

PHIL S175: Introduction to Ethics

Summer Session B: July 6-August
MWF 1:00-3:15
Class location: TBA

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******THIS IS A TENTATIVE SYLLABUS, SUBJECT TO POSSIBLE MINOR CHANGES BEFORE
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Extended Course Description

Whether or not we stop to think about them, ethical issues pervade our lives. The scenarios that tend to get highlighted are the dramatic cases, where the question is about something like whether or not to kill someone. But ethically relevant scenarios are much more common, and often much more subtle. In these more common scenarios we are faced with questions such as: Should I insist on staying angry with a friend who often fails to help out, or should I just adjust my expectations of her? Is it appropriate to judge a fellow student for his homophobic comment despite knowing that he grew up in a traditional religious family? Should I feel guilty about accidentally saying something patronizing to my friend, even though I was genuinely just trying to make her feel better about getting dumped? Should I worry about eating meat that comes from factory farms where animals are mistreated? Must I be friendly to a nerdy, unpopular boy in school, and if so, does this mean doing things like inviting him to social events?

Perhaps most often we deal with these scenarios without first reflecting on what to feel or think or do. But plenty of times – especially when we feel torn about how to respond or when we realize that we will have to justify ourselves to others – we do take the time to explicitly ask ourselves questions like the ones above, and we do our best to answer them before responding to the situation. Or we find ourselves thinking through these questions retrospectively. And to the extent that we do think through these questions, we are already doing ethics: we are trying to determine how we ought to live our own lives and how we ought to expect others to live theirs.

In this course we will be addressing questions about how to live, but will be doing so in a more systematic and sustained way than is usually done in our everyday lives. To help us do this, we will be looking at the work of philosophers who have thought about such questions. The point of reading these philosophical essays is not to memorize the answers these thinkers have given; rather, the point is to stimulate and challenge our own ethical thinking, and learn how to approach ethical questions in a more philosophically rigorous way. Through engagement with these readings and with each other we will develop our ability to think clearly, critically, and honestly about ethical issues. In the process we will also gain a deeper understanding of our own ethical views, of the ethical views of others, and of our ethical lives in general.

Specific Course Goals

In pursuit of the wider goal of advancing our ethical thinking, this course is designed with primarily five more particular goals in mind. Specifically, you can expect that in this course you will:

1. Become familiar with the sorts of questions asked, answers proposed, and supporting arguments offered by people thinking philosophically about our ethical lives.

2. Engage with the ethical perspectives and concerns of others, including those whose perspectives and concerns have been systematically marginalized and undermined in society (an even in traditional philosophical ethics itself).
3. Develop your skills in critically but openly attending to the viewpoint of another person through reading and discussion, even when this is a viewpoint with which you vehemently disagree. Such skills will allow you to better understand the other person's position, to better understand her reasons for holding it, and to uncover any kernel of truth that might be found in it.
4. Improve your ability to articulate – in both writing and discussion – your ethical views and your reasons for holding them in ways that allow others to better understand and engage with them.
5. Develop your capacity to honestly reflect upon and consider challenges to your ethical views and the (often hidden) assumptions behind them, in this way making it possible to strengthen your conviction in these views, refine these views so as to accommodate reasonable challenges, or revise them altogether in light of devastating objections.

Assignments and Other Activities

Developing the skills mentioned above will require your active involvement. So, while most of the class sessions will involve some lecturing on my part, there will also be plenty of class and small-group discussion. There will also be significant emphasis on reading and writing assignments, structured in ways that will allow you to practice and build your critical thinking skills. To make this practice regular yet manageable, you won't be writing several medium- to long-length papers, but instead will be writing just one medium paper, and spending more time on short papers, primarily on one-page guided reading responses. Below is a more detailed list of the various key activities you will participate in throughout this course. In addition to giving a brief description of each activity, I also briefly indicate how the activity relates to the specific goals of the course, and how success in the activity will be assessed.

