

Introduction to Ethics (Phil E-166d) **Harvard Extension School**

Spring 2022

Mondays, 5:50-7:50pm (lectures held live on Zoom and recorded for later viewing)

Optional Discussion Sections: TBA (Once enrollment settles, we will run a poll to see when the most interested students are available. These will also be held on Zoom.)

Course Website: <https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/96403>

Instructor: Ben Roth (PhD in philosophy), broth@fas.harvard.edu (I will usually respond within 24 hours on weekdays, but please check the syllabus and course website for answers to questions first.)

Teaching Assistant: Joel Van Fossen (PhD student in philosophy), joelvanfossen0@gmail.com

Office Hours on Zoom by appointment.

What does morality require us to do? Minimize suffering? Act in a way that everyone can, never making exceptions or excuses for ourselves? Develop character traits like courage and generosity? Is morality objective, relative, dependent on god, or created by humans? This course introduces students to the main theories of ethics in Western philosophy. We read major historical texts such as John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism*, Immanuel Kant's *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, and other influential philosophers and contemporary thinkers on the moral permissibility of eating animals, of abortion, and on other concrete issues like if we should, or are even obligated to, give a significant portion of our incomes to charity.

Course Goals:

- To give you an overview of different ethical theories in Western philosophy, in both historical and contemporary forms.
- To teach you not just what some philosophers have argued and how to apply these theories to concrete situations, but to think philosophically yourself, about your own choices.
- To improve your reading comprehension abilities.
- To improve your ability to concentrate and resist distractions.
- To improve your writing, especially the ability to explain complex views with clarity and precision and to make your own arguments with reasons.

Expectations:

- That you will keep up with the course lectures on a weekly basis.
- That, before each lecture, you will have read the assigned selections carefully and critically, multiple times (on purpose, a limited number of pages are assigned each week). I do not expect you to fully understand the readings on your own, but I do expect you to have an initial understanding of them, and a sense of where you need clarification and further explanation.
- That we will all treat each other and the readings with respect, but also skepticism. Philosophy does not care about a view simply because someone believes it, but only because of the quality of reasons that can be provided for that view.
- That, for papers of the more explanatory type, you will reread the relevant selections yet again, such that you can explain them clearly, in your own words, proving what you say with textual evidence and analysis.
- That, for papers of the more argumentative type, you will not simply write up the first idea that comes to you, but spend some time considering different possible arguments and then develop the most promising one as deeply as you can, having considered objections to it.
- That you will turn papers and exams in on time (by uploading them to Canvas).

Texts:

These are the editions/translations that I will be referring to and quoting in lectures, and they are available at [The Coop](#). You are welcome to use other editions (many can be found online), but know that following along with me will be somewhat more difficult.

John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 2nd ed., Hackett 9780872206052

Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Hackett 9780872201668

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 3rd ed., Hackett 9781624668159

Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, Yale 9780300115468

The rest of the readings will be made available on the course website under “Files” as pdfs.

Accommodation Requests:

Harvard Extension School is committed to providing an inclusive, accessible academic community for students with disabilities and chronic health conditions. The Accessibility Services Office (ASO) (<https://extension.harvard.edu/for-students/support-and-services/accessibility-services/>) offers accommodations and supports to students with documented disabilities. If you have a need for accommodations or adjustments, contact Accessibility Services directly via email at accessibility@extension.harvard.edu or by phone at 617-998-9640.

Ground Rules for Zoom:

If attending lectures live via Zoom, please keep your microphone muted except when called on to ask a question. You can raise your hand virtually (and should use this feature, rather than waving at the camera) to ask a quick clarification question during the course of a lecture. Please reserve more involved questions for the end of class. It is up to you whether you activate your camera during lecture, though I will probably be able to better understand questions if I can see you. If your camera is active, please minimize distractions, both on your part and in your background.

