

INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS: ETHICS OF THE EVERYDAY

Note: This is an abridged sample syllabus designed for a 15-week semester. The course is an introductory course that does not assume any background in philosophy or ethics.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

What does it mean to live ethically? How do ethical challenges arise in important social relationships? What ethical values and principles should guide your actions? In this course, we will explore a range of ethical problems and challenges which arise in everyday life. Drawing on a range of contemporary texts in moral philosophy, we will examine some key areas of modern life—family, work, love, living with animals, sexuality, and social media—and investigate different views about what it means to act ethically in these contexts.

Some of the questions we will examine include:

- Should we eat animals?
- Are we obligated to do work which makes the world a better place?
- What do we owe our parents?
- Is it OK to ghost someone in a dating relationship?
- How should we communicate about sex?
- Is online shaming ever justified?

This course will be relevant to students with a wide range of intellectual interests. No prior experience with ethical theory or philosophy is required or assumed.

COURSE GOALS

Students in this course will develop and cultivate the following skills and forms of knowledge:

- An understanding of a range of contemporary philosophical approaches to what it means to act ethically
- The ability to charitably read, interpret, and critically evaluate complex texts in ethics
- The ability to apply philosophical theories and tools to everyday ethical issues
- The ability to develop, articulate, and defend your own perspective on ethical issues
- The ability to respectfully discuss philosophical ideas with a diverse group of thinkers
- The ability to clearly explain complex ideas verbally and through writing

ASSESSMENT

- **Participation (26%):** Active participation in discussion sections over the course of the semester. Some ways you can participate include:
 - Contributing verbally in whole-class discussions (especially in a way that shows completion of the reading and critical reflection on the course texts and lectures).
 - Contributing verbally in small group discussions (especially in a way which helps others in your group join the discussion).
 - Bringing a specific question you have about the reading or lecture to class.
 - Coming to my office hours to have a discussion about the reading or course content.
- **Reading reflections (24%):** reflections are due weekly, by the night before our first class. Reflections should be around 3-4 sentences and should raise a question or offer a comment about one of the upcoming readings/viewings. Each reflection is worth 2%. You can miss 3 reflections over the semester.
- **Short assignments:**
 - Personal reflection assignment (10%, 800 words): How do you approach ethical issues in your life? What areas of your life ethical challenges appear in? What resources (e.g. friends, social media, parents) do you draw on when deciding how to respond to ethical issues in your life?
 - Objection & response assignment (10%, 800 words): Select a reading from Units 2-4. Identify an objection to a claim in the author's argument and explain how this objection might undermine the claim. Then, explain what you think the strongest response to this objection is.
 - Ethical advice assignment (10%, 800 words): Select an advice question from "Dear Prudence", "The Ethicist", or "Am I the Asshole?" Drawing on one course text, explain what ethical advice you would offer the questioner and explain in what ways this advice is similar or different to the advice offered by the actual respondent(s).
- **Final paper (20%, 1,500 words):** Choice between paper topics on the ethics of sex, consent, attraction, social media, or self care.

SCHEDULE & READINGS

UNIT 1: WHAT IS ETHICS? (1 WEEK)

Day 1: What is ethics?

- Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas" (short story)
- Stephen Cave & Stefan Klein, "[Once and Future Sins](#)"

Day 2: What is involved in reasoning about ethics?

- James Rachels, "Can Ethics Provide Answers?"

UNIT 2: LIVING WITH ANIMALS (1.5 WEEKS)

Day 3: Should we eat animals?

- David Foster Wallace, “Consider the Lobster”

Day 4: What moral status do animals have?

- Lori Gruen, “Eating Animals,” (pp. 76-86) & “Why Animals Matter,” (pp. 25-43) in *Ethics and Animals*

Day 5: Is it ethical to own pets? What limits should there be on the way we treat pets?

- Gary L Francione, “[The Case Against Pets](#)”
- Benjamin Rossi, “[Pet Ownership and the Ethical Perils of Domination](#)”

Personal reflection assignment due

UNIT 3: WORK (1.5 WEEKS)

Day 6: What makes (some) work valuable?

