

Introduction to Ethics

Instructor: Hannah Read

Email: Hannahread01@gmail.com

Class Meetings: Tues. 11:30-12:50pm; Fri. 11:30-12:50pm

Office Hours: After class and by appointment

1. Description

We sometimes describe people, actions, and events as morally right or wrong. We also often disagree about these claims across cultures, as well as even within our communities. In this course, we will seek to make sense of these complex features of the moral life. The course will be divided into four parts.

In the first part we will address meta-ethical questions such as: What are people doing when they say that something is morally wrong? Are they expressing a personal opinion, or are they making an objective claim? Are there any moral facts? How can we make sense of moral disagreements and are there any such disagreements that cannot be resolved?

In the second part of the course, we will consider normative ethical questions such as: What actions are right or wrong? Is the moral status of an action determined by its consequences, whether it is performed because one has a duty to perform it, or whether it was performed by someone with a good moral character?

In the third part of the course, we will consider more practically minded moral questions that bridge the divide between meta-ethics and normative ethics. Questions we will grapple with include: To what extent should general moral principles (such as “Do not lie”) play a role in moral decision making? Should we always approach moral conflicts with the goal of figuring out who is right? Are some compromises morally impermissible even if they help to resolve the conflict?

In the fourth part of the course, we will turn to applied ethics. We will critically assess influential responses to questions such as: Is all speech, no matter how harmful, free speech? For example, is pornography a form of free speech? Are abortion and euthanasia morally permissible? If not, why? And if so, when?

2. Goal

The primary goal of this course is to provide students with an overview of fundamental and pressing questions and approaches in all major areas of ethics. It also aims to foster students’ critical and analytical thinking and writing skills, as well as their sensitivity to the potential moral complexity of many questions within and beyond philosophy.

3. Assignments

a. Participation

Attendance and in-class participation are required. Any more than 3 absences will affect students’ overall grades (except in cases of medical emergency). Students are also expected to

actively engage in class discussions. This means both raising questions and observations as well as carefully listening to others. If speaking up in class discussion is personally difficult, please contact the instructor as soon as possible to discuss this.

Note: Violations of Rutgers' Policy on bullying and harassment will not be tolerated:

<https://visiting.rutgers.edu/policies/university-student-life-policy-against-verbal-assault-harassment-intimidation-bullying-and>

See also the Philosophy Department's policy on norms of discourse:

philosophy.rutgers.edu/about-us/discourse

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b. Weekly Questions (1 question per reading, every class)

Students are expected to generate one question about the reading prior to each class. Questions may raise general concerns or confusions about the text (e.g. What does the author mean by X ?), but they should be philosophically substantive (e.g. If the author means M , then Y follows. But this raises problem P . Does the author really mean M ?). Questions should be uploaded to the discussion forum on Sakai by midnight the day before class.

c. Short Papers (3-4 pp)

Students choose and respond to a prompt from a list of options provided by the instructor.

d. Final Paper (10-12 pp)

Students may expand one of their short papers in light of feedback from the instructor or propose a new topic. Students must submit a proposal for approval from the instructor regarding their topic.

4. Grading

Participation (includes attendance, in-class discussion, and weekly questions) (25%)

2 Short papers (35%)

1 Final paper (40%)

Note: I am committed to providing adequate accommodation to those who need it. Please be in touch with Rutgers' Office of Disability Services as soon as possible, and don't hesitate to reach out to me for assistance: <https://ods.rutgers.edu/>

5. Calendar

Note: The following may be revised throughout the course of the semester.

Date	Topics and Readings	Assignments
1/21	<i>Introduction—A. What is Ethics?</i> No reading	
1/24	<i>Introduction—B. Philosophical Arguments and a Case Study</i> No reading	
1/28	<i>Meta-ethics</i> Smith; Schroeder	
1/31	<i>Moral Judgments and Moral Language</i> Stevenson	
2/4	Mackie (especially pp. 30-42)	
2/7	<i>Moral Motivation</i> Smith	
2/11	Svavarsdottir (especially pp. 163-172)	
2/14	<i>Moral Disagreement</i> Doris & Plakias	
2/18	Bloomfield	
2/21	<i>Normative Ethics</i> Kant	First short paper due
2/25	Mill	
2/28	Aristotle	
3/3	Tronto	
3/6	<i>Critiques of Normative Ethical Theories</i> Stocker	
3/10	Wolf	
3/13	Blum	

3/17 — 3/20	<i>Interlude: Moral Decision Making and Conflict</i> O'Neill	Second short paper due
3/24	<i>No Class—Spring Break!</i>	
3/27	Little	
3/31	Wong	
4/3	Avishai	Final paper proposals due
4/7	<i>Applied Ethics—A. Free Speech and Pornography</i> MacKinnon (pp. 1-22)	
4/10	Dworkin	
4/14	<i>No Class!</i>	
4/17	<i>B. Euthanasia</i> Rachels	
4/21	Nesbitt	
4/24	<i>C. Abortion</i> Marquis	
4/28	Thomson	
5/1	Review	Final paper due

6. Readings

Note: All readings will be made available on Sakai.

Introduction

What is ethics?

Philosophical methods and arguments

Part 1: Metaethics

Smith, intro from *The Moral Problem*

Schroeder, “Normative ethics and metaethics”

Stevenson, “The emotive meaning of ethical terms”

Mackie, excerpts from *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*

Smith, excerpts from *The moral problem*

Svavarsdóttir, “Moral cognitivism and motivation” [need to decide on which paper to read]

Doris & Plakias, “How to argue about disagreement: Evaluative diversity and moral realism”

Leiter, “Against convergent moral realism”

Part 2: Normative Ethics

A. Theories:

Kant, excerpts from the *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals*

Mill, excerpts from *Utilitarianism*

Aristotle, excerpts from the *Nichomachean Ethics*

Tronto, excerpts from *Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care*

B. Critiques

Stocker, “The schizophrenia of modern ethical theories”

Wolf, “Moral saints”

Blum, “Moral perception and particularity”

Interlude: Navigating moral decision making and conflict

O’Neill, excerpts from *Toward Justice and Virtue*

Little, “On knowing the ‘why’: Particularism and moral theory”

Wong, “Coping with moral conflict and ambiguity”

Avishai, excerpts from *On compromise and rotten compromises*

Part 3: Applied Ethics

MacKinnon, “Pornography, civil rights, and speech”

Dworkin, “Women and pornography”

Rachels, “Active and passive euthanasia”

Nesbitt, “Is killing no worse than letting die?”

Marquis, “Why abortion is immoral”

Thomson, “A defense of abortion”

Note: All violations of Rutgers’ Academic Integrity Policy will be reported immediately and may result in suspension or expulsion: <http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/academic-integrity-policy/>