
PHIL 21001-006: INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS (SPRING 2024, T/TH 12:30-1:45PM)

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OFFICE LOCATION: Bowman 320, Room N
OFFICE HOURS: Wednesday, 2:30-5pm

GRADUATE ASSISTANT:
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OFFICE HOURS: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2pm-3:30pm

REQUIRED TEXTS: All required readings will be made available as PDF files on the web. Students who wish to purchase hard copies of the main texts for the course should consider these three titles:

James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*
Joshua Greene, *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap Between Us and Them*
Michael Sandel, *Justice: What is the Right Thing to Do?*

COURSE DESCRIPTION

When facing hard choices, what code of conduct should we use in guiding our actions? What kind of character traits should we foster in ourselves and our children? What kind of society do we want to live in, and what should we do to steer things in that direction? These are arguably the most difficult questions we can ask, but also the most important.

Moral questions give rise to an overwhelming multitude of conflicting opinions, perceived differently by atheists, theists, conservatives, liberals, individualists, collectivists, and so on. For some, there is a strong temptation to view morality as a matter of subjective personal taste or mere opinion. For those with religious commitments, it may be equally tempting to assume that sacred texts and spiritual leaders have authoritative answers to moral quandaries. We begin this course by examining serious challenges to both of these approaches to moral reasoning.

Having surveyed the problems with an “anything goes” philosophy and with an uncritical reliance on religious teachings, we go on to examine a number of alternative philosophical approaches to morality, both classical and contemporary—most prominently, utilitarianism, libertarianism, deontology, contractarianism, and virtue ethics. Philosophers in the western tradition have argued that morality is based on self-interest, on a social contract, on emotional attitudes, on the need to maximize happiness, and on pure reason alone. We will discuss these proposals, noting the merits and flaws of each, and apply them to the live moral and political debates of our own time, including separation of church and state, abortion, guns, healthcare, drugs, prostitution, immigration, the prison system, factory farming, wealth inequality in America, global poverty, and climate change.\

Diversity: This course may be used to satisfy the University Diversity requirement. Diversity courses provide opportunities for students to learn about such matters as the history, culture, values and notable achievements of people other than those of their own national origin, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, age, gender, physical and mental ability, and social class. Diversity courses also provide opportunities to examine problems and issues that may arise from differences, and opportunities to learn how to deal constructively with them.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

Reading

Required readings for every class session are listed in the course schedule below. Note that reading philosophical texts is different from reading plot-driven novels or short stories. With argumentative writing, it often happens that you need to read the text more than once to grasp its meaning. If after multiple readings you still feel like you don't understand the main points, please contact me with detailed questions that reference specific parts of the text.

Weekly “micro” assignments (4-10% each, for a total of 75% of the final grade)

There will be weekly “micro” assignments throughout the semester, with the word-count minimum ranging from 500 to 1000 words. They will be submitted and graded on Canvas. Instructions for each assignment will be on Canvas as well, along with links to the readings.. Longer assignments will be worth more points.

One final “macro” essay (15%)

You will be asked to write one argumentative essay. The *absolute minimum* length of the essay is 1500 words, though you are encouraged to write as much as you feel you need to in order to cover the topic. Please note that you will *not* be able to receive credit for any paper that does not meet the strict word-count requirement.

I will provide detailed instructions for the paper approximately 2 weeks before it's due. We will also take some class time to go over the basics of writing a philosophical essay, with a focus on constructing an effective *thesis statement* and organizing your ideas into a cogent *argument*. In general, philosophical writing should be clear, focused, persuasive, and attentive to detail. It should strive to express complex ideas in commonsense terms, with an eye for academic standards of diction. Most importantly, it must take into account the arguments of multiple sides on an issue.

The biggest factor in determining the grade on a philosophical paper is the strength of the overall argument, and the author's ability to anticipate and forestall challenges to his or her claims and inferences. Also important is the author's care with factual claims (which often require citation), as well as his or her comprehension of the course material.

The grade is *never* based on the viewpoint that the author has chosen to argue for. The goal of this course is to teach students to reason well about difficult abstract issues. Success in the course consists in learning to argue well for your conclusions, whatever they happen to be.

Late papers will be accepted, but may be subject to a decrease in the grade, depending on individual circumstances. To submit a late paper, please discuss your situation with me by email or in person.

Class Participation (10% of the final grade)

Class participation consists in contributing to class discussion by asking questions or making comments that demonstrate a grasp of the course material and an interest in the topics. Although attendance is required, it does *not* count as class participation. I think of participation as a kind of intellectual investment in the course, which goes beyond simply completing the reading and writing assignments.

