

FIRST ETHICS PAPER PROMPT

DEADLINE: SEPTEMBER 25

This is a slightly unusual assignment, so please, read the prompt carefully. There are two parts of this assignment: the “live” part and the written part.

- (1) **The “live” part:** Choose two consecutive days of a week (weekend may be the easiest), when you make all the ethical choices you have — all choices of your everyday life — according to utilitarianism.
 - Decide the days early, and mark it on your calendar. Living like a utilitarian will make life seem pretty complicated at times, but please make an effort.
 - Please do not do anything that would seriously interfere with your formation.
 - If you can, make your choices according to utilitarianism even if you think that the utilitarian choice is not the right one. You only need to do this for two days, so don’t be afraid that it will corrupt you.
 - **Important:** keep a journal, a small notebook with you (possibly on your phone) all the time to record everything you do. These include: getting up, breakfast, what to say to your friends, etc. It might happen that there is a case when you just really can’t do what utilitarianism would command (either because it would bring about permanent damage or you just can’t bring yourself to it for some other reason); record that too. At this point, the journal should be very personal; you can record things that you would not necessarily share.
- (2) **The written part:** After all this, you will need to write a paper. A *philosophical paper*, not a personal essay. Here is how.
 - Start by going over your journal. After reading it carefully, you will need to select **two** things in it: your most significant deed that you did based on utilitarianism during those two days (the “utilitarian choice”); and a situation where you either just could not do what the utilitarian choice would have been, or you did it but knew it was wrong (the “problematic situation”).
 - In the first part of your paper, describe the *utilitarian choice*. Describe the situation in detail, and state the two alternatives between which the agent (in this case, you) must choose. Show how the utilitarian arrives at the choice: who are those concerned by the action? What are the effects of the actions? How do both alternatives affect the happiness of all concerned? If you think the utilitarian reasoning gave the right result, you should explain why. If you think that it did not, you should also explain why, and why you rather would have done things differently.
 - In the second part of your paper, describe the *problematic situation* in a similar way. Again, describe the situation in detail, and state the two alternatives between which the agent (you) must choose. State which alternative utilitarianism seems to favor and why. If this alternative goes against commonsense morality or some basic moral principle you do not want to violate, state the moral principle with which utilitarianism

appears to conflict, and show which option it favors. Present how the utilitarian might respond, using either the “denial” or the “biting the bullet” strategy. (Remember: if you did not end up doing the action, you cannot bite the bullet!) If you do *not* agree with utilitarianism, show why the strategy employed in the previous point does not ultimately work.

- Be as clear in your paper as you can. Assume that your reader does not even know what utilitarianism is; start with explaining that. The expected length of the paper is 2–3 pages maximum (Times font, 12pt, double spaced, Letter paper, 1” margins).
- (3) Finally, type in your journal and, if you wish, edit it. If you think some things in it are too personal, you can leave them out (mark it with ellipses in square brackets, like this: [...]). Otherwise, leave it relatively untouched. I will read the journals, but will not grade them; the grade is exclusively the grade of the paper.

Please bring your paper and journal in hard copy to class on the day of the due date, OR send them to me by e-mail before class. Late assignments will not be considered.

Do NOT write your name on your paper or on your journal. Submit them with a number generated by your birthday (MMDDYY) and the last two digits of the zip code where you grew up (e.g., if you were born on May 15, 1990, and lived in 10470, you should write 05159070 on your paper).