Activity	Description	Purpose	Assessment
Informal essay/ Critique of informal essay	In the first class you will be given about 30 minutes to write an argumentative essay in response to some prompt. At the end of the course you will submit a short (1-2 pages) question-guided critical response to your own informal essay.	This gives you the chance at the end of the class to turn your improved critical thinking skills onto your own work, and to see how your thinking has progressed over the course.	The informal essay will not be graded, though evidence that you are thoughtful in writing it could help your overall course grade. Your critique of the essay will be graded. It will be assessed based on the particular guiding questions, but the things that will matter are more or less the same ones that will matter in the assessment of the other response papers (see below).
Intro meeting/ Mid-course meeting	Early in the session we will meet individually to discuss things like your informal essay, your ethics background and interests, and perhaps the ways you learn best. About midway through the course, we will meet again to discuss your strengths and weaknesses in the course thus far, as well as your sense of what components of the course have been more and less helpful to your learning.	These activities are meant to encourage communication about your interests, abilities, and reasonable needs as a learner, and about the effectiveness of the course in promoting your learning.	Of course, neither of these activities will be graded per se; but honesty in your self-assessment and constructiveness in your suggestions regarding the components of the course that have been most (and least) helpful for your learning could improve your overall course grade.

Activity	Description	Purpose	Assessment
Reading responses	<p>Generally, you will prepare for class by doing several readings and submitting (by the midnight before class) one or two 1 page reading responses. These response papers will always be guided by specific questions, which will vary. For example, you may be asked: to reconstruct an argument offered in the reading; to offer a certain type of objection to an argument in the reading; to offer a rebuttal on behalf of the writer against a certain objection to her argument; to strengthen or explore the implications of the writer's argument; to raise a clarification question you have about the reading; or to do any combination of the above.</p> <p><i>**On occasion, several students may be asked to informally "present" and discuss the thoughts, arguments, or questions raised in their reading responses, which would then serve as the basis for wider class discussion.</i></p>	<p>These reading responses aim to advance pretty much all the specific goals of the course. They especially give you the chance to practice clear and charitable yet critical thinking, as well as the particular argumentative strategies learned in class. They will also deepen your thoughts and bring up questions for you on the issue at hand, better preparing you for class discussion. Finally, since the responses are due the night before class, I can take into account your comments, concerns, and questions when refining the lesson plan.</p>	<p>Reading responses will be assessed based on the particular guiding questions. Some of the things that will matter are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> How clearly do you organize and express your thoughts? Do you interpret and address the claims and arguments of the reading in their most plausible form? Do you have good ideas about how the arguments can be made clearer or more convincing, or how they have even more interesting implications than the reading shows? Are your objections clearly stated, insightful, well supported by plausible reasons, and sensitive to how they might be rebutted?
Position paper (in four stages)	<p>You will write one 5-7 page paper based on one of several suggested topics. Your work on this paper will be done in four stages over the span of four weeks. In the second week of the course you will meet with me to discuss a paper proposal; in the third week you will submit an outline that lays out the argumentative dialectic of the paper and then meet with me to discuss it; in the fourth week you will submit your full paper based on the approved outline and will then receive a critical response to the paper from a peer; finally, in the fifth week of the course you will submit a 2-page response to your peer's critique.</p>	<p>While the regular response papers give you a chance to practice focused critical reading and thinking, developing a deeper argument requires more space. This paper will give you the room to explore an issue somewhat more deeply. Writing in steps – particularly putting together a solid outline that clearly lays out the dialectic of the paper before writing the paper itself – is key to writing a successful philosophy paper. This also ensures that you get my feedback on the core of your argument before taking the time to put it into paper form. Carefully reading and responding to thoughtful criticisms of your work further develops your ability to fruitfully bring others into your own ethical thinking.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Your proposal will be assessed for whether you have prepared for our meeting with significant, albeit tentative, thinking on what conclusion you want to argue for in the paper and how you want to argue for it. Your outline will be assessed for how clearly it lays out the dialectical argument you will be offering, and for how thoughtful and well-reasoned is: your main argument, the objections you consider against this argument, and the responses you offer to the objections. (for more specifics, see the sorts of factors mentioned below, regarding the completed paper). You will get more guidance on what makes a good philosophy paper, but some of the things that will matter in the assessment of your full paper are: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> How clearly do you organize and express your claims and arguments? How sincere & insightful is your argumentation? How strongly does your reasoning support your conclusion? Do you consider interesting and well reasoned objections to your main argument? Does your response to the objections take them seriously by addressing the strong reasoning that supports them with thoughtful counter-arguments? Your response to the peer critique will be assessed for clarity as well as for things like: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Do you take your peer's comments seriously by considering and responding to them in their most plausible form? Is your response to these comments well reasoned and does it show a willingness to refine or more seriously revise your conclusion and argument when you see no other honest option?
Peer-paper critique	<p>After everyone has submitted his or her completed position paper, you will be responsible for writing a 2-page question-guided critical paper in response to another student's position paper.</p>	<p>Rather than only taking seriously the writing of distant "experts", you will do the same with the work of your peers, knowing also that your comments will be responded to by the writer herself.</p>	<p>This peer paper critique will be assessed based more or less on the same sorts of factors that will be used to assess your other response papers (see above).</p>