Some students will initially find it difficult to speak up in front of a crowd. Nevertheless, public speaking is an essential aspect of the course, and also a requirement; no student can receive an A in the course without engaging actively in class discussion. To make the class participation grade as

objective as possible, you will be asked to write down some keywords from your contribution to the class discussion at the end of *each* class session. Please make sure to do this before leaving the class.

Limited class participation credit can also be earned by engaging with me at length by email or in office hours.

Attendance

Attendance is mandatory; having more than two unexcused absences will negatively impact your final grade in the course. Having more than 8 unexcused absences is grounds for failing the course. A sign-in sheet will be passed around during each class session. All students are expected to come to class on time and to be engaged for the length of the class session. If you miss multiple class sessions, please discuss your situation with me, either in person or by email.

Students who are absent from class due to documented medical treatment will not incur any penalty on their final grade, but are responsible for all required reading and writing assignments.

Religious Accommodations

The University welcomes individuals from all different faiths, philosophies, religious traditions, and other systems of belief, and supports their respective practices. In compliance with University policy and the Ohio Revised Code, the University permits students to request class absences for up to three days per term, in order to participate in organized activities conducted under the auspices of a religious denomination, church, or other religious or spiritual organization. Students will not be penalized as a result of any of these excused absences.

The request for excusal must be made, in writing, no later than 14 days after the first day of instruction in a particular course and include the date(s) of each proposed absence or request for alternative religious accommodation. The request must clearly state that the proposed absence is to participate in religious activities. The request must also provide the particular accommodation(s) you desire.

You will be notified by me if your request for accommodation is approved, or, if it is approved with modification. I will work with you in an effort to arrange a mutually agreeable alternative arrangement. For more information regarding this Policy you may contact the Student Ombuds (ombuds@kent.edu).

Grading

Here is a summary of how your final grade will be calculated:

- Weekly “micro” assignments: 75%
- Final “macro” paper: 15%
- Class participation: 10%

The following provides a translation from the numerical score to a letter grade:

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|----------|----------|----------|---------------|
| A 93-100 | B+ 86-89 | C+ 71-75 | D 56-60 |
| A- 90-92 | B 81-85 | C 66-70 | F 55 or below |
| | B- 76-80 | C- 61-65 | |

There is no “curve” for the course. This means that you are *not* in competition with your classmates for high grades. It is conceivable—though exceedingly unlikely—that everyone in the course will receive an A. Or a D. When you receive your final grade for the course, please note that it is *non-negotiable*. I will not change grades under any circumstances, unless I have made a demonstrable clerical error in my calculations.

Office Hours and Availability

My primary office hours are on Wednesday and Friday afternoons. However, many other options are available. If you want to meet with me at some other time, or virtually (on Teams), let me know and we can try to arrange it.

Needless to say, I can be reached by email at any time. I will do my best to respond to your emails as quickly as possible. Sometimes I will reply to your message immediately, even at odd hours, like 4am. However, please do not assume that this is always possible. Occasionally, I will not have access to email or will not be able to respond for up to several days. In such cases, please be patient.

Plagiarism, Cheating, and other forms of Academic Dishonesty

Please note that I do not tolerate academic dishonesty in any form. I take a strict stance on this. Be aware that I will dole out *maximum* penalties for violations, including assigning failing grades and pushing for suspension and/or expulsion from Kent State. If you are unclear on what constitutes plagiarism or academic dishonesty, please make it your business to learn about this immediately. Ignorance of university policy will not be accepted as an excuse. University policy 3-01.8 deals specifically with the problem of academic dishonesty. The sanctions provided in this policy will be used to deal with any violations. If you have questions, please visit <https://www.kent.edu/plagiarism>

IMPORTANT: Please note that I consider the use of Chat GPT (or anything like it) to be a form of academic dishonesty. Although times may change, at present it is unacceptable in the academic setting. As above, I take a strict stance on this.

Information for Students with Documented Disabilities

University policy 3-01.3 requires that students with documented disabilities be provided reasonable accommodations to ensure their equal access to course content. If you have a documented disability and require accommodations, please contact me at the beginning of the semester to make arrangements for necessary adjustments. Please note, you must first verify your eligibility for these through Student Accessibility Services, which can be reached at 330-672-3391 or www.kent.edu/sas

Registration and Withdrawal

University policy requires all students to be officially registered in each class they are attending. Students who are not officially registered for a course by published deadlines should not be attending classes and will not receive credit or a grade for the course. Each student must confirm enrollment by checking his/her class schedule (using Student Tools in FlashLine) and correct any registration errors prior to the deadline.

COURSE SCHEDULE

NOTE: *This schedule is subject to change; all changes will be announced in class and by email.*

Readings are linked below and can also be found on Canvas. All readings are required.

INTRODUCTION

Tuesday, January 16: Introduction—no readings

Thursday, January 18: Introduction—no readings

MORAL DILEMMAS

Tuesday, January 23: James Rachels, “What is Morality”, ch. 1 of [Elements](#)

Thursday, January 25: James Rachels, “Does Morality Depend on Religion,” ch. 4 of [Elements](#)

Micro 1

UTILITARIANISM: A COMMON CURRENCY FOR ACHIEVING MORAL CONSENSUS?

Tuesday, January 30: James Rachels, “The Utilitarian Approach,” ch. 7 of [Elements](#)

Thursday, February 1: Joshua Greene, *Moral Tribes*, Chapter 6: “[A Splendid Idea](#)”

Micro 2

UTILITARIANISM: PROBLEMS AND OBJECTIONS

Tuesday, February 6: James Rachels, “The Debate Over Utilitarianism,” ch. 8 of [Elements](#)

Thursday, February 8: Sandel, [Justice: What is the Right Thing to Do?](#), ch. 2, Utilitarianism

UTILITARIANISM, RIGHTS, AND ABORTION

Tuesday, February 13: Joshua Greene, *Moral Tribes*, Chapter 10, “[Justice as Fairness](#)”

Thursday, February 15: Joshua Greene, *Moral Tribes*, [Chapter 11](#)

Micro 3

IMMANUEL KANT: RIGHTS, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND FREEDOMS

Thursday, February 20: Sandel, *Justice*, Chapter 5: “[What Matters is the Motive](#)”

Thursday, February 22: James Rachels, “[Kant and Respect for Persons](#)”
Onora O’Neill, “[A Simplified Account of Kant’s Ethics](#)”

Micro 4

CAPITALIST LIBERTARIANISM: FREEDOM AND PRIVATE PROPERTY

Tuesday, February 27: Sandel, *Justice*, Chapter 4: “[Libertarianism](#)”

Thursday, February 29: Milton and Rose Friedman, *Free to Choose*, ch. 7

Micro 5

SOCIALISM: MORAL ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST

Tuesday, March 5: Samuel Arnold, “[Socialism](#)”

Thursday, March 7: Samuel Arnold, “[Socialism](#)”

Micro 6

CRIME, PUNISHMENT, LAWS, AND PRISONS

Tuesday, March 12: Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Chapter 1

Tuesday, March 14: Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Chapter 2-3

Micro 7

CRIME, PUNISHMENT, LAWS, AND PRISONS

Tuesday, March 19: Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Chapter 5

Thursday, March 21: Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Chapter 6

Micro 8

SPRING BREAK

OUR TREATMENT OF NONHUMAN ANIMALS: IS IT OK TO EAT FACTORY-FARMED DOGS? PIGS?

Tuesday, April 2: Peter Singer, [Animal Liberation](#), ch. 1: “All Animals Are Equal”

Thursday, April 4: Peter Singer, [Animal Liberation](#), ch. 3: “Down on the Factory Farm”

Micro 9

OUR TREATMENT OF NONHUMAN ANIMALS: IS IT OK TO EAT FACTORY-FARMED DOGS? PIGS?

Tuesday, April 9: Paul Waldau, “[Religion and Animals](#)”

Thursday, April 11: Immanuel Kant, “[Why We Have No Obligations to Animals](#)”
Tibor Machan, “[Do Animals Have Rights?](#)”

Micro 10

CLIMATE CHANGE: ETHICS AND POLITICS

Tuesday, April 16: David Wallace-Wells, “[The Uninhabitable Earth](#)”

Thursday, April 18: Garvey, [The Ethics of Climate Change: Rights in a Warming World](#), ch. 1

Micro 11

Tuesday, April 23: James Garvey, [The Ethics of Climate Change](#), chapters 4 and 6

Thursday, April 25: Naomi Klein, “[Capitalism vs. Climate](#)”

Micro 12

CLIMATE CHANGE AND CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Tuesday, April 30: Hargrove, Abbey: “[The Ethics of Ecological Sabotage: An Exchange](#)”

Thursday, May 2: Bron Taylor, “[Resistance](#)”

FINAL PAPER due on Thursday, May 9th, at midnight
