

ETHICS

SYLLABUS

This course introduces students to some major themes in ethics. A few things make it distinctive. First, it is an incremental step outside the traditional canon. The syllabus introduces sources from traditions not usually covered in western philosophy curricula, and the next iterations of this course will expand further and further in that direction as I become more familiar with the relevant material. Second, the syllabus focuses on concrete moral problems. Although it covers major ethical theories, it situates them as potential solutions to pressing and concrete ethical disagreements, dilemmas, and controversies. And third, the course is *ungraded*. This is an experiment in reducing the role of grades as both the main outcome of the course and as the main incentive for student work and participation. I borrow C. Thi Nguyen's strategy of discussing the ethical aspects of grading to get students invested in the project of ungrading, and to introduce ethical themes more broadly.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

What is the right thing to do? What do we owe to each other, and how should we treat each other? What beings, human or otherwise, deserve moral consideration? These are obviously difficult questions, ones we've been asking for thousands of years. But they look different today than they did a thousand years ago, or even a hundred. The questions are weaved into our lives and context — social, political, technological — and pose new challenges for every generation. This course will start with an overview of some important themes in ethical thought. Then we will move on to broader questions about ethics as a subject of study and the status of ethical knowledge. Finally, we will consider some contemporary ethical problems, including the moral status of animals, the value of life, and the way law and politics are entangled with ethics in abortion policy.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this course, you will be comfortable with central debates in contemporary ethics and prepared for more advanced courses in the subject. You will understand the place of current ethical problems in the history of ethical thought. You will have gained experience evaluating arguments, writing argumentative papers, and participating in group inquiry into difficult problems. And you will be comfortable taking a philosophically-informed perspective on concrete ethical problems.

STRUCTURE OF THIS DOCUMENT

This whole document is required reading for the course. The next page contains basic information about people, grades, deadlines, and readings — the kind of thing you could print out and put up by your desk to keep important information handy. After that, there are overviews of the assignments and course policies. You should read through these sections at the start of the semester, and then refer back to them as they become relevant again.

A NOTE ON GRADING

This class will be “ungraded” — see the third page for a detailed description.

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BASIC INFORMATION

Time: ###

Location: ###

Instructor: Andrew Richmond, ar3688@columbia.edu

Office hours: ###

ASSESSMENT *See next section for details*

One course rubric, due Friday, May 27

Three writing exercises, due throughout the semester

Two papers, due at the mid-point and end of semester

Two course reflections, due at the mid-point and end of semester

SCHEDULE • = required reading, ○ = optional reading, ⊕ = due date, all readings on Courseworks

NOTE: "SL" refers to the Schafer-Landau book on Courseworks

Day 1. Introduction: Are Grades Bullshit?

- Frankfurt, "On Bullshit"
- Stommel, ["How to Upgrade"](#)
- Schneider & Hutt, "Making the grade"

Day 2. Egoism: Moral and Psychological

- Feinberg, "Psychological Egoism" (SL Ch 19)
- Rachels, "Ethical Egoism" (SL Ch 21)
- Hunt, "Flourishing Egoism" (SL Ch 20)

Day 3. Realistic Relativism

- Rosenberg, "Can Moral Disputes Be Resolved?"
- Rovane, "Moral Dispute or Cultural Difference?"
- Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, Ch 2-4
- Appiah, "What will future generations condemn us for?"
- Midgley, "Trying Out One's New Sword"

⊕ Course Rubric

Day 4. Ethics in Practice: Homelessness

- Waldron, "Homelessness and the Issue of Freedom"
- Lowe, [The Socialist Lavatory League](#)
- Appiah, Ch 10

Day 5. Impossible Moral Requirements

- Tessman, *When Doing the Right Thing is Impossible*, Ch 2 & 3, plus the description of Dr. Santana on pp. 14-15
- Tessman, Ch 1

Day 6. Utilitarianism I

- Mill, *Utilitarianism* (selections: SL Ch 29 & 48)
- Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" (SL Ch 53)
- Browse effectivealtruism.org
- Cloudek, "[Goodwill Ransomware](#)"

⊕ Writing Exercise 1

Day 7. Utilitarianism II

- Le Guin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"
- Srinivasan, "Stop the Robot Apocalypse"
- Mozi, *Basic Writings* (selections)
- Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," excerpts

Day 8. Deontology I

- Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (selections: SL Ch 55)
- O'Neill, "A Simplified Account of Kant's Ethics"

⊕ Writing Exercise 2

Day 9. Deontology II

- O'Neill, "Kantian Approaches to Some Famine Problems" (SL Ch 57)
- Feldman: "Kantian Ethics"
- Williams, "Persons, Character and Morality"

Day 10. Virtue I

- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (selections: SL Ch 66)
- Hursthouse, "On Virtue Ethics"
- Hursthouse, "Normative Virtue Ethics" (SL Ch 68)

