

# Introduction to Ethics: PHIL 160

## Syllabus

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### Description

Ethics examines right and wrong, good and evil, the best and worst ways to live and to be. Normative ethics attempts to tell us when an action is right or wrong and why (e.g. does it have to do with the consequences of the action, or something about the person who performs the action?). Metaethics attempts to answer questions about the nature of moral reality, moral knowledge, moral language, and our moral behavior (e.g. are there moral facts, can we know them, and are we expressing a fact or a mere opinion when we say some action is morally permissible?). Applied ethics attempts to answer difficult ethical questions pertaining to particular domains (e.g. when if ever is euthanasia permissible, do animals have rights, and is it permissible to use pornography?).

Our course will walk through some of the major theories of normative ethics: Utilitarian ethics, Kantian ethics, and virtue ethics. Along the way, we'll apply those theories to think about questions in applied ethics. We'll also take time to think about the role that meaning has to play in making moral choices, and what role morality has in shaping our choices more generally.

### Objectives

The goals of this course are to empower you to:

- Identify, interpret, and evaluate the views and arguments of a variety of philosophers on topics in ethics.
- Engage in reflective and respectful written discourse with your peers, especially in situations in which you may disagree.
- Reflect meaningfully on the relevance of what you've read and discussed for living a fruitful and happy life.
- Develop your own answers to the questions we discuss, as well as an increased ability to communicate them and argue for them by written means.

I'll measure your progress in these objectives by recording your performance on the assignments mentioned below.

## Communication

I will be available to contact via email on weekdays, generally before 5pm. I'll attempt always to respond to an email within 48 hours (usually sooner). To make sure your email is responded to in a timely manner, please put "PHIL 160" in the subject line.

If I email you, the email will be sent to your UMass email, so you should check that once per day on weekdays. If my email requires a response, please respond within 48 hours.

Class communication must always be respectful; I won't tolerate rude behavior, unnecessary vulgarity, or abuse of any kind (towards myself or any others). If you aren't sure what counts as any of those things, you should read the [UMass Guidelines for Classroom Civility and Respect](#). Students who engage in rude, vulgar, or abusive communication in the course are subject to dismissal.

If you're contacting me to ask a question about the course, an assignment, or something related, make sure to check the syllabus, Blackboard, or the assignment instructions first!

## Texts

The following text is required.

*The Sovereignty of Good*, Iris Murdoch. Routledge, 1970. ISBN: 0415253993.

All other required readings will be made available via Blackboard.

## Assignments and Grading

Your grade for this course will be determined by your performance on a few short essays, a group presentation, a personal project, and regular reading responses.

	SHORT ESSAY 1	5%
	SHORT ESSAY 2	10%
SHORT ESSAYS	SHORT ESSAY 3	15%
	FIRST APOLOGIA	15%
APOLOGIAI	FINAL APOLOGIA	15%
CLASS DISCUSSION		20%
SNT RESPONSES		20%

## Short Essays

There will be three short writing assignments in this class, in which you'll practice summarizing arguments, offering objections and replies, and evaluating a philosophical dialectic.

## Apologiai

At the beginning and end of the course (i.e. the end of the first week and the end of the final week) you'll be required to write an articulation and defense (i.e. an "apology") of your way of life. This will require reflecting on how you actually live your life, how someone might see it as immoral or in some other way lacking value, and thinking about how you would defend your way of life to them. Your final apologia will expand on themes developed in the first apologia.

## Class Discussion

Class Discussion will take place on a series of online discussion boards, hosted on Blackboard. The boards will be divided up by week, with separate boards for random discussion, administrative information, and questions for me. You'll be required to post at least three times per week on each weekly board. Each of the required posts should either be an original post or a response post. Original posts should be substantive responses (e.g. asking a question with some attempt to answer, presenting a problem, or connecting ideas between texts) to the weekly reading or assigned videos. Response posts should be substantive responses of the same kind to an original post or to another response post.

