

ETHICS

SYLLABUS

COURSE DESCRIPTION

What is the right thing to do? How should we treat each other? What beings, human or otherwise, deserve moral consideration? These are difficult questions — we've been asking them 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 contexts — social, political, technological — and pose new challenges for every generation. This course will start with an overview of some important themes in ethical thought, discuss broader questions about ethics as a subject of study and the status of ethical knowledge, and then turn to contemporary ethical problems, including the moral status of animals, the value of life, and the way ethics is entangled with law and politics 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 two pages contain 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: Mon–Thurs, 2:45–4:20
Location: PHL 716

Instructor: Andrew Richmond, ar3688@columbia.edu
Office hours: Wed & Thurs, 12:00–1:00, [via Calendly](#)

SCHEDULE • = *required reading*, ○ = *optional reading*, ⊕ = *due date*, all readings on *Courseworks*
Note: “SL” refers to the Schafer-Landau book on *Courseworks*

Day 1. Are Grades Bullshit? Are They Ethical?

- 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”

Day 4. Ethics in Practice: Homelessness

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

⊕ **Friday, May 27: Course Rubric**

⊕ **Friday, May 27: Writing Exercise 1**

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](#)
- Cloudsek, [“Goodwill Ransomware”](#)

Day 7. Utilitarianism II

- Le Guin, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”
- Srinivasan, “Stop the Robot Apocalypse”
- Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism”, excerpts

⊕ **Thurs, June 2: Writing Exercise 2**

Day 8. Deontology I

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

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)

Day 11. Virtue II

- Annas, “Being Virtuous and Doing the Right Thing” (SL Ch 71)
- Van Norden, “Virtue Ethics and Confucianism”
- McLaren, “Feminist Ethics: Care as a Virtue”

⊕ **Thursday, June 9: Writing Exercise 3**

Day 12. Care I

- Gilligan “In a Different Voice” (SL Ch 72)
- Baier “The Need for More than Justice” (SL Ch 75)
- 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)

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”

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

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

⊕ **Thursday, June 16: First Paper**

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 Younger, “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”

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”
- Palmer, “Developing a New, Relational Approach”

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”

⊕ **Tuesday, July 5: Second Paper**

⊕ **Tuesday, July 12: Course Reflection**

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COURSE WORK AND GRADING

UNGRADING

It's not clear that assigning grades on an A to F scale serves much of a pedagogical purpose, and I want to organize this course so that GPA isn't a consideration, doesn't get in the way of *your intrinsic interest* in the course material, and doesn't distract you from *the skills and knowledge you want to build* in the course. You still have to receive a grade, but you'll grade *yourself* based on (i) the feedback you receive from me on your assignments and (ii) a rubric you'll submit at the end of our first week describing your goals for this class. The rest of the assignments will be standard for a philosophy course. You must submit all of them to pass the course, but aside from that your grade will be up to you.

COURSE RUBRIC. Due Friday, May 27

This assignment is an exercise in *metacognition* — thinking about your 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 be able to X*. But no fair just borrowing those ones — 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 future. As you think about these goals, consider not just the products you create (like papers) but the skills you learn by doing so. And think about how other parts of your experience might contribute to your goals — e.g., participation in the class, or timeliness (especially considering the shortened semester).

Second is a rubric describing the standards — based on your goals — for an A, B, and C. This will be a way of making your goals concrete, and your achievement of them measurable.

WRITING EXERCISES. Three, due May 27, June 2, and June 9

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, progressing from the most basic skills to the more complex ones. Each will be followed by a *reflection* on the exercise, discussing what came easily to you and what didn't.

FIRST PAPER. Due Friday, June 16.

A 1500-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.

SECOND PAPER. Due Friday, July 5.

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.

COURSE REFLECTION. Due Friday, July 12.

In this 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, outlined in your rubric. We'll talk more about details as the date gets 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, there won't be 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 for 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. *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. 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 to do 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.