

PL 431 – Philosophy: Ethics

Mondays & Wednesdays, 5:10PM – 6:25PM
Room: B503

INSTRUCTOR

Adam Etinson, Department of Social Sciences, The Fashion Institute of Technology.

Email: Adam_Etinson@fitnyc.edu

Office Hours: Wednesdays 4:30 – 5:00PM (B601), or by appointment.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

We are constantly faced with a bewildering array of choices. Some of these are big choices: choices about what career to pursue, where to live, who to vote for, and who to love. And some of them are smaller ones: choices about what to eat, what to wear, and whether to take a bike or the subway to class. Most of the time, our choices matter, and we want to do the right thing. But how do we figure out what the right thing to do is? There is always a lot to consider. On the one hand, we have *ourselves* to think about. It's important that we satisfy our own needs, wants, hopes, and desires. But, on the other hand, we also have *others* to consider: they have needs, wants, hopes, and desires too.

It's this latter consideration, that of doing right by others, that is the main subject matter of ethics or morality. This course will give students an introduction to the basic questions of ethics and to the best answers that philosophers have given to those questions across the ages. Some of these questions include: Whether we have any reason to respect the interests of others (Section II); whether morality varies depending on which culture one belongs to (Section III); whether there are any 'right answers' to moral questions, or whether these are all just a matter of opinion; whether women and men tend to think differently about ethical questions (Section IV); whether moral rules are always subject to important qualifications and exceptions; and whether the very idea of holding people accountable for their choices and actions even makes sense in a world determined by physical laws (Section I).

Although moral philosophy can often seem abstract, throughout the course an effort will be made by the instructor to demonstrate the relevance of moral philosophy to current events and daily life. To this end, the final section of the course (Section V) focuses on applied questions in ethics: questions about animal rights, vegetarianism, our duties to the world's poor, and about the rights of same-sex couples.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

This course will offer students a chance to:

- (a) Become familiar with the basic methods and preoccupations of philosophy.

- (b) Learn to read and interpret primary and secondary source material in philosophy.
- (c) Improve their essay and critical writing techniques.
- (d) Engage in philosophical discussion and discourse, and relate it to their everyday lives.
- (e) Refine their presentation techniques.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

(25%) Short essay: 3-4 double-spaced pages, due on the 23rd of October. On the 9th of October, students will be given 5-10 eligible short essay questions. The questions will draw on the topics and readings discussed in the first three sections of the course. And the student will be required to answer their chosen essay question in light of all of the readings associated with its topic, including supplementary readings. The essay will be assessed on the basis of its (i) clarity, (ii) effort, (iii) relevance to the chosen question, (iv) critical distance from the arguments of the discussed authors, and (v) its demonstration of familiarity with the relevant readings. The instructor will give students clear guidelines for writing essays at least a week before the short essay is due.

(35%) Final essay: 5-6 double-spaced pages, due on the 11th of December. On the 27th of November, students will again be given 5-10 eligible final essay questions. The questions will draw on topics and readings included in the final two sections of the course. These questions are likely to be more ambitious than those provided for the short essay, in that they will require students to cover more material, and to make a distinct positive argument. The same standards of evaluation that applied in the short essay will apply here, but as this is a longer essay more emphasis will be placed on critical distance. If students wish, the instructor will be willing to consider original suggestions for a final essay topic and/or for final essay readings (although this must be done in advance of handing in the essay).

Note: Essays submitted late will be penalized by 1/3 grade per day (e.g. A- instead of A if the paper is one day late).

(20%) In-class Presentation: Each student is expected to deliver a 10-15 minute presentation on a scheduled class topic. Only one presentation will take place per class. But since assigned readings will usually be discussed over two class sessions (that is, on Mondays and Wednesdays) students presenting on the same set of readings will be expected to collaborate and ensure that there is no major overlap between both in-class presentations. Students are asked to present a section or portion of the assigned text(s) that they find interesting and compelling. They will be expected to offer (a) a concise summary of the arguments offered in that section of text, (b) clearly relate that argument to the course material in general, and (c) raise one or two critical questions about the arguments that they have presented. The main goal of these presentations is to give students practice in organizing material to be presented in front of a group.

Note: Students are urged to pick a date for presentation as early as possible, i.e., ideally during the introductory class session on August 26.

