

Philosophy 310: Ethics

Amherst College
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About the course. We will look at classic and contemporary work on central topics in ethics. We will be concerned to see whether there is anything to be said in a principled way about what to do and how to live. The core of the course will be an examination of the central traditions in moral philosophy in the West, typified by Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, and John Stuart Mill. We will also examine vexing contemporary moral issues with an eye to whether moral theories can help give us practical guidance; or whether, instead, the complexities of moral practice require us to revise or even abandon our moral theories. Finally, we will step back and ask whether any of the moral theorizing we have been engaging in is really capable of uncovering objective moral truths.

Meetings: T/Th 11:30-12:50 in Barr 102

Text: *Ethical Theory: An Anthology* edited by Shafer-Landau.

Tentative Schedule. We will not cover all the readings below. We will aim for quality of understanding rather than quantity covered and move at whatever pace is right for us.

Weeks 1-3. Consequentialism.

1. *Introduction: Three Moral Theories.* No reading.
2. *Consequentialism:* Harris, The Survival Lottery
3. *Consequentialism:* Mill, Utilitarianism
4. *Consequentialism:* Hare, What's Wrong with Slavery
5. *Consequentialism:* Smart, Extreme and Restricted Utilitarianism

Weeks 4-6. Deontology.

7. *Deontology:* Dougherty, Sex, Lies, and Consent
8. *Deontology:* Kant, Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals
9. *Deontology:* Korsgaard, Kant's Formula of Universal Law
10. *Deontology:* Nozick, The Rationality of Side Constraints
11. *Deontology:* Thomson, Killing, Letting Die, and the Trolley Problem

Weeks 7-9. Virtue Ethics.

12. *Virtue Ethics:* Stocker, The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories
13. *Virtue Ethics:* Aristotle, The Nature of Virtue
14. *Virtue Ethics:* Hursthouse, Normative Virtue Ethics
15. *Virtue Ethics:* Annas, Being Virtuous and Doing the Right Thing

Weeks 10-13. Challenges to Morality.

16. *Why is the good good?* Plato, Euthyphro

17. *Realism*. Moore, The Subject-Matter of Ethics
18. *Non-cognitivism*. Hume, Of the Influencing Motives of the Will
19. *Expressivism*. Ayer, A Critique of Ethics
20. *Nihilism*. Mackie, The Subjectivity of Values
21. *Relativism*. Harman, Ethics and Observation; Harman, Relativism Defended

Requirements. Detailed accounts of the expectations regarding these requirements will be presented in class at the appropriate times. Here's what you need to know now.

- **Papers.** You will be required to write **2 papers**. The first paper will be 5-6 pages in length, and count for 30% of the final grade. The final paper will be 10-12 pages in length, and will count for 50% of the final grade. At at least one, but possibly two, yet to be determined points, you will be required to substantially **rewrite** at least one, but probably two, of your papers at least once, but possibly twice.¹
- **Participation.** You are expected to do the assigned reading before class, and actively participate in class discussion. **Each Sunday by 5pm**, you will be required to submit a short 1-2 page response to some aspect of the reading for that week. Sometimes I will ask you to **present** something to the class. All of this counts as class participation and will count 20% toward your final grade.

Writing Expectations. David Foster Wallace said it best (in his own syllabus):

If you want to improve your academic writing and are willing to put extra time and effort into it, I am a good teacher to have. But if you're used to whipping off papers the night before they're due, running them quickly through the computer's Spellchecker, handing them in full of high-school errors and sentences that make no sense, and having the professor accept them "because the ideas are good" or something, please be informed that I draw no distinction between the quality of one's ideas and the quality of those ideas' verbal expression, and that I will not accept sloppy, rough-draftish, or semiliterate college writing. Again, I am absolutely not kidding. If you won't or can't devote significant time and attention to your written work, I urge you to drop... and save us both a lot of grief.²

I too am absolutely not kidding.

Late Penalty.

- Late *reading responses* will not be accepted.
 - Late papers will be penalized by 1/3 of a grade for every day late.
- If you foresee difficulties completing your assignments on time, please contact me as soon as possible. Extensions may be given in some circumstances if requested sufficiently in advance.

Communication. Important class announcements and assignments will be communicated to you via email or in class. It is your responsibility to make sure you are up to date with the latest news.

Attendance. Most of the action happens in class—it is where I give away all the answers, so you won't want to skip. If you must miss class, let me know *in advance* and we will schedule a make up assignment. (I promise to design make-up assignments so that they are both less fun and more time consuming than attending class.)

Participation. Philosophy is a communal activity. Much of it is about asking simple, clarificatory questions. I'll expect you to do at least that much regularly. I realize that class participation is more difficult for some of us. But writing papers, understanding the readings—these too are more difficult for some of

¹ Do not mimic this sentence in your own writing.

² <http://alasophia.blogspot.com/2008/09/david-foster-wallaces-syllabus.html>

us. Class will consist, largely, of discussion, and everyone is expected to participate. If you feel uncomfortable speaking up in class, for any reason, please come see me and we will find a way to work on it together. And remember: you can always prepare your questions ahead of time, participate outside of class by coming to my office hours, etc.