Activity	Description	Purpose	Assessment
Class discussions	There will be an ample amount of class discussion in this course, based on the readings and response papers assigned and on the content of the lectures. The structure of these discussions will vary: sometimes they'll be more open-ended, sometimes they'll be more guided in structure, and sometimes (depending on the size of the class) we'll break out into smaller group discussions. <i>**As noted above: on occasion, several students may be asked to informally "present" and discuss the thoughts, arguments, or questions raised in their response papers, which would then serve as the basis for wider class discussion.</i>	Philosophy is often best carried out through dialogue with others, as is much of our everyday ethical thinking. Therefore, this course aims to develop your ability to critically think, express yourself, and fairly engage with others' views not only in terms of how you write but also in your discussions with others. The only way to improve your dialogical skills in these ways is through actual dialogue.	Your participation in class discussions will factor into your Participation grade; it will be assessed along various dimensions: 1. The regularity of your contributions: Do you routinely share your thoughts, concerns, and questions with the class while also refraining from dominating discussion? 2. The tone and sincerity of your contributions: Do you respectfully engage with others, even (or especially) in disagreement? 3. The relevance and fruitfulness of your contributions: a. When you are not quite clear about what the discussion is supposed to be focusing on, or about certain points in the readings, or about other students' comments, do you ask for clarification so that you (and others) can then better engage in the discussion? b. Do you tend to helpfully link your comments and questions to those made by others thereby contributing to the continuity and deepening of the discussion (or do you instead tend to just make comments that are dissociated from the thread of the discussion)? c. Do your contributions tend to stimulate others to offer related comments or questions? d. Do you provide good argumentative support for the claims you make? e. Are you able to effectively clarify or elaborate upon your comments when asked?
Ethical case contributions	Our class discussions will often center on issues that arise within particular ethical cases. Often these cases will be ones presented in the readings for the day or by me. But occasionally you will be asked to contribute ethical cases that may be used in our discussions. You are encouraged to draw on pretty much any source you like for these cases. It could be a case from your own life, or it could be: e.g., a newspaper article, a passage from a novel, an excerpt from a religious text, a YouTube clip, a song, etc.	If you are contributing a case, presumably it is one you find ethically interesting, and others might find more ethically interesting as well. This makes sincere, engaged discussion more likely. Also, by keeping your eye out for such cases, you will hopefully become more attuned to the ethical aspects of your experiences.	You will not be graded on these contributions per se, but evidence that you have put some thought into your selections could help your overall course grade.

