

INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

New York University
Spring 2014

COURSE DESCRIPTION

How should you live? Should you love your neighbour as yourself? Should you be digging wells rather than taking philosophy classes? Is taxation just? What obligations do we have to the not-yet-born, and to the dead? And says who? Are there really any answers to these questions? If so, what explains why they are one way rather than another? The will of God? Perhaps we need rules to ensure mutual benefits. But then, can I break them if no-one will find out? By the end of this semester, you will be developing answers to these questions and many more.

INSTRUCTORS

Barry Maguire

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READING

The reading for each week will be short. You should aim to read each piece a few times. Read once, quickly, to get the structure of the argument, the main claims, and the conclusion(s). Read a second time to study the argument more carefully, to formulate the argument in your own words, to think of your own examples illustrating the main claims, and to think of counterexamples. Read a third time to soak up any remaining details. Some excellent reading advice can be found online here: <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html>

The course text is *Ethical Theory, An Anthology*, edited by Russ Shafer-Landau. It would be better to have the second edition, but feel free to get the first edition; I'll post on the course website any articles that do not appear in the first edition.

Articles that are not in the course text, