

CAS PH 150: Introduction to Ethics

Course Instructor: Jordan Kokot

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Office: Zoom Room

Office Hours: TBD

Course Dates: July 6 - August 12

Course Location: CAS 228

Course Time: Mon., Tues., Thurs., 6:00-8:30 PM

Course Description

The study of 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 attempts to develop standards of actions, 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, behaviors, etc., are somehow *better* or more worthy than others. However, the structure of these "should" is far from obvious, and it immediately generates its 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, are they hopelessly 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 some competency in the general 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, a large portion of the class will be seminar style discussion and activity based. I firmly believe that learning about philosophy involves both a change in the way we think and a strong dialectical component. We learn from each other, not in isolation.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is offered in the “learn from anywhere” format, meaning that while you are strongly encouraged to attend the class in person on campus, you will have the opportunity to attend by zoom. This course is primarily designed to be synchronous. Please contact me directly if synchronous attendance will be an issue for you this semester. As an accelerated course, there will be a good bit of difficult reading. It is your responsibility to keep up with the weekly readings and come prepared to discuss your findings.

Books and Other Course Materials

All course materials will be available through the class Perusal site (perusal.com, code KOKOT-MXNVL) or on blackboard. You should refer to the syllabus, which will be updated periodically, for the schedule of readings.

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/>

Courseware

Our class has a Blackboard site that contains the syllabus, assignments, and other course-related materials. You can log in to our Blackboard page at: <http://learn.bu.edu/> All additional coursework will be posted on blackboard.

Assignments and Grading Criteria

In order to make the most out of PH 150 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 and participate in classroom discussions
- Complete regular reading check-ins and discussion prompts (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 and Participation	10%
Reading Check-ins/Discussion Questions	20%
Weekly Reflection Assignment	20%
Midterm Exam	25%
Final Exam	25%

General Outline

This course is designed to introduce students to several of the fundamental questions, arguments, and positions in the academic field of philosophical 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 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.

The second unit will narrow our scope somewhat. Instead of asking what makes for a good life, in general, we will begin to ask what makes for a good action or decision. 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 are able to 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 is in part styled after a seminar, your regular attendance and active participation are essential both to your own learning and to your classmates’ learning. This is especially important in an accelerated course. Missing a single class is the equivalent of missing an entire week of a regular semester course. All absences must be discussed with me prior to class time and makeup work will be assigned. Unexcused absences will incur a 10% penalty on your participation grade.

Students who are interested in taking the course asynchronously should contact me directly.

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. For most of you, this will mean paying attention in class and contributing to the conversation on a regular basis. Seminars work best when every voice is engaged in their own unique way. 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 10% of your grade.

Office Hours

I will be available by appointment only this semester, but my schedule is reasonably flexible. Please reach out to me if you would like to schedule a meeting. I can meet in person or by zoom.

Submitting Assignments and Exercises

Assignments will be submitted and returned via individual Google Drive folders. Unless otherwise noted, the assumed submission time is at the BEGINNING of the class period on the day that the assignment is due.

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. If three people are penalized in this way, then the entire class will lose technology privileges. 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 Boston University's Academic Conduct Code. All students are subject to the CAS code, which can be read online:

<http://www.bu.edu/academics/resources/academic-conduct-code/>

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 that listed in the StudentLink. You are also invited to tell me early in the semester which set of pronouns (she/her/hers, he/him/his, they/their/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.

Office of Disability Services

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 disability, BU provides many support services that are available to all students.

Disability Services is the office responsible for assisting students with disabilities. If you have a disability that interferes with your learning (whether visible or invisible, physical or mental), you are encouraged to register with this office. Disability Services 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 Disability Services.