Evaluation:

You will write a number of short papers, increasing in length and complexity over the semester. Students taking the course for graduate credit will initially follow the same assignment structure but be held to a higher standard in grading. Toward the end of the course, they will write a longer final paper on a topic of their own devising (in consultation with me and the TA). Non-credit students may submit papers for comments but will not receive grades. Late papers will be docked a third of a letter grade per day. Here is the grading breakdown:

Undergraduate Credit:

Paper 1: ungraded diagnostic

Paper 2: 20%

Paper 3: 25%

Paper 4: 25%

Paper 5: 30%

Graduate Credit:

Paper 1: ungraded diagnostic

Paper 2: 20%

Paper 3: 25%

Final Paper Proposal: 10%

Final Paper: 45%

Participation:

Each week, you can participate in three ways:

— By participating in a weekly discussion section, led by the course TA. This is by far the best way to participate.

— By attending lecture live and asking a question and/or participating, when time allows, in the discussion at the end of the session.

— By submitting a question (clearly stated in a couple sentences at most) by noon on Monday to the Canvas “Assignment” created for that purpose each week. I will attempt to incorporate an answer to it into my lecture that evening. Such questions should be about the upcoming topic (rather than the previous one), formulated on the basis of having done the reading ahead of time.

Your participation can slide your final grade up or down a third of a letter grade (so, e.g., a B can become a B- or a B+). Doing one of the above each week well—e.g., contributing thoughtfully to discussion section, putting care into your question on Canvas—will result in a positive participation grade. Doing more than one each week will not boost you any further. Poor conduct during lecture or discussion section, such as a lack of punctuality, distractions caused by your devices, or dominating or disrespectful comments, will lower your participation grade.

Academic Integrity:

You are responsible for understanding Harvard Extension School policies on academic integrity (<https://extension.harvard.edu/for-students/student-policies-conduct/academic-integrity/>) and how to use sources responsibly. Stated most broadly, academic integrity means that all course work submitted, whether a draft or a final version of a paper, project, take-home exam, online exam, computer program, oral presentation, or lab report, must be your own words and ideas, or the sources must be clearly acknowledged. The potential outcomes for violations of academic integrity are serious and ordinarily include all of the following: required withdrawal (RQ), which means a failing grade in the course (with no refund), the suspension of registration privileges, and a notation on your transcript.

Using sources responsibly (<https://extension.harvard.edu/for-students/support-and-services/using-sources-effectively-and-responsibly/>) is an essential part of your Harvard education. We provide additional information about our expectations regarding academic integrity on our website. We invite you to review that information and to check your understanding of academic citation rules by completing two free online 15-minute tutorials that are also available on our site. (The tutorials are anonymous open-learning tools.)

In general, I would encourage you *not* to pursue outside sources until we have discussed a topic and you have written your paper on it. If you do draw on any outside sources, you must cite them, or you are guilty of plagiarism. But our papers do not ask for someone else’s, rather than your own, explanations or arguments. Thus if you rely on and cite outside sources, instead of your own thinking, you haven’t really completed the assignment. Our readings are not easy—you will need to read them carefully, and multiple times—but everything you need to write your papers is in the texts themselves. There is a lot of nonsense written about philosophy on the internet, even on what might seem to be reputable websites (the best internet resource for philosophy is the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, at <https://plato.stanford.edu>). If a topic piques your interest, we would be very happy to guide you to related readings.

Course Schedule (subject to slight revision):

January 24

Course Introduction

MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 1-11

Midgley, "Trying Out One's New Sword"

Singer, *Practical Ethics*, pp. 1-15

Paper 1 (1 page) due by 5:30pm on 1/31: Explain how Mill's theory compares the value of different pleasures, holding some to be higher than others. Provide concise textual support for your explanation. Make sure to consult the Formatting and Writing Guidelines.

January 31

Mill, *Utilitarianism*, pp. 1-41

February 7

Mill, *Utilitarianism*, pp. 42-64

Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality"

Le Guin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"

February 14

Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, pp. 1-33, 63-67

February 21: Presidents Day, No Class

Paper 2 (2 pages) due by 5:30pm on 2/28: Explain a specific difference of conclusion that Singer and O'Neill come to regarding the morality of how we respond to famine, and how it emerges from their adherence to different moral theories.

