have creative control over how you present your moral toolkit. It can take the form of a podcast, a piece of art, a filmed dance performance, a written script, a sculpture, an actual toolkit, etc. I want you to be able to express your creativity in a way that makes what we learn *stick*. Alternatively, there is a paper option if you choose to do so. I will ask you to run your creative (or paper) idea by me by **Nov. 14th** so that we can discuss your project and have you on track to submit it by **Dec. 16th.**
- **In-Class Participation:** Finally, in-class participation will be a key component of your grade. You will be asked to work with group members, work through simulations, and be creative thinkers during class. This, of course, requires you to show up to class. Please note that your in-class participation grade will determine the + or - of your grade, and you will provide a self-assessment that will help me determine what in-class participation grade you deserve for the semester.

Grading:

In an ideal world there would be no grading. As professors, we could provide you with qualitative feedback about how well you have done in the course, and we could pursue knowledge for the sake of its intrinsic value. Unfortunately, I am asked to assign you a grade, even though there seems to be [many flaws in traditional systems of grading](#). However, in order to combat the bad effects of grades, I have done my best to build a grading system that respects your time and effort, while rewarding you for working on mastering the learning objectives of the course and giving you freedom of choice. Enter [specifications grading](#).

Here is how grading will work in this course. You will choose a "bundle" of assignments that you feel mirrors the grade you want to get in this course. Bundles in the higher grade categories require more effort and more work. Bundles in the lower grade categories require less work. **All assignments are graded on a "Satisfactory" or "Not Satisfactory" grading scale - either you meet the rubric requirements or you do not** (I will provide clear rubrics for all assignments).

What this allows me to do is to provide you more *qualitative* feedback on how you did in your assignment. If you did all of the work for an assignment to a "Satisfactory" level but it still could be improved, you will not be punished grade-wise. Instead, I can give you qualitative feedback on what to do to improve even more. If you receive a "Not Satisfactory", then on some assignments, such as our *Philosophical Exercises*, you can do a limited number of retries. Take a look at the grading bundles below, and don't worry, we will go over this more in class!

| | "A" Grade Bundle | "B" Grade Bundle | "C" Grade Bundle | "D" Grade Bundle |
|---|--|---|---|---|
| Daily Meditations (no retries) | 22 Satisfactory <i>Daily Meditations</i> | 20 Satisfactory <i>Daily Meditations</i> | 18 Satisfactory <i>Daily Meditations</i> | 15 Satisfactory <i>Daily Meditations</i> |
| Philosophical Exercises (2 retries) | 5 Satisfactory <i>Philosophical Exercises</i> | 4 Satisfactory <i>Philosophical Exercises</i> | 3 Satisfactory <i>Philosophical Exercises</i> | 2 Satisfactory <i>Philosophical Exercises</i> |
| Moral Life Paper (1 retry) | Satisfactory <i>Moral Life Paper</i> | Satisfactory <i>Moral Life Paper</i> | Satisfactory <i>Moral Life Paper</i> | |
| Moral Toolkit (no retries) | Satisfactory <i>Moral Toolkit</i> | Satisfactory <i>Moral Toolkit</i> | | |
| In-Class Participation | In-class participation will determine the + or - components of your grade. Your participation grade will be a combination of your own self-assessment and my assessment of your willingness to engage with other classmates during our in class discussions and simulations. | | | |

Classroom Expectations

Our class will be what is called a ["flipped classroom"](#), i.e., you will watch short lecture videos and do the readings prior to class. In class, we will work together, and each day will be unique. Some days we will be having debates, others you will be asked to work on creative projects. The goal is that our classroom is a creative environment where we can practice philosophy. Doing philosophy this way requires us to be open and honest with each other. But, we should also cultivate a classroom culture that is safe and kind for folks. The way we arrive at truth is through collaborative knowledge creation, and we can only achieve this by hearing people's true views, beliefs, and opinions. There will be contentious discussions, but I ask you to be respectful of those who contribute. I vow to do my best as a facilitator to be sensitive to a variety of views, backgrounds, contexts, and attitudes.