- Andrea Veltman, “[What Makes Work Meaningful?](#)”
- David Graeber, “[On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs](#)”

Day 7: Should we earn to give?

- William MacAskill, “Don’t “Follow Your Passion”: Which Careers Make the Most Difference?” in *Doing Good Better: Effective Altruism and a Radical New Way to Make a Difference*

Day 8: What does it mean to have an ethical career?

- Amia Srinivasan, “[Stop the Robot Apocalypse](#)”

UNIT 4: FAMILY (1.5 WEEKS)

Day 9: What do we owe our parents?

- Sarah Clark Miller, “Filial Obligation, Kant’s Duty of Beneficence, and Need”

Day 10: How should families be structured?

- Sophie Lewis, selections from *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation*

Day 11: Who should do what kinds of work in families?

- Judy Brady, “[I Want a Wife](#)”
- Pat Mainardi, “The Politics of Housework”

Objection & response assignment due

UNIT 5: LOVE & FRIENDSHIP (2.5 WEEKS)

Day 12: What does it mean to be a good romantic partner?

- bell hooks, Chapter One, “Clarity: Give Love Words” in *All About Love*

Day 13: Can you promise to love someone forever?

- Elizabeth Brake, “Is Divorce Promise-Breaking?”

Day 14: Should we morally criticize those we love?

- Barrett Emerick, “Love and Resistance: Moral Solidarity in the Face of Perceptual Failure”

Day 15: What does it mean to be a good friend?

- Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 8, chapters 1-5

Day 16: How should we decide whether to end a friendship or a romantic relationship?

- Adam Popescu, “[Why People Ghost — and How to Get Over It](#)”
- Julia Annas, “[What is Virtue Ethics For?](#)” (podcast)

UNIT 6: SEX, CONSENT & ATTRACTION (2.5 WEEKS)

Day 17: Is anyone entitled to sex?

- Amia Srinivasan, “[Does Anyone Have a Right to Sex?](#)”
- Eleanor Gordon-Smith, “[Hollaback Girl!](#)” (podcast)
 - Content note: sexual harassment

Day 18: What kinds of lies undermine sexual consent?

- Tom Dougherty, “Sex, Lies, and Consent”

Day 19: How should we communicate about sex?

- Kristen Roupenian, “[Cat Person](#)” (short story)
- Quill R. Kukla, “[Consent and Refusal Are Not the Only Talking Points in Sex](#)”
 - Content note: sexual assault

Day 20: Is it ethical to treat attractive people differently?

- Ted Chiang, “Liking What You See: A Documentary” (short story)

Day 21: Are racial fetishes ethically justifiable?

- Robin Zheng, “Why Yellow Fever Isn’t Flattering: A Case Against Racial Fetishes”

Ethical advice assignment due

UNIT 7: SOCIAL MEDIA & SELF CARE (3 WEEKS)

Day 22: Is social media good for us?

- Michael Schur, Rashida Jones, and Charlie Brooker, “Nosedive” (TV episode), *Black Mirror*

Day 23: What does it mean to have an ethical social media presence?

- Thi Nguyen, “[Escape the Echo Chamber](#)”
- Jia Tolentino, “[The I in the Internet](#)”

Day 24: Is online shaming ever justified?

- Kathryn J. Norlock, “Online Shaming”

Day 25: Is self knowledge ethically valuable?

- Jordan MacKenzie, “Knowing Yourself and Being Worth Knowing”

Day 26: Is a stoic approach to one’s emotions virtuous?

- Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, “Stoicism (as Emotional Compression) is Emotional Labor”

Day 26: What is the connection between self care and caring for others?

- Hui Yun Chan, “Mental Wellbeing in a Pandemic: The Role of Solidarity and Care”
- Sara Ahmed, “Selfcare as Warfare”

UNIT 8: STUDENT CHOICE & WRAP UP (1.5 WEEK)

Day 28 & 29: Student choice

- Some options: climate change, fraternities and sororities, protest and civil disobedience, parenting, aging.

Day 30: Wrap up & reflection

Final paper due