(20%) Class Participation: All students will be expected to ask questions and respond to questions posed by the instructor. The hope is that this will facilitate active and engaged class

discussions of the course material. Students will be evaluated in accordance with their effort and engagement in class discussions. Basically: don't be shy. Classes are always more fun when there is lots of discussion.

PLAGIARISM

In accordance with FIT policy, plagiarism is regarded as a serious offence and will not be tolerated in any way. Any plagiarized coursework will automatically be assigned a grade of 0%.

COURSE MATERIALS

You must acquire the following two books for this course (both are on order at Fashion Design Books, 250 W 27th St, in adequate quantities):

- (1) James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy: Seventh Edition* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2012), ed. Stuart Rachels. (Hereafter: **EMP**)
- (2) James Rachels, *The Right Thing to do: Basic Readings in Moral Philosophy* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2012), Sixth Edition, ed. Stuart Rachels. (Hereafter: **RTTD**).

All other recommended texts will be made available on MYFIT for download.

COURSE SYLLABUS

AUGUST

26 INTRODUCTORY CLASS SESSION

I. WHAT IS MORALITY?

28 DEFINING MORALITY:

(1) **EMP**, "What is Morality?" Ch. 1, pp. 1-13.

Supplementary Reading

(a) **RTTD**, James Rachels, "A Short Introduction to Moral Philosophy", Ch. 1, pp. 1-18.

(b) Galen Strawson, "Your Move: The Maze of Free Will" in *The Stone*, New York Times, July 22nd, 2010.

II. WHY SHOULD WE BE MORAL?

SEPTEMBER

9+11 BEING AMORAL:

(1) **EMP**, “Ethical Egoism”, Ch. 5, pp. 64-81.

Supplementary Reading

(a) **RTTD, Friedrich Nietzsche**, “Master Morality and Slave Morality”, pp. 70-74.

(b) **Thucydides**, “The Melian Dialogue” in *History of the Peloponnesian War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), Tr. M Hammond, pp. 301-307.

(c) **Bernard Williams**, “The Amoralist” in *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. 3-14.

III. WHERE DOES MORALITY COME FROM?

16+18 MORALITY AND RELIGION:

(1) **EMP**, “Does Morality Depend on Religion?” Ch. 4, pp. 49-63.

Supplementary Readings

(a) **Richard Dawkins**, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006), Ch. 6, pp. 210-233.

(b) **Richard Dawkins**, “Is Religion Good or Evil?” (youtube video)

(c) **Frans de Waal**, “Morals Without God” in *The Stone*, New York Times, Oct. 17, 2010.

(d) **Frans de Waal**, “Morality Without Religion” (youtube video)

23+25 THE SOCIAL CONTRACT:

(1) **EMP**, “The Social Contract Theory”, Ch. 6, pp. 82-97.

Supplementary Readings

(a) **Ann Cudd**, “Contractarianism” in *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (online).

OCTOBER

30+2 MORALITY AND CULTURE:

(1) **EMP**, “The Challenge of Cultural Relativism”, Ch. 2, pp. 14-31.

Supplementary Reading

(a) **Adam Etinson**, “Of Kings, Cannibals, and Culture: The Problem of Ethnocentricity” in *The Stone*, New York Times, Feb. 17, 2013.

7+9 SUBJECTIVISM:

(1) *EMP*, “Subjectivism in Ethics”, Ch. 3, pp. 32-48.

Supplementary Reading

(a) *RTTD*, **J. L. Mackie**, “The Subjectivity of Values”, Ch. 6, pp. 47-58.

IV. WHAT DOES MORALITY REQUIRE OF US?

14+16 UTILITARIANISM:

(1) *EMP*, “The Utilitarian Approach”, Ch. 7, pp. 98-109.

(2) *EMP*, “The Debate over Utilitarianism”, Ch. 8, pp. 110-124.

Supplementary Reading

(a) *RTTD*, **John Stuart Mill**, “Utilitarianism”, Ch. 3, pp. 28-38

(b) *RTTD*, **Bernard Williams**, “Utilitarianism and Integrity”, Ch. 4, pp. 39-43.

(c) *RTTD*, **Robert Nozick**, “The Experience Machine”, Ch. 5, pp. 44-46.

21+23 KANTIANISM:

(1) *EMP*, “Are There Absolute Moral Rules?” Ch. 9, pp. 125-135.