## Socratic Note Taking Responses

The purpose of these assignments is to help you read articles more effectively, and to provide accountability for completing the readings. "Socratic Note Taking" is named after the philosopher Socrates, who famously taught by asking questions.<sup>1</sup> In these notes you will write questions as you read. Think of it as a reading quiz that you create yourself, along with an answer key. These assignments will also help you create a detailed set of notes on the papers for which you complete them.

## Late Work

All work is due by 11:59pm, Sunday by the end of the week on which it's due. Turn things in on time. The penalty for late assignments is one third of a letter grade per day. For example, an assignment that would've been an A, if handed in one day late would instead be given an A-. If handed in two days late it would instead be given a B+. Work will be considered one day late if it is to me between

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<sup>1</sup>This assignment was inspired by Walker, Trafimow, and Bronstein [2017] "The Socratic Note Taking Technique", *Teaching Philosophy* 40 (3):341-365.

any time in the 24 hours after the due date, two days late if to me between 24-48 hours of the due date, and so on.

## **Extensions**

I am happy to grant extensions on assignments for a variety of reasons if you communicate with me ahead of time. Think of your papers as projects, and of me as your project manager. I'm trying to help you manage your time and resources to do well on your projects, and the only way I can do that is if you are communicating with me.

## **Academic Dishonesty**

Don't plagiarize. I'll know if you do, and you will receive a 0 on the assignment (and possibly fail the course). It's also immoral and you'll be worse off as a person if you do it. You are responsible for knowing what plagiarism is. If you aren't sure whether something counts as plagiarism, ask me. Simple cases are things like copying words or ideas from others, using a paper (or section of a paper) you wrote for another class, or helping anyone else do any of those kinds of things. You can research our school's stance on plagiarism and related issues here:

<http://www.umass.edu/honesty/>

## **Students with Disabilities**

If you desire accommodations for this class on the basis of physical, learning, psychological or emotional disability, you should contact Disability Services. Disability Services is located at:

161 Whitmore  
181 Presidents Drive  
University of Massachusetts  
Amherst, MA 01003-9313

It can be reached by calling 413.545.0892. Visit <https://www.umass.edu/disability/students> for more information. Make sure to plan ahead if you are going to ask for adjustments to assignment requirements.

## **Tentative Course Schedule**

The course will divide into 6 discreet units, each with a particular theme, and each assigned to one of the 6 weeks of the course, as follows:

Week	Unit	Readings	Assignments Due
07/06-07/11	Introducing Ethical Deliberation	Midgley, "Trying Out One's New Sword" Plato, <i>Apology</i> Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection"	SNT 1 SNT 2 SNT 3 First Apologia
07/13-07/17	Utilitarianism	Mill, sections from <i>Utilitarianism</i> Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism" Singer, "Famine Affluence and Morality" Timmerman, "Sometimes there Is Nothing Wrong with Letting a Child Drown"	SNT 4 SNT 5 SNT 6 SNT 7  Essay 1
07/20-07/24	Kantian Ethics	Kant, <i>Groundwork</i> , Preface & §1 Feldman: "An Examination of Kantian Ethics" Velleman, "A Right of Self-Termination?"	SNT 8 SNT 9 SNT 10 Essay 2
07/27-07/31	Virtue Ethics	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> Book I, Book II.1-6, and Book X.6-9 Hursthouse, "Right Action" Rini, " <a href="#">Raising Good Robots</a> "	SNT 11  SNT 12 SNT 13
08/03-08/07	God & Meaning	Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism" Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'" Schopenhauer, "On the Sufferings of the World" Wolf, "Meaningfulness: A Third Dimension of the Good Life"	SNT 14 SNT 15 SNT 16 SNT 17 Essay 3
08/10-08/14	Grounds for Choosing	Markosian, "Rossian Minimalism" Wolf, "Moral Saints" Frankfurt, "On Bullshit" Riggle, " <a href="#">High Five</a> " Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good" Over Other Concepts"	SNT 18 SNT 19 SNT 20 SNT 21 SNT 22  Final Apologia