February 28

Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, pp. 33-62

O'Neill, "Kantian Approaches to Some Famine Problems"

March 7

Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (especially pp. 17-39)

Beauvoir, "The Age of Discretion"

Graduate credit: see "Final Graduate Paper" and start thinking about your topic

March 14: Spring Break, No Class

March 21

Hobbes, from *Leviathan*

Rawls, from *A Theory of Justice*

Mills, *The Racial Contract* (pp. 1-19; 19-40 optional)

Paper 3 (2-3 pages) due by 5:30pm on 3/28: Briefly explain Rawls's idea of the original position. Now imagine that you are behind the veil of ignorance. What is a key feature of

society that someone might advocate for different from or in addition to the principles Rawls describes? Provide an argument for this feature.

March 28

Epictetus, *The Enchiridion*

Nussbaum, "Rational Emotions"

Graduate Credit: Final Paper Proposal (1 page): due by 5:30pm on 4/4

April 4

Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion"

Davis, "Racism, Birth Control and Reproductive Rights"

April 11

Shelby, "Ideology, Racism, and Critical Social Theory"

Plato, *Republic* I (optional: beginning of Book II)

Undergraduate Credit: Paper 4 (2-3 pages) due by 5:30pm on 4/18: Explain Thrasymachus's view that "justice is the advantage of the stronger." Does Socrates' successfully refute it? Why or why not?

April 18

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I

MacIntyre, "The Virtues, the Unity of a Human Life, and the Concept of a Tradition"

April 25

Singer, "Equality for Animals?"

Scruton, "A Carnivore's Credo"

Optional: Korsgaard, "A Kantian Case for Animal Rights"

May 2

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II-IV

Jesus, The Beatitudes

Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 260

Optional: Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Book I

Undergraduate Credit: Paper 5 (3-4 pages) due by 5:30pm on 5/9: Apply one of the ethical theories we have studied to abortion or eating meat. Explain what claim about its permissibility the theory supports, and why. You can draw on one of our readings about abortion or animal rights but should not merely repeat its views.

Graduate Credit: Final Paper (9-10 pages) due by 5:30pm on 5/9

May 9

Kierkegaard, "Of the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle"

The Book of Job

Optional: O'Gieblyn, "Algorithm"

My Paper's Title

This is roughly how I would like you to format your papers. Use a normal font (like Times New Roman or Garamond) in 12-point size, and one-inch margins on all sides. Single-space your header information (if you are using *Word*, go to “Format,” “Paragraph,” and check “Don’t add space between paragraphs of the same style”), and include it only on the first page, then double-space the body of the paper. Length guidelines are based on this formatting. Give your paper an interesting and informative title. Include page numbers at the bottom of the page.

Citation-wise, we don’t need anything for assigned works beyond parenthetical page numbers for quotations and paraphrases. For example, Mills writes that “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied” (10). In quoting Plato and Aristotle, it is traditional to use the standardized page numbers included in the margins of every respectable edition. For example, Thrasymachus claims that justice is “the advantage of the stronger” (338c). If you refer to any source beyond those assigned, you should provide enough bibliographical information in a footnote that we can track it down, though this is unlikely for anything except the final paper for graduate students. For example, Heidegger writes, “By its very essence, death is in every case mine.”¹ Note that citations aren’t necessary for references to common knowledge, or general claims about well-known works like, say, *Hamlet*.

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Collins, 1962), 284.

An Introduction to Writing Philosophy Papers

Philosophy values **clarity** and **precision** very highly. You should choose your words carefully and define or explain uncommon, unfamiliar, and technical terms (think of your audience as generally well educated and curious, but not specifically familiar with our readings). It is often helpful to make distinctions, so your reader knows you mean X rather than—similarly but importantly differently—Y. Don't trust that your reader will be charitable; make your sentences literally mean what you intend. Since philosophy often deals with complex and abstract issues, it is important to use straightforward and plain language whenever possible. Don't falsely inflate your diction, syntax, or tone in an effort to sound smart or cover over vagueness in your thinking.

Philosophy values **reasons** and **argument** very highly. When discussing an existing view (from our readings), it is not enough to explain *what* is claimed. Rather, you will almost always be asked to explain *why* a philosopher claims what they do, what reasons are put forward to defend that claim as being true. When writing about your own views in philosophy, it is not enough to merely state your opinion, *that* you think X, or *that* someone is wrong to claim Y. Rather, you need to argue *why* X is true, *for what reasons* Y is false, so that your reader has rational grounds for accepting your claim. Finally, in making arguments, it is better (especially in short papers of the sort assigned in this course) to develop one unified argument for your claim than it is to list numerous partially developed ones. Pick your strongest reason and develop it as fully as you can.