(2) *EMP*, “Kant and Respect for Persons”, Ch. 10, pp. 136-145.

Supplementary Reading

(a) *RTTD*, **Immanuel Kant**, “The Categorical Imperative”, Ch. 7, pp. 59-62.

(b) **Randy Cohen**, “If Kant were a New York Cyclist” in *The New York Times*, Aug. 4, 2012.

28+30 FEMINISM AND THE ETHICS OF CARE:

(1) *EMP*, “Feminism and the Ethics of Care”, Ch. 11, pp. 146-156.

Supplementary Reading

(a) *RTTD*, **Virginia Held**, “Caring Relations and Principles of Justice”, Ch. 10, pp. 74-80.

NOVEMBER

4+6 VIRTUE ETHICS & GUN CONTROL:

(1) *EMP*, “Virtue Ethics”, Ch. 12, pp. 157-172.

- (2) **Jeff MacMahan**, “Why Gun ‘Control’ is Not Enough” in *The Stone*, The New York Times, Dec. 19th, 2012. (Available online)

Supplementary Reading

- (a) **RTTD, Aristotle**, “The Virtues”, Ch. 8, pp. 63-69.
(b) **Robert Wright**, “A Gun Control Law that Would Actually Work” in *The Atlantic*, Dec 17th, 2012. (Available online)

V. APPLIED MORAL PROBLEMS

11+13 ANIMAL RIGHTS:

- (1) **RTTD, Peter Singer**, “All Animals are Equal”, Ch. 14, pp. 116-125.
(2) **RTTD, Alastair Norcross**, “Torturing Puppies and Eating Meat: It’s All in Good Taste”, Ch. 15, pp. 126-133.
(3) **RTTD, Tibor R. Machan**, “Do Animals Have Rights?” Ch. 16, pp. 134-146.

Supplementary Reading

- (a) **James Rachels**, “The Moral Argument for Vegetarianism” in *Can Ethics Provide Answers? And Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), Ch. 7, pp. 99-109.
(b) **Jeff MacMahan**, “Animals” in *A Companion to Applied Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), ed. R.G. Frey & C.H. Wellman, pp. 525-536.

18+20 WORLD HUNGER:

- (1) **RTTD, Peter Singer**, “The Singer Solution to World Poverty”, Ch. 17, pp. 147-153.
(2) **David Miller**, “‘Are they My Poor?’ The Problem of Altruism in a World of Strangers” in *The Ethics of Altruism* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), pp. 107-129.
(3) **Peter Singer**, “Effective Altruism” (unpublished paper).

Supplementary Reading

- (a) **Peter Singer**, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (1972), Vol. 1, No. 3, pp. 229–243.
(b) **Hugh LaFollette**, “World Hunger” in *A Companion to Applied Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), ed. R.G. Frey & C.H. Wellman, pp. 238-254.

25+27 GLOBAL WARMING:

- (1) **Robert Hood**, “Global Warming” in *A Companion to Applied Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), ed. R.G. Frey & C.H. Wellman, pp. 674-684.

Supplementary Reading

- (a) **John Broome**, “The Ethics of Climate Change: Pay Now or Pay More Later?” in *Scientific American*, May 19, 2008.

DECEMBER

2+4 WAR, TORTURE AND TERRORISM:

- (1) **RTTD, Douglas Lackey**, “The Ethics of War and Peace”, Ch. 21, pp. 192-200.
(2) **RTTD, David Luban**, “Liberalism, Torture, and the Ticking Bomb”, Ch. 24, pp. 212-225.
(3) **RTTD, Thomas Nagel**, “What Is Wrong with Terrorism?”, Ch. 23, pp. 209-211.

Supplementary Readings

- (a) **RTTD, Atul Gawande**, “Hellhole”, Ch. 20, pp. 174-191.
(b) **RTTD, John Rawls**, “Fifty Years after Hiroshima”, Ch. 22, pp. 201-208.
(2) **Tony Coady**, “War and Terrorism” in *A Companion to Applied Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), ed. R.G. Frey & C.H. Wellman, pp. 674-684.

9 MARRIAGE:

- (1) **RTTD, Bertrand Russell**, “Our Sexual Ethics”, Ch. 26, pp. 240-246.
(2) **RTTD, John McMurty**, “Monogamy: A Critique”, Ch. 27, pp. 247-255.

11 COURSE CONCLUSION