

## Introduction to Ethics (PH 150)

**Course Instructor:** Jordan Kokot

**Contact :** jdkokot@bu.edu

### Course Description

Ethics is the study of one of the most fundamental questions of human experience: *what should I do?* This question confronts us almost continuously, not just in large decisions, political conversations, or in the rules and standards that govern our lives, but literally at every moment of every day. Should I get an egg with my wrap? Should I study for philosophy or for math? Should I date this person or that person? Should I honor my promises? or should I protect my own interests? These 'shoulds' signal the *normativity* of human life, or the sense that some choices, outcomes, dispositions, states of affairs, and behaviors, are somehow *better* or more worthy than others. However, the meaning and structure of these "should" is far from obvious, and they immediately generate their own series of questions: what could motivate a "should," and where does their strength come from? Are there different kinds of "shoulds?" Do "shoulds" apply differently to different people? If so, why? Can we find a way to theorize about "shoulds" in general, or are they fundamentally varied and situational? Are "shoulds" merely a social construct, and, if so, what would that mean for human life and decisions more generally?



In this class, students will be introduced to the academic study of philosophical ethics, often understood as rigorous attempt to understand and characterize normativity. Students will be asked to engage with a variety of contemporary and historical texts on topics within the field of ethics, stretching from Plato and Aristotle up through modern thinkers like Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Nietzsche, and contemporary writers like Ruth Chang and Michael Sandel. We will discuss important historical movements in the field of ethics, engage with contemporary debates concerning politics, race, technology, and advancing medical science, and we will investigate some of the most enduring questions in human experience.

### Course Objectives

You will develop your abilities to:

- craft responsible, considered, and well-structured arguments
- express yourself orally and converse thoughtfully about complex ideas
- gain competence in the landscape of academic ethics, broadly construed
- grow as a thinker, learner, reader, and communicator

## Instructional Format, Course Pedagogy, and Approach to Learning

This course will employ a mixed format. Though there will be regular interactive lectures, there will also be regular class discussions. I firmly believe that learning about philosophy involves both a change in the way we think and a strong conversational component. We learn from each other, not in isolation.

## Books and Other Course Materials

All course materials will be available through the class Perusal site ([perusal.com](https://perusal.com), code KOKOT-UKAUE). You should refer to the reading schedule, which will be updated periodically, for weekly readings and assignments.

All readings and videos will be made available on the class Perusal site.

**Additional Resources:** Finding reliable information about philosophy online can be tricky. I highly recommend the following sites:

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <https://plato.stanford.edu/>

The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <https://www.iep.utm.edu/>

## Assignments and Grading Criteria

In order to make the most out of Intro Ethics for you and your classmates, you will do a good deal of reading and writing, and you will engage in a variety of class activities. Specific course requirements are to:

- Regularly attend class and section, and participate in classroom discussions
- Complete regular reading check-ins and discussion prompts (in class on an ad-hoc basis)
- Complete four (out of five) weekly reflection assignments
- Complete two exams—a midterm and a final

## Grading and Evaluation

Your final grade will be calculated as follows:

Attendance & Participation (Section & Lecture)	15%
Reading Check-ins/Discussion Questions	15%
Regular Reflection Assignments	20%
Midterm Exam	25%
Final Exam	25%

## General Outline

This course is designed to introduce students to several fundamental questions, arguments, and positions in the academic field of ethics. It is also designed to give students the opportunity and resources to reflect more deeply on their own position as ethical agents. To facilitate these goals, the semester is divided into three parts, roughly equating to three different “levels” of inquiry. The first takes on the broadest view possible in that it introduces philosophy, the study of ethics, and standards of good argumentation, all while challenging students to engage with one of the most basic questions of the human experience: what, if anything, constitutes a “good life.” During this unit we will also begin to

engage with several “metaethical” questions, or question about whether and in what way ethics and its study are possible in the first place.

The second unit will narrow our scope. Instead of asking what makes for a good life, in general, we will begin to ask what an action or decision a good one. In this unit we will discuss two of the most influential ethical theories in modern history: utilitarianism and deontology.

The third unit will directly address several of the most pressing practical questions of contemporary life, many of which have been raised by the explosion of modern technology and the political and social situation of our modern world. We will discuss contemporary political issues, questions about artificial intelligence and medical technology (especially genetic manipulation), and wrestle with issues of race and gender.

Along the way, we will work to develop standards of good argumentation and dialogue, practice careful reading, and try our hands at philosophical writing. Our goal is to develop a small community of curious and supportive minds that can help each other grow as students, writers, and thinkers. In leaving this class, you should feel better prepared to engage with your peers about some of the most difficult questions, not just of our time, but of all times.

This class is only an introduction. Every subject we touch on in this course is the subject of its own dedicated field of inquiry. It is my hope that this class will be a doorway for further and deeper thinking for all of you.

