

# Philosophical Ethics

PHIL-3000 R12, TF 8:30–9:45, Dealy 206

**Zita Toth**, Collins Hall B11 – **Office Hours:** TR 10 a.m.–12 & by appointment.  
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## Course Description

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Human beings have the unique and perhaps strange capability to perform ethically significant actions. We often examine and judge people regarding their behavior (eating habits, whether they donate money to charities, how they behave with their family, etc.), and we usually do this based on some ethical principle we already accept. Thus, the first main aim of *philosophical* ethics is to bring these already present but mostly hidden assumptions into light: why do we make the ethical judgments we do? What do we think a good human life consists in? The second main aim of the course is to evaluate these assumptions: are we in fact correct when we make these judgments? Might there be other moral standards, according to which we would judge differently? Are these different standards equally true and valuable? How can we justify our own ones? To help us to get a broader view on these questions, we will examine some of the most influential answers given to them in the history of philosophy: by John Stuart Mill, Immanuel Kant, and Aristotle.

## Course Objectives

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This course will help students to:

- Understand the normative character of ethical questions, and distinguish them from other, descriptive claims.
- Understand the central claims of the most important major approaches to ethics as discussed in the course, and the differences between these approaches.
- Be able to argue for or against these approaches.
- Apply the main claims of these approaches to real-life ethical questions.
- Recognize how these approaches are present in works of literature and in everyday conversations.

## Required Materials

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**Course text:** There is one required book for this course. It will be available in the campus bookstore (but it's probably cheaper on Amazon/Abebooks/etc.):

**Russ Shafer-Landau, ed., *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*, second edition (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), ISBN: 978-0-470-67160-3.**

(N.B.: the first edition has different page numbers, so please get the second ed.)

**Blackboard:** Some readings will be posted on Blackboard (you should be able to log in with your Fordham ID and password). Students are expected to have read these and to bring a **printed copy** to class on the day for which they are assigned.

## Course Policies

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- Attendance** **Attendance in class is mandatory**, and **more than four** unexcused absences will result in failure of the course.
- Everyone gets one unexcused absence for free. After that, each unexcused absence will count as a 0 towards your reading questions / précis grade.
- An absence will be considered excused only if you bring me some documentation from your dean.
- Electronic devices** **Electronic devices are not allowed in class** as they can be very distracting. This includes every internet-enabled device, such as phones, laptops, tablets, etc. Everyone is expected to leave these at home or keep them turned off and out of sight during class time.
- If I see you using your phone in class, I will take it and keep it till the end of the class. Sorry, no exceptions.
- For any special concerns about this policy, please ask me directly.
- E-mail** There will be some official communication via e-mail, and everyone is expected to check their e-mail accounts regularly *and read their e-mails carefully*. You can expect me to read and answer my e-mails within 12 hours; please do not send me e-mails at midnight expecting a response by the next morning class.
- Submitting papers** Papers must be brought to class on the date when they are due, **in hard copy**. At the top of the papers please put the word count, your Fordham ID number (available on [my.fordham.edu](http://my.fordham.edu)), and the date. **Do not put your name on the paper**. This helps facilitate blind grading to reduce the effect of grader bias.
- Academic integrity** Please familiarize yourself with Fordham's academic integrity policy found in the Undergraduate Handbook. Any assignment with plagiarized material will receive a zero, and will be reported to your dean.
- In summary, from the Fordham Handbook: "Plagiarism occurs when individuals attempt to present as their own what has come from another source. *Plagiarism takes place whether such theft is accidental or deliberate.*"
- If you are unsure about whether something would count as plagiarism or not, please see me before submitting your assignment.
- Internet sources** Please note that you are not allowed to use internet resources for your final paper. The main reason for this is that internet resources vary greatly in reliability, and unless you know the material very well already, it is difficult to assess how reliable they are in a given case. (E.g., wikipedia is very often mistaken.) You can always trust — and are allowed to use — the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, and anything you show me and ask me about.
- Disabilities** According to the Student Handbook, "Fordham University will make reasonable accommodations and provide auxiliary aids and services to assist otherwise qualified persons in achieving access to its programs, services and facilities in accordance with Section 504 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990."
- If you think you have a disability that will affect your ability to participate in class, please make an appointment to speak with someone at the Office of Disability Services, and bring me a letter from them **in the first week of the class**.
  - For more information, please see the Student Handbook.

## Requirements and Grading

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|                    | Component                    | Percentage |
|--------------------|------------------------------|------------|
| Grade<br>breakdown | In class participation       | 15%        |
|                    | Reading questions and précis | 15%        |
|                    | Short papers total           | 25%        |
|                    | Final paper                  | 25%        |
|                    | Final exam                   | 20%        |

**Participation:** Conversation is essential to Philosophy. Everyone, even if they are bored or shy or anxious is expected to participate in class. Here are a few suggestions with regard to class discussion:

- Charity is very important in every engaging discussion. You should answer to your peers' suggestion according to the best interpretation you can give to them.
- Criticism can be very useful, but be careful not to direct it towards the person instead of the idea.
- Please be willing to change your mind if the evidence so dictates.

**To prepare for class participation**, be sure to make notes about: (1) the main reading; (2) the main thesis of the reading; (3) the main line of argument in the reading; (4) any questions, objections, or remarks having to do with (1)–(3).