We will have lots of debates, Socratic discussions, simulations, roleplaying, creative projects, and other learner-centered activities in this class. One step that you can take to be a more active participant is to familiarize yourselves with what are called ["discussion moves"](#). We will be using these discussion moves in our classes to keep the conversation moving and to elicit good philosophical inquiry.

“Life Happens” Clause:

Life can be stressful and strange stuff can happen. To that end, I have a “life happens” policy where any student can contact me via email 24 hours **in advance of a deadline** and receive a 3 day extension—no questions asked. This can be invoked **once per semester**. If there is a bigger issue that requires massive accommodations, we can discuss that as well. However, this specific clause exists to prevent you from feeling the need to lie or divulge any personal information with respect to why an assignment didn’t get done on time. I get it—life happens.

Email Response Policy:

During weekdays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. I will try my best to hastily respond to your emails. Outside of those hours and during weekends, although I will be checking my email, response times cannot be guaranteed to be as quick. Therefore, if you are in need of a quick response, please try to contact me during the week from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.—outside of these hours, I should be able to respond to you within the next day. I will also expect the same from you – **you** will not be asked to be available at all times to respond to **my** emails either. If I email you outside of those hours, I will not expect an immediate response either. I think this goes a long way to creating a culture of a healthy work-life balance – we all deserve more free time to play and enjoy our lives.

Laptops in the Classroom:

There is a lot of (heated) debate about the pros and cons of having laptops in the classroom. A [popularly cited study](#) shows a *slight* difference in course performance in favor of those *not* using laptops in the classroom. [This more recent one](#) shows that laptops are distracting. [Another popular study shows](#) that laptop use hinder learning among those *nearby* laptop users, and [an additional study](#) suggests that there are learning advantages to taking handwritten notes over typed notes. So, what does this mean? It isn’t conclusive, but it seems like the best practice to *not* use laptops in the

classroom. However, there will be times where using laptops or phones will be helpful for in class discussions. For example, we might do classroom polls, and you might need to have access to your daily meditations on your laptop (although a notecard might be better). To this extent, I will not police you. But also know that **you will learn better when laptops and phones are put away when they are not useful to the course** (and I will give consistent reminders during class of this).

I also understand and respect that, for accessibility purposes or various other learning reasons, it may be important for you to have a laptop in class. To that end, if you have an accommodation for a laptop in the classroom, please let me know and we will make sure that you are able to use it. Additionally, *if you can make a compelling case as to why using a laptop in the classroom*, we can work out a solution. So—I will ask you to please not use laptops in the classroom unless you meet any of the previous two conditions.

Students with Disabilities and Accommodation Needs:

If you are student with a disability or are in need of accommodations, please note that you can seek resources through The Ross Center for Disability Services. As they note: “The Ross Center for Disability Services is the entity that approves and coordinates academic accommodations. If you are a student at UMass Boston and have a disability, you may be eligible for accommodations available through the Ross Center. We also provide connections to services in our office, and both on-and off-campus. The Ross Center invites you to call 617.287.7430, email ross.center@umb.edu, or visit the office in Campus Center, UL Room 211, and inquire about eligibility and procedures.” Once you meet with the Ross Center, please speak with me about your accommodation needs as soon as you can!

Plagiarism:

Plagiarism is the use of someone else’s work without proper attribution. It is a serious issue that you will be responsible for avoiding. Any works that you draw from, previous work you have written, texts, videos, and podcasts that you draw from, all of these must be cited in your written work in order to avoid plagiarism. Therefore, in this class, please note that you should always cite the material from which you draw either quotations or ideas. The best way to cite material is by providing a source and a page number if it is a text (see <https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/home.html>). If you cite material, you must not only provide an in-text citation, but you must also provide a full bibliographic citation at the end of your work. Please take time to review the [Student Code of Conduct](#) on this issue.

Mental Health Services Available via UMass Boston:

College can be a stressful time (and it shouldn’t have to be!), and I encourage you all to take advantage of the many resources we have at UMB to help in any circumstance. For mental health needs and concerns, you can go to the Counseling Center in the Quinn Admin Building, 2nd floor, Room 7, or visit https://www.umb.edu/healthservices/counseling_center. You can also call them at 617-287-5690.