Reading. Most of the readings we will look at are short, but quite tricky. Give yourself time to read them. I recommend a three step approach: first, skim, and then carefully read each piece before we discuss it in class. Jot down questions and confusions and raise them in lecture. Finally, skim the reading again after we've discussed it to make sure you understand it well. If you're still unclear about something, email me, come by my office hours, ask a classmate, etc.

Academic Honesty. Upon entering Amherst College, you each signed a pledge to uphold the honor code. In particular, you agreed to the *Statement of Intellectual Responsibility*, which states: "Every person's education is the product of his or her intellectual effort and participation in a process of critical exchange. Amherst College cannot educate those who are unwilling to submit their own work and ideas to critical assessment".³ I expect you will all honor the pledge you signed. Therefore, everything you turn in should be *your own work* and *in your own words*. If you discussing the reading with your friend, dog, parent, etc., is helpful, cite them. You are not expected to consult outside sources, but if you do, you must credit them appropriately. (Yes, even Google searches and Wikipedia.)

****In short, do not plagiarize. I will fail you.****

Formatting. Please prepare your assignments as follows and submit them on the course website. *Assignments that fail to meet these guidelines are late until revised.*

- Submit files in PDF format.
- Name them as follows: lastname_assignment.pdf
- *Your name* and *page number* should appear on every page of your paper.
- *Word count* at end of paper (exclude prompt, bibliography, etc. when calculating).
- *Double space* (except block quotes which should be single spaced and indented).
- *Standard margins* (1 inch), font size (12pt), style (Times New Roman), etc.
- *Cite sources* in a clear, consistent way.⁴

Grading. Your paper will be evaluated along three main dimensions:

1. The clarity and soundness of the *argument* for your *thesis*.
2. Your demonstrated understanding of readings and material covered in class.
3. Your insight and creativity in engaging the issues.

Please do not assume that merely completing the assignment without making any mistakes is enough to get an A. And do not panic if your first paper receives a low grade. Fewer than 10% of students are able to write above the B- level in their first few attempts at philosophical writing. Don't let this discourage you. Writing is hard. But it is a skill you can learn. People who make a *serious* effort are often writing B+ or A-papers by the end of term. Do not disregard this just because you have taken a philosophy class before.

I understand the letter grades roughly as follows:

A This is a truly outstanding paper. It is clearly written, well-argued, and original. A paper that just gives a straightforward or "obvious" response to some philosophical or interpretative problem would not merit an

³ <https://www.amherst.edu/campuslife/deanstudents/acadhonesty>

⁴ E.g., http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html.

A, even if it is clear. An A paper does something extra—but *not at the cost of a clear treatment of the problem.*

A- This is a really good paper, one that operates at an advanced level. It is clearly written. (If there are any significant problems with the writing or the organization of the paper, then it won't merit an A-. This is because good clear writing and organization are not separable from good philosophical thinking.) The paper may have a couple of minor mistakes or confusions, or it may fail to unpack some of its arguments sufficiently. It may have an original argument or interpretation, but if so, that will be offset by some other flaw. For example, in a longer paper, perhaps there is too little philosophical back-and-forth (considering objections and challenges, and responding to them). Or perhaps it is not as engaged with the texts as it should be.

B+ This is a well-written paper with nothing terribly wrong. The writing may have some small problems, or it may be flawless. The paper may make some mistakes or have some ambiguities that have to be sorted out, but overall it will be a good paper. It will show more promise or originality than a B paper, but nothing will make it stand out like an A- paper, or it won't be operating at as advanced a level as an A- paper. (Or perhaps the paper would stand out if some of its ideas were properly developed, but as it stands they aren't.)

B This is a solid paper, with some notable mistakes or obscurities, but no serious misunderstandings. The writing may not be super-clear. To earn a B, the paper needs to make it clear why the problem addressed in the paper is a problem, and offer some response to it. (It may be a straightforward or unoriginal response; it may not be a decisive response; the paper may even end by showing that a certain response doesn't work. But the paper must put forward or examine some response to the problem.) A B paper does not seriously misrepresent the views of other philosophers.

B- There are starting to be some serious problems. Perhaps the writing is really unclear or the paper is poorly organized. Or perhaps there are straightforward mistakes and misunderstandings about what the problem is, or about what other philosophers say. Or perhaps the paper presents the problem correctly, but doesn't really address it. Still, there is an effort. The author has some understanding of the problem and of the relevant texts. She does offer some argument. A paper with no argument won't merit a B-.

C+ There are more serious problems. Either the writing is really hard to get through; or the paper has no discernible structure; or the author doesn't understand the text or the positions she is discussing; or the paper doesn't really attempt to offer any argument.

Papers with more problems will earn grades of C or below. It is difficult to give a general gloss on those grades since the problems that beset these papers are quite varied.⁵

⁵ Adapted from: <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/grades.html>.