Course Schedule

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

Date	Learning goals	Readings due	Assignments due
Unit 1: The Good Life			
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 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.			
Week 1: Introduction/Meta Ethics/Problems of Meaning			
Tues, 7/6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduce course & define course goals - What is “Ethics? What is “Philosophy” - Cultural Relativism/Question in Metaethics - Courseware (Blackboard, Perusall, & Google Drive) 	Required <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - This Syllabus - Fassio, “How to Read Philosophy” - Midgley, “Trying out One’s Sword” (in class) Recommended: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Plato, <i>The Euthyphro</i> 	

Thurs, 7/9	- The Problem of Meaning - Challenges: The Absurd/Nihilism	Required: - Nagel, "The Absurd" - Schopenhauer, "On the Vanity of Existence" Recommended: Schopenhauer, "On the Sufferings of the World"	- Reading Check-In
Fri, 7/9	- Sources of Normativity & Meaning - Divine Command Theory - The Euthyphro Problem	Required: - Plato, <i>The Euthyphro</i> Recommended: -	- Discussion Question
Week 2: The Good Life--Problems and Solutions			
Mon, 7/12	- Aristotle, Virtue, and the Function Argument	Required: - Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> , Books I & II Recommended: - Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> , Books VI and X	- Discussion Question
Tues, 7/13	- Nietzsche & the Affirmation of Life	- 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) Recommended: - Nietzsche, <i>Gay Science</i> , all of books I-III	
Thurs, 7/15	- Ruth Chang, Simone de Beauvoir, and Existential Ethics	Required: - de Beauvoir, <i>Ethics of Ambiguity</i> , Ch 1 (1-9, 13-20) - Chang, "Hard Choices" (1-3, 10-20) - Chang, "Hard	- Weekly Reflection Assignment (Due Friday)

		Choices (TedTalk) Recommended: - Chang, "Hard Choices" (Full Text) - de Beauvoir, <i>Ethics of Ambiguity</i> , Ch 1 (Full Text)	
Week 3 (part 1): Narrative Ethics			
Mon, 7/19	- Narrative Ethics - Death	Required: - Velleman, "Well-Being and Time" Recommended: -	
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			
Week 3 (Part 2)--Utilitarianism and Consequentialism			
Tues, 7/20	- Hedonism & Utilitarianism	Required: - Epicurus, "Letter to Menoeceus" - Bentham, <i>Principles</i> , Ch I & IV	
Thurs, 7/22	- Utilitarianism, Pt 2	Required: - <i>The Queen vs. Dudley & Stephens</i> - Mill, <i>Utilitarianism</i> Recommended: - Sandel, "Utilitarianism"	
Week 4: Objections to Utilitarianism/Kant and Kantianism			
Mon, 7/26	- Singer - Nozick	Required: - Singer, "The Solution to World Poverty" - Nozick, "The Experience Machine"	
Tues, 7/27	- Kant	Required: - Le Guinn, <i>The</i>	

		<i>Ones who Walk Away from Omelas</i> - Kant, <i>Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals</i> , Ch 1 Recommended: - Kant, <i>Groundwork</i> , Preface	
Thurs, 7/29	- Kant	Required: - Kant, <i>Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals</i> , Ch 2	-Midterm
Week 5: Kant and Kantianism			
Mon, 8/2	- Reason and Sentiment	Required: - 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>			
Week 5 (Part 2): Topics in Political Philosophy			
Tues, 8/3	- 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	
Thurs, 8/5	- Rawls/Justice	Required: - No new readings. Re-read Rawls on Justice	-
Week 6: Topics in Practical Ethics			
Mon, 8/9	- Colonialism & Race	Required: - Gordon, "Living Thought, Living Freedom" (Public Lecture) - Gordon, "Race and Racism" - Fanon on	

		<p>Violence & the Person</p> <p>Recommended:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fanon, Concerning Violence - Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (Ch 6) 	
Tues, 8/10	- Feminism, Gender, and Queerness	<p>Required:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - De Beauvoir, <i>The Second Sex</i> (Introduction) - "What is Gender" (Philosophy Tube) - Butler, "Performative Acts" 	-
Thurs, 8/12	- Technology & Genetic Engineering	<p>Required:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Arthur, <i>The Nature of Technology</i> (Ch. 1) - Sandel, "The Case Against Perfection" 	