Here are the most common types of papers assigned in philosophy classes:

Explanation

Often, especially early in introductory classes, you will be asked to write essays that merely explain a claim or argument. Here the task is simply to clearly and precisely explain—in your own words, but usually with key supporting textual evidence—what the prompt asks you to explain: what a claim means and/or how an argument is supposed to lead to its conclusion. Notice that this kind of essay does *not* ask you whether you agree with the claim or whether you think the argument works. This kind of paper does not really have a contentious thesis, as such prompts assume there is a right way to understand the claim/argument. While you will want to think about how to best organize your explanation, such essays usually don't have a formal introduction/body/conclusion structure. Jump right in, starting by stating the claim to be explained. A common mistake in these papers is to start too far from the specific topic, including broad summary and background information not strictly relevant and so a waste of precious space. In our class, Papers 1 and 2 are of this form.

Interpretation

Sometimes, especially in classes dealing with very difficult texts or more engaged with secondary scholarship about such texts, you will be asked to write essays that go beyond merely explaining to more fully interpreting a claim or argument. Such papers are similar to explanation essays (and the line between them isn't always hard and fast), but they include a contentious thesis: that one should understand what is discussed in *this* way, rather than in *that* way. Whereas in explanation essays, alternative interpretations aren't usually discussed, or discussed only to make clear that you mean X and not Y, in interpretation essays, it is assumed that others could reasonably understand the claim or argument differently, and your task is not just to explain, but to make an explicit case that your interpretation is the best one available. Our class doesn't include this kind of paper (in part because we are avoiding harder texts), but it is good to be aware of it.

Critical Analysis/Evaluation

The most common type of paper in philosophy classes asks you to analyze and/or evaluate an argument, that is, to make your own argument about an existing claim, most often whether or not an author has provided sufficient reasons to accept it is true. Most of the time, students are expected to identify a problem with the examined argument. This might be a problem with its logic, or with one of its premises, or with an unstated assumption it makes, or with an unacceptable implication it has. One can also identify a potential problem, but then show how it is resolvable (ultimately siding with the original author, now having added new support to the claim). Such essays usually build on an initial moment of explanation (or interpretation), since you need to make sure your reader understands what is claimed, and how the argument is supposed to work, before making your own argument about it. This kind of paper usually has an explicit thesis, foregrounding your claim—that so and so's argument is problematic because of X—and a fuller structure (which is not to say irrelevant background should be included; it still shouldn't be). In our class, Paper 4 is of this form.

Original Argument

This kind of paper asks you to make an original claim of your own (usually in response to a specific question or issue) and defend it with reasons that add up to one unified argument. It is very much centered on a contentious thesis—your claim and a succinct statement of the reason(s) you will put forward in defense of it. It is usually helpful to start with a quick introduction framing the issue and foregrounding your thesis, so that your reader knows what to keep in mind as you get into the details. Often, such papers will build on a moment of explanation (or interpretation) and/or critical analysis—if explaining an existing philosophical view and/or criticizing an argument put forward in defense of it is the best way of setting up your own argument that something else (your thesis) is true instead. A common mistake in this kind of paper is merely offering your opinion, not an argument that it is true. Another common mistake is thinking that an earth-shatteringly original claim is better than a more modest but still interesting one, carefully defended. In our class, Paper 3 is of this form.

Application

Sometimes, especially in classes on Applied Ethics (Medical Ethics, Business Ethics) and Philosophy of Art, you will be asked to apply a philosophical theory to a specific case or situation or work. Such essays usually build an initial moment of explanation (or interpretation) into them, as you will probably need to make sure that your reader understands the theory before discussing how it applies in this specific instance. This kind of paper is centered on a contentious thesis: that the theory applies in *this* way, for *this* reason. Its structure may be more or less formal depending on the length and the complexity of views discussed. In our class, Paper 5 is of this form.