### Participation and Attendance

Since this course involves a regular discussion component, your attendance and active participation are essential both to your own learning and to your classmates’ learning. Whenever possible, absences should be discussed with me or your TF prior to class time and makeup work may be assigned. That said, you are allowed three absences, no questions asked. Unexcused absences beyond three will incur a 10% penalty on your participation grade.

In order to participate appropriately, you will be expected to prepare for class by reading all of the assigned texts and thinking critically about their content. There should never be a situation where don’t have at least something important to say about a text in class.

Participation means regular verbal engagement with the course material, in lecture, section, or in office hours. For most of you, this will mean paying attention in class and contributing to the conversation on a semi-regular basis. I know that this can be a hurdle for some students, but it is important that you try to develop public speaking skills as well as you are able. You may supplement class participation with regular office visits. Bare attendance will earn you a D in this category. Attendance and participation are worth 15% of your grade.

### Office Hours

Please refer to the top of this syllabus for my office hours and location. Your TF will also be available for office hours. Also note that office hour participation counts towards your general participation grade and can be a great way to supplement your participation if you find speaking in class challenging.

### Submitting Assignments and Exercises

Apart from reading check-ins, assignments will be submitted and returned through Blackboard. Unless otherwise noted, the assumed submission time is at the BEGINNING of the class period on the day that the assignment is due. Most assignments (apart from the exams) will be graded on a four-point scale (check, check plus, check minus, zero).

Reading check-ins will take place DURING CLASS and will be completed either on Perusall or on paper handed into your TF. These are graded on “good faith completion,” and are either pass fail.

### Late and Missed Assignments

Unless you make other arrangements with me in advance, graded assignments will be penalized by one-third of a letter grade for each day they are late. Please note too that we will regularly work with our exercises and drafts in class. If you are habitually late with your assignments, you will be unable to participate fully in the class.

### Technology Policy

Computers, tablets, and similar devices will be generally permitted in this class. There will be a “zero tolerance” policy for anyone who abuses this privilege. If you are caught misusing technology in this class (checking social media, for example), you will no longer be able to use your device at all in the classroom. For your own sake and for the sake of your classmates, please use your technology responsibly.

### Academic Integrity

In this class, we will discuss conventions for using and citing sources in academic papers. Cases of plagiarism will be handled in accordance with the disciplinary procedures described in the university’s Academic Conduct Code. All students are subject to the code, which can be read online:

<https://www.bu.edu/provost/students/undergraduate/academic-integrity/>

### Chosen Name and Gender Pronouns

This course aims to be an inclusive learning community that supports students of all gender expressions and identities. While class rosters are provided to instructors with students’ legal names, please let me know if you would like to be addressed by a different name than the one listed on the university roster. You are also invited to tell me and your TF early in the semester which set of pronouns (she/her/hers, he/him/his, they/them/theirs, etc.) you feel best fits your identity. My pronouns are he/him/his. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

### Student Accessibility Support

I assume that all of us learn in different ways. If there are circumstances that may affect your performance in this class, please talk to me as soon as possible so that we can work together to develop strategies for accommodations that will satisfy both your learning needs and the requirements of the course. Whether or not you have a documented accessibility need, the university provides many support services that are available to all students. Here is their website: <https://www.bu.edu/disability/>

The Accessibility Support Office is responsible for assisting all students. If you have a disability that changes your learning condition your learning (whether visible or invisible, physical, emotional, or

mental), you are encouraged to register with this office. The Accessibility Support Office will work with you to determine appropriate accommodations for your courses, such as additional time on tests, staggered homework assignments, or note-taking assistance. This office will give you a letter outlining the accommodations you need that you can share with your teachers; specific information about your disability will remain private. If you have any questions about accommodation, or what constitutes a disability, I invite you to speak with me or to the Accessibility Support Office.

### Student Mental and Emotional Health

I recognize that being a college student can be an extraordinarily difficult and transformational experience, even in the best of times. Unfortunately, even before the COVID crisis, many students around the world were suffering from increased mental and emotional stresses, a pronounced sense of isolation and loneliness, and increased levels of depression, anxiety, and other serious mental health concerns. This situation has only been made worse in the last several years by the pandemic.

While there are limits on what I can do to help, I want aid in your learning in any way possible. Please reach out to me if you are struggling with course material, workload, or other internal or external pressures that are making it difficult to participate fully in this course. Communication is key—so long as you stay in touch with me, we can almost always work something out to help you thrive in this course and beyond.

You don't need to wait for a crisis to seek counseling. If you would like someone to talk to, please reach out to Brandeis Counseling Center here: <https://www.bu.edu/students/health/counseling/>. Therapy can be helpful for everyone! If you do find yourself or one of your peers in crisis, their emergency consultation number is 781-736-3730 and their crisis number is 781-736-3333.