

Introduction to Ethical Theory

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TF : TBD

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Course Dates: Aug. 31 – Dec. 9
Course Location: Rabb 236
Course Time: M/W/TH 11:15 – 12:05

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, code L7LK6E33TN). 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 semi-weekly reflection assignments (roughly eight of these. You are allowed to skip one)
- 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*	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 makes an action or decision a good one. In this unit we will discuss two of the most influential ethical theories in modern philosophy: 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.

Assignments and Exercises

Apart from reading check-ins, assignments will be submitted and returned through Latte. Unless otherwise noted, the assumed submission time is at the BEGINNING of the class period on the day that the assignment is due. There will roughly eight reflection assignments over the course of the semester, of which you will be able to skip one. 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.brandeis.edu/student-rights-community-standards/academic-integrity/index.html>

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, Brandeis provides many support services that are available to all students. Here is their website: <https://www.brandeis.edu/academic-services/accessibility/index.html>

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.brandeis.edu/counseling/> Therapy can be helpful for just about 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.

Course Schedule

This schedule is intended as a blueprint or roadmap and is subject to change based on the needs of the class. Any changes will be announced in class and will be posted on Perusall.

Date	Learning goals	Readings due	Assignments due
Unit 1: The Good Life			
<p>The first unit 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 fundamental questions of the human experience: what, if anything, constitutes a (the?) good life. During this unit we will also begin to engage with several “metaethical” questions, or question about whether or not or in what way ethics is possible in the first place.</p>			
Introduction/Meta Ethics/Problems of Meaning			
Week 0 (Aug 31)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Why do we educate ourselves? - Introduce course & define course goals - Courseware (Perusall) 	<p>Required</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -None <p>Recommended:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Plato, <i>The Euthyphro</i> 	
Week 1 (Sept. 4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is “Ethics? What is “Philosophy” - Cultural Relativism/Question in Metaethics - The Problem of Meaning - Challenges: The Absurd/Nihilism 	<p>Required:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -This Syllabus - Midgley, “Trying out One’s Sword” (in class) - Nagel, “The Absurd” - Schopenhauer, “On the Vanity of Existence” <p>Recommended:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Schopenhauer, “On the Sufferings of the World - Fassio, “How to Read Philosophy” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reading Check-In (in class) - Reflection Assignment
Week 2 (Sept. 11)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sources of Normativity & Meaning - Divine Command Theory - The Euthyphro Problem - Aristotle, Virtue, and the Function Argument - “Technomoral Virtues” 	<p>Required:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Plato, <i>The Euthyphro</i> - Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>, Books I & II - Vallor, <i>Technomoral Virtues</i> (excerpts) <p>Recommended:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>, Books VI and X 	
The Good Life--Problems and Solutions			
Week 3 (Sept. 18)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nietzsche & the Affirmation of Life 	<p>Required:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Schopenhauer, “On the Sufferings of the World” (pgs 1-2) - Nietzsche, <i>Gay Science</i> (Preface, Sections 1-13, 19, 21, 23, 26, 29, 42-44, 56-58, 76, 98, 107-134, 143-168, 276-290, 341) <p>Recommended:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reflection Assignment

		-Nietzsche, <i>Gay Science</i> , all of books I-III	
Week 4 (Sept. 25)	- I will be out of town this week! Special Guest Lectures TBD - Ruth Chang, Simone de Beauvoir, and Existential Ethics	Required: - Chang, "Hard Choices" (1-3, 10-20) - Chang, "Hard Choices (TedTalk)" Recommended: - Chang, "Hard Choices" (Full Text) - de Beauvoir, <i>Ethics of Ambiguity</i> , Ch 1 (Full Text)	Reflection Exercise Assigned
Narrative Ethics			
Week 5 (Oct 2)	- Narrative Ethics - Death	Required: - Velleman, "Well-Being and Time" - Bradley, "Well-Being and Death" (excerpts) - Youtube clips on death	-
Unit 2: Doing the "Right Thing"			
One answer to the question from unit one concerning the good life is that a good life is one that is filled with good choices. But what makes a choice a good one? How are we to decide what counts as a good choice? In this unit we will explore two of the most influential answers to that question—one from the utilitarian tradition of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, and one from Immanuel Kant			
Utilitarianism and Consequentialism			
Week 6 (Oct 9) [No Class Monday]	-Hedonism & Utilitarianism	Required: - Epicurus, "Letter to Menoecus" - Bentham, <i>Principles</i> , Ch I & IV	Reflection Assignment Due
Week 7 (Oct 16)	-Hedonism & Utilitarianism	Required: - <i>The Queen vs. Dudley & Stephens</i> - Mill, <i>Utilitarianism</i> - Sandel, "Utilitarianism"	
Objections to Utilitarianism/Kant and Kantianism			
Week 8 (Oct 23)	- Singer - Nozick	Required: - Singer, "The Solution to World Poverty" - Nozick, "The Experience Machine" - Clare, <i>Brilliant Imperfection</i> , Ch 7 (98 – 115) Recommended: - Clare, <i>Brilliant Imperfection</i> , Ch 7 (full text)	Reflection Assignment Due
Week 9 (Oct 30)	- Kant	Required: - Le Guinn, <i>The Ones who Walk Away from Omelas</i> - Kant, <i>Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals</i> , Ch 1 Recommended: Kant, <i>Groundwork</i> , Preface	-Midterm (Wednesday, March 22)
Week 10 (Nov 6)	- Kant	Required: - Kant, <i>Groundwork for the Metaphysics</i>	

		<i>of Morals</i> , Ch 2 -Korsgaard, read “Skepticism about Practical Reason” Recommended:	
Unit 3: Problems in Practical and Political Ethics			
<p>Though we have discussed real world cases throughout the semester, in this final unit, we will engage with practical ethics even more directly. We will survey a small collection of current and pressing social and political issues and apply the skills we’ve gained over the past several weeks to try to find better ways of answering them.</p>			
Topics in Political Philosophy & Applied Ethics			
Week 11 (Nov 13)	- Rawls/Justice	Required: - Sandel on Rawls - Rawls, <i>A Theory of Justice</i> (pgs 1-30) Recommended: - Rawls, <i>A Theory of Justice</i> , Ch 1-6 & 11-13	
Week 12 (Nov 20) [No Class W/TH]	- Colonialism & Race	Required: - Gordon, “Living Thought, Living Freedom” (Public Lecture)	
Week 13 (Nov 27)	- Colonialism & Race	Required: - Gordon, “Race and Racism” - Fanon on Violence & the Person Recommended: - Fanon, Concerning Violence Fanon, <i>The Wretched of the Earth</i> (Ch 6)	
Week 14 (Dec 4)	Feminism, Gender, and Queerness	Required: - De Beauvoir, <i>The Second Sex</i> (Introduction) - “What is Gender” (Philosophy Tube) - Butler, “Performative Acts” Recommended:	- Reflection Assignment
Week 15 (May 1) -- Last Week of Class	Technology & Genetic Engineering	Required: - Arthur, <i>The Nature of Technology</i> (Ch. 1) - Sandel, “The Case Against Perfection”	