⊕ Writing Exercise 3

Day 11. Virtue II

- Confucius, *Analects* (selections)
- Van Norden, "Virtue Ethics and Confucianism"
- Annas, "Being Virtuous and Doing the Right Thing" (SL Ch 71)
- McLaren, "Feminist Ethics: Care as a Virtue"

Day 12. Care I

- Gilligan "In a Different Voice" (SL Ch 72)
- Baier "The Need for More than Justice" (SL Ch 75)
- Calhoun, "Justice, Care and Gender Bias"
- Tessman, "Critical Virtue Ethics"

Day 13. Care II

- A.J. Ayer "A Critique of Ethics" (SL Ch 2)
- Noddings "An Ethic of Caring" (SL Ch 73)
- Lindemann, "What Is Feminist Ethics?"
- Herr, "Is Confucianism Compatible with Care Ethics?"

Day 14. Meta-Ethics: What are Ethical Truths?

- Mackie, "The Subjectivity of Values" (SL Ch 3)
- Smith, "Realism" (SL Ch 9)
- Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy"

⊕ First Paper

Day 15. Meta-Ethics: What are Ethical Truths?

- Tessman, Ch 4 & 5
- Walker, "Seeing Power in Morality: A Proposal for Feminist Naturalism in Ethics"

Day 16. The Sources of Ethics

- Tessman, Ch 6-9
- Kitcher, "Biology and Ethics"
- LaFollette, "Pragmatic Ethics"
- Frans de Waal, "[Moral Behavior in Animals](#)"

Day 17. Responsibility and Freedom

- Strawson, "The Impossibility of Ultimate Moral Responsibility" (SL Ch 37)
- Strawson the Elder, "Freedom and Resentment" (SL Ch 41)

Day 18. Ethics in Practice: Life

- Dworkin et al, "Assisted Suicide: The Philosophers' Brief"
- Lo, "Confucian Ethic of Death with Dignity and its Contemporary Relevance"

⊕ First Course Reflection

Day 19. Ethics in Practice: Animals I

- Huxley, "On the Hypothesis That Animals Are Automata"
- Kant, "We Have No Duties to Animals" (SL Ch 42)

Day 20. Ethics in Practice: Animals II

- Palmer, "Animals' Capacities and Moral Status"
- Diamond, "Eating meat and eating people"
- Palmer, "Capacity-Oriented Accounts of Animal ethics"

Day 21. Ethics in Practice: Abortion

- Supreme Court, *Dobbs v. Jackson*, pp. 9-23, 38-47, 148-159
- Singer, "[The Real Abortion Tragedy](#)"
- Dobbs, [Draft opinion argument map](#)
- Review Frankfurt, "On Bullshit"

Day 22. Ethics in Practice: Emotion

- Cherry, "The Errors and Limitations of Our 'Anger-Evaluating' Ways"
- Táiwò, "Stoicism (As Emotional Compression) Is Emotional Labour"
- Cherry, "Political Anger"

⊕ Second Paper

⊕ After feedback on Second Paper: Second Course Reflection

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COURSE WORK AND GRADING

UNGRADING

Unless there is a natural disaster mid-class, the worst and most fruitless part of this semester, for me, will be assigning grades. Not because I won't enjoy reading your work and talking to you about it — *that's my favorite part of teaching* — but because the pedagogical motivation for assigning grades on an A to F scale is dubious. (Maybe worse, since it adds incentives that can get in the way of learning.) So this class is going to do away with grades as far as possible. You still have to receive a grade, or the university won't count the course on your transcript. But we can at least use the grading process in a more pedagogically meaningful way. The basic idea is that you are going to grade *yourself*, based on (i) the feedback you receive from me on your assignments and, most importantly, (ii) a rubric you'll submit at the end of the first week describing the goals you have in this class. The rest of the assignments will be pretty standard for a philosophy course. You must submit all of them to pass the course, but aside from that your grade will be entirely up to you.

COURSE RUBRIC. Due

This assignment is an exercise in *metacognition* — in this course you won't just be thinking about the course material but also about your own learning goals, your strategies for achieving them, how to tell if you're achieving them, and so on. There are two parts to the assignment.

First is a short reflection identifying your goals for the course. What skills and abilities do you want to develop, and how will you tell if you've developed them? What goals do you have for the course, and how will you tell if you've met them? One useful tip is to phrase these like the ones on the first page of this syllabus: *By the end of this course, I will have learned how to X; by the end of this course, I will be able to Y*. No fair just borrowing those learning objectives though! The idea is for you to identify your own goals, based on the reasons you're taking this course and the way it can contribute to your own future. As you think about these goals, consider not just the end-products you create (like the papers) but the skills and abilities you're learning by doing so. And think about how less direct parts of your experience might contribute to your goals — e.g., participation in the class (whatever that means to you), or timeliness (especially considering the shortened semester).

