

General Ethics

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Course description

Ethics is the study of the general moral principles (if there are any) that explain *why* some things are right and others are wrong. Typically, we think of moral principles as universal. However, distinct cultures vary (sometimes drastically) in their moral outlook. How can this be possible if morality is universal? In this course, we will consider four questions related to this overarching theme:

- 1) Does the cultural variability of morality undermine the possibility of doing ethics?
- 2) What is morality?
- 3) Where does morality come from?
- 4) Why does morality variegate over time and across cultures?

To answer these questions, we will consider conceptual work done by moral philosophers, as well as work in adjacent fields, such as anthropology, primatology, psychology, and sociology.

Course texts

Three books are required for this course:

- Gert, B. 2007. *Morality* (Oxford University Press) [G]
- Tomasello, M. 2016. *A natural history of human morality* (Harvard University Press) [T]
- Gray, J. and Graham, J. 2018. *Atlas of moral psychology* (Guilford Press) [A]

Other readings will be made available on the Canvas page for the course.

Grading

Participation (20%): There is no formal attendance policy. More than 4 unexcused absences could result in an F, as per the College's policy. Throughout the semester, you are expected to complete various surveys about your moral thoughts and attitudes. More details on these surveys will be supplied elsewhere.

Reflections and self-assessment (15%; *Due each Friday*): Each week, you will submit a short (300 words or less, preferably less!) ethical reflection based on your experiences during the week. I want to leave this assignment a little open-ended, but reflections may include a description of a moral choice that you or someone close to you made, a moral or immoral action you witnessed and how that made you feel, an ethical problem you are thinking through, and so on. The goal of this assignment is to think about the role of morality in everyday life. Please do not include any identifying information about other students in your reflections. Also, I will read these, so please do not include information that you are not comfortable with me seeing.

Short paper (15%; *Due September 25*): You will write one short paper on the issue of whether the cultural variability of morality undermines the universality of ethical principles. I will give you a rubric with more instructions later in the semester.

Creative short story (20%; *Due October 30*): You will write one creative short story on an ethical dilemma or quandary. The genre of the story should be science fiction or historical fiction, although alternative genres (or media) are possible with my approval.

Final paper (30%; *Due December 11*): You will write one longer paper at the end of the term on some issue in class (e.g., the evolutionary basis of morality, the psychology of moral experiences, etc.). This will be roughly double the length of the short paper.

Academic Integrity

All students pledge to abide by the guidelines on academic integrity outlined in the *Undergraduate Catalogue* (in the aptly titled section “Academic Integrity”).

Classroom procedure

Electronic devices are not permitted in class. On rare occasions, this rule might be suspended, but your default presumption should be that laptops, tablets, phones, and so on are not needed during class.

I expect you to read and reflect on the assignment before class and be willing to engage in classroom discussion. I will post reading guides for each assignment that include some reflection questions to help spur some thoughts.

Boilerplate

Student Success Center: The newly-minted Student Success Center (Phillips Memorial Library, Room 250) offers a wide variety of support services for all students, including group and individual tutoring, academic skills mentoring, disability support, and writing assistance. *Note:* Students who may need academic accommodation based on a documented disability should make the necessary arrangements as soon as possible. All accommodations must be arranged through the Student Success Center.

Mental Health and Well-Being: As a student, you may experience a range of challenges that can interfere with learning, such as strained relationships, increased anxiety, substance use, depression, difficulty concentration, or lack of motivation. These mental health concerns or stressful events may affect your ability to attend class, concentrate, complete work, take an exam, or participate in daily activities. If mental health and adjustment concerns are causing distress, please speak to me and/or reach out for personal support. Remember that asking for help is a sign of strength and courage. Additional resources can be found at the Personal Counseling Center, Dean Of Students, CARE team, Chaplain’s Office, Title IX Office, PC/Day One Advocate, and the Student Health Center.

Diversity & Inclusion: It is my intent that students from all backgrounds be well-served by this course, that their learning needs be addressed both in and out of class, and that the diversity they bring into the classroom be viewed as a resource, strength, and benefit. I will make every effort to present material and activities that are respectful of your various identities, including (but not limited to) those tied to ethnicity, race, gender, religion, sexuality, disability, age, socioeconomic status, and culture. Please let me know if something said or done in the classroom, either by myself or other students, is particularly troubling or upsetting. While our intention may not be to

cause distress or offense, the impact of what happens throughout the course should not be ignored and deserves proper attention. It is critical that we work together to create a safe and bias-free learning environment in which all students can thrive and succeed. I take this mission very seriously and your suggestions on how to best accomplish it are always encouraged and appreciated.

Schedule

(*This schedule is subject to change; all modifications will be announced in class)

8/29 Introduction and Background

No reading

8/31 The basics of ethical relativism

Brandt, "Ethical relativism"

9/2 Radical differences

Benedict, "Anthropology and the abnormal"

9/7 The case for universalism

Midgley, "Trying out one's new sword"

9/9 Emotivism

Stevenson, "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms"

9/12 Prescriptivism

Hare, *Language of morals* (selections)

9/14 Reflective equilibrium as ethical methodology

Rawls, *Theory of justice* (selections)

9/16 Ethics as irony

Rorty, "The contingency of liberalism"

9/19 Relativism reformulated

Scanlon, *What we owe to each other* (selections)

9/21 *No class*

9/23 *No class*

9/26 Basic concepts of morality

G 1

9/28 Harm and benefits as basic moral aims

G 4

9/30 The evolution of purity (I)
Fitouchi et al., “Moral disciplining” §§1-2

10/3 The evolution of purity (II)
Fitouchi et al., “Moral disciplining” §§3-7

10/5 Rules
G 5

10/7 Moral ideals
G 10

10/8 Shifting to Character
G 11

10/10 Moral motivation
G 13

10/14 Morality and politics
G 14

10/17 Cancel culture
Readings on Canvas

10/19 Can we disagree?
Readings on Canvas

10/21 Living in a polarized democracy
Readings on Canvas

10/24 *No class*

10/26 *No class*

10/28 *No class*

10/31 The evolutionary roots of morality
T 1 & 2

11/2 Morality and collaboration
T 3

11/4 How does morality get objective?
T 4

11/7 Morality and cooperation

T 5

- 11/9 Developing a truly moral psychology
A 57
- 11/11 Pronouns
- 11/14 Abortion
- 11/16 Should we pay college athletes?
- 11/18 Transgenderism and female sports
- 11/21 What is race?
- 11/28 Racism and Critical Race Theory
- 11/30 The Black Lives Matter movement
- 12/2 Race, Discrimination, and College Admissions
- 12/5 Friendship and ideology
- 12/7 Confrontation
Martin Luther King, "The power of nonviolence"
Malcolm X, "The ballot or the bullet"
- 12/9 The beloved community
Martin Luther King, "Loving your enemies"