**Reading questions and précis:** For each reading, you should prepare a question about the reading that you would be willing to discuss in class, OR a short précis (max. 200 words).

- The question can be related to the thesis, the argument, or the consequences of the view.
- The précis should summarize the main thesis and argument of the reading, or be focused on an objection that you have about the reading.
- You should e-mail me your question every time by the end of the day (11:59 p.m.) before the reading is due (i.e., if something is due on Tuesday, you need to e-mail me your précis by Monday 11:59 p.m.). Please send your précis, together with the word-count, in the body of your e-mail. In the title of your e-mail, put the course number and your name (e.g., PHIL-3000-R18 John Doe). Whenever you send me a new précis, respond to the e-mail you sent previously (e.g., for your second précis, you should respond to your message in which you sent me the first précis). My e-mail address for the précis (please use my regular address for other course-related matters): ztoth@philosophy@gmail.com.

**Short papers:** There will be two short papers assigned for this course, related to the first two ethical theories we will consider. Detailed instructions will follow. **Note that there will be an oral component** for the first short paper, where you will be expected to rehearse an argument.

**Final paper:** The final paper is a 5–6 page research paper in which you are expected to apply an ethical theory studied in class to a specific ethical problem. You can choose the topic of your final paper, but you need to consult me about it. More details later.

**Final exam:** Unlike perhaps in most of your classes so far, it will be an **oral exam**. This usually creates a good occasion for discussion. Date TBD.

- The final exam will cover all the material assigned throughout the course.
- Please do not leave NYC before the official exam date (set by the University).

## Preliminary Schedule

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| <b>Introductory material</b> |  |   |
|------------------------------|--|---|
| Sep. 2                       | Introduction   | C.S. Lewis, "On the Reading of Old Books" (BB)<br>D.F. Wallace, "2005 Kenyon Commencement Address" (BB) |
| Sep. 6                       | Why be moral?  | Wilde, <i>The Picture of Dorian Gray</i> (sel.) (BB)<br>Plato, "The Immoralist's Challenge" (132–137)   |
| <b>Utilitarianism</b>        |  |   |
| Sep. 9                       | Utilitarianism   | LeGuin, <i>Those Who Walk Away...</i> (BB)<br>Mill, "Utilitarianism" (417–422)                          |
| Sep. 13                      | Act and rule utilitarianism                            | Smart, "Extreme and Restricted Utilitarianism" (423–427)<br>Hooker, "Rule Consequentialism" (428–440)   |
| Sep. 16                      | Some consequences                                      | Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" (466–473)<br>W Berry, "Waste" (BB)                            |
| Sep. 20                      | Objections 1: Happiness                                | Schafer-Landau, "Happiness" (BB)<br>Nozick, "The Experience Machine" (264–265)                          |
| Sep. 23                      | Against utilitarianism                                 | Williams, "Jim and the Indians" (BB)<br>Harris, "The Survival Lottery" (474–478)                        |
| Sep. 27                      | <b>Paper writing workshop; DUE: first short paper</b>  |   |
| <b>Deontology</b>            |  |   |
| Sep. 30                      | Hume   | Hume, <i>Treatise</i> (sel.) (BB)<br>The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (BB)                     |
| Oct. 4                       | Enlightenment  | Kant, "What is Enlightenment" (BB)<br>Terry Castle, "Just don't pick up" (BB)                           |
| Oct. 7                       | Deontology   | Sophocles, <i>Antigone</i> (BB)<br>Kant, "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals" (485–490)            |
| Oct. 11                      | Categorical Imperative                                 | Kant, "Groundwork" (490–498)  |
| Oct. 14                      | The Golden Rule  | Gewirth, "The Golden Rule Rationalized" (524–235)   |
| Oct. 18                      | Neg. and pos. duties                                   | Thomson, "Killing, Letting Die..." (543–552)<br>Foot, "The Problem of Abortion" (536–542)               |
| Oct. 21                      | Some consequences                                      | O'Neill, "Kantian Approaches..." (510–520)  |
| Oct. 25                      | <b>Paper writing workshop; DUE: second short paper</b> |   |
| <b>Virtue Ethics</b>         |  |   |
| Oct. 28                      | Introduction   | <b>DUE: final paper topics</b><br>Chekhov, <i>The Bet</i> (BB)  |
| Nov. 1                       | Overview   | Annas, "Being Virtuous" (676–686)   |
| Nov. 4                       | Virtues  | Aristotle, "The Nature of Virtue" (615–629)   |
| Nov. 11                      | Justice  | Aquinas, <i>Summa theologiae</i> 2a2ae (BB)   |
| Nov. 15                      | Some consequences                                      | Slote, "Famine, Affluence, and Virtue" (BB)   |
| Nov. 18                      | <b>Class canceled</b>                                  |   |
| Nov. 22                      | Writing workshop                                       | <b>DUE: final paper abstracts</b>   |
| <b>Final matters</b>         |  |   |
| Nov. 29                      | Relativism   | Gensler, "Cultural Relativism" (44–47)<br>Prinz, "Morality" (BB)  |
| Dec. 2                       | VE and Relativism                                      | Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues" (630–644)  |
| Dec. 6                       | Relativism and expressivism                            | C.S. Lewis, <i>The Abolition of Man</i> (BB)  |
| Dec. 9                       | <b>Final review</b>                                    |   |

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**Final: TBD**