Second is a rubric describing the standards you'll set, based on your goals, for an A, B, and C. I'll share some example rubrics to help with this. This will be a way of making your goals for the course concrete, and your achievement of them measurable. We'll talk more about all of this in class, and I'll give you some examples of course rubrics that you can use as a model for yours.

WRITING EXERCISES. Three, due

These are short assignments (150-600 words) that should be handed in before class on the day they're due. They will give you the chance to practice the basic skills needed to write a successful argumentative paper. The first will ask you to summarize an argument from our reading. The second will ask you to do the same, but to identify some points of ambiguity or interpretation — where there are different ways you might understand the argument — and to argue for a particular reading. The third (a sort of mini-paper) will ask you to summarize an argument from our reading and analyze it critically, arguing for or against its conclusion (or for some intermediate or more nuanced position). Each of these exercises will also be followed by a brief reflection on the exercise, discussing what came easily, what was more difficult, what you learned about your reading and writing strategies, and things like that. More detailed instructions will be posted on Courseworks.

FIRST PAPER. Due ###

A 1500-word paper, illustrating one of the debates we've discussed in class and arguing for a position on it. I'll provide prompts, but you can also pick a different topic in consultation with me. My feedback for the writing exercises will be tailored to help you write this paper, so if you work hard at the writing exercises, this paper will be a natural next step.

SECOND PAPER. Due ###

A 3000-word paper, explaining one of the debates we've discussed in class and arguing for a position on it. I'll provide prompts, but you can also pick a different topic, in consultation with me. If you work hard at the writing exercises and the first paper, you'll be extremely well-prepared to write this paper.

COURSE REFLECTIONS. Two, due ###

You'll write your first reflection after you receive feedback on your first paper. The goal will be to, first, evaluate your progress on your learning goals, as defined by your rubric, second, update the rubric as necessary (e.g. if it turns out not to capture your goals as well as it could), and third, reflect on the strategies you used to write the paper and to do your work in the course so far, and how you might update them based on how they're serving you so far.

In the second reflection you will assign yourself a grade for the course, and support that grade by discussing your work in the course and the extent to which you achieved the goals you set for yourself at the start of the course. We'll talk more about the details of both reflections as their due dates get closer.

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COURSE POLICIES

OFFICE HOURS. *Please take advantage of these.* I hope to see you all in office hours at some point this semester. You can come with questions about course material, about philosophy, about grad school, or anything else. Or you can just drop by to chat — no need to have questions prepared in advance. If you can't make the times listed, get in touch. I'm very happy to set up another time to meet.

LATE ASSIGNMENTS. Because this course is self-graded, I won't impose any penalty for late work. But if you have to submit something later than it's due, please let me know as soon as possible.

REWRITES. You can rewrite any assignment in this class. To do this, just inform me that you're doing a rewrite as soon as possible, and let me know what specific issues with your previous submission you're planning to improve in the rewrite, so I know what to look at as I'm giving you feedback.

ELECTRONICS. The scientific literature on electronics in the classroom is mostly unequivocal: *they are bad for learning*. If you use a computer in class — even if you intend to use it only to take notes — you remember less about the material, particularly about conceptual as opposed to factual issues, i.e., the ones that are most important in a philosophy course. Using your phone is worse. Even having your phone *on your person* has a slight distracting effect. Using electronic devices, especially laptops, can also be distracting for the people around you. I won't have a strict policy about this, so if you need, or if you just really want, to use your computer, you can. But you should be aware of all the above and try to mitigate the negative effects.

ACADEMIC SUPPORT. You should take advantages of the resources you have here at Columbia. As usual, the [Writing Center](#) can be consulted for advice about academic writing, and the [Libraries](#) can be a great source of advice on the practicalities of research. You can also come to me about either of those, or about other sorts of advice — e.g., on building work habits, or finding opportunities for new research — and I'll try to direct you somewhere helpful.

ACCESSIBILITY. You can find the Faculty Statement on Disability Accommodation [here](#). If you have a DS-certified Accommodation Letter, please get in touch with me as soon as possible about any accommodation needs I should be aware of. If you think you might have a disability that requires accommodation, you should contact [Disability Services](#) at 212-854-2388 or disability@columbia.edu. You should also feel free to come to me directly with any issues or questions. More generally, I hope you'll let me know if there's anything I can do to make the class more accessible or inclusive, or if there's any way I can make it easier for you to participate and thrive.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY. You can find the Faculty Statement on Academic Integrity [here](#). The work in this course will all be individual. For any of the assignments you can consult with each other, but the work you turn in must be your own, and any sources you draw from must be explicitly credited.