Components of Your Course Grade

Response papers (approx. 20 at 1.5% each)	30%
Position paper	
a. Proposal	5%
b. Outline	10%
c. Full paper	15%
d. Response to peer critique	10%
Peer-paper critique	10%
Informal essay critique	5%
Class participation	15%

Note: Although they will not be officially graded, evidence of genuine thoughtfulness in your informal essay, mid-course meeting, and ethical case contributions will count favorably toward your overall course grade, particularly if you are on the border between grades.

Attendance and Unexcused Absences

There are only fifteen class meetings in the Summer Session, so missing even one class meeting in a course like this one – where class discussion is key for learning – can have a significant effect on your progress. Therefore, I will be fairly strict about what counts as a legitimate excuse for missing class, and my granting an excuse might be conditional on you completing a reasonable alternative assignment. Unexcused absences will have an impact on your final course grade: specifically, *your course grade will be dropped by a step (e.g., from A- to B+) for each unexcused absence.*

Late Assignments

Reading responses:

If your responses are submitted late this will undermine their purpose of helping prepare you and me for class discussion and giving you practice doing critical reading of as yet uncovered material. Therefore, late reading responses will not be accepted. However, you will have the opportunity – for **up to three** missed responses – to make them up by writing a 1 page question-guided response *to the discussion we have in class* about the relevant reading.

Position paper:

In light of the tight schedule of the course, and the fact that you can't proceed to the next stage of the position paper until the previous one is completed, I will adopt the following policy for extensions regarding the position paper components: There will be no extensions given for the paper proposal. If, for what I can be convinced are legitimate reasons, you need an extension on either your outline, or your full paper, or your response to the peer critique, I will grant you a 48-hour extension for that component, **provided you request this extension from me at least 24 hours before the deadline.** It will *not* be considered a legitimate reason to get an extension on one component (e.g., the peer critique response) that you got an extension on an earlier component (e.g., the full paper) and so now have less time to do the later one. And if you turn in one of these last three components of the position paper late without having been granted an extension, you will lose two steps (e.g., from a B+ to a B-) on your grade for that component for every day it is late. Also, note that you will be expected to fully keep up with the other work of the course during any extension period.

Peer-paper critique:

Since the fellow student whose position paper you will be critiquing will be disadvantaged if you do not submit your peer-paper critique on time, then can be no exceptions to this deadline.

Informal essay critique:

If you request an extension for this critique at least 24 hours before the deadline, I will grant you a 24-hour extension (to the last day of class) without question. Barring what seem to me particularly exigent circumstances, no informal essay critiques will be accepted after the last day of class.

Readings and Schedule

There are no books you will need to purchase for this course. **All required readings will be made available for free on the course website** (on the v2 classes server). On the next page is a full schedule of the readings and assignment deadlines (other than reading responses) for this course. It may help to know that I estimate this course will require no more than **13 hours of work per week** outside of class time (including *all* of the assignments); I am open to making adjustments as needed.

<p>Aug 2</p>	<p>CARE & MORAL UNDERSTANDING Aug 3</p> <p>Walker: “Moral Understandings”</p> <p>1. Relying on emotion or on reason? [Bennett: “The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn”]</p> <p>2. Focusing on our similarities or our differences?</p> <p>Minow: <i>Making All the Difference</i> (excerpt)</p>	<p>Aug 4</p>	<p>CATCH-UP Aug 5</p> <p>It is unlikely there will be any readings for this class session that are not just previously-assigned readings we couldn't get to during previous sessions.</p> <p>RESPONSE TO PEER CRITIQUE DUE 12PM</p>	<p>Aug 6</p> <p>IN-FORMAL ESSAY CRITIQUE DUE 5PM</p>	<p>FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY Aug 7</p> <p>Examining the effects of mental illness, social upbringing, and circumstances on moral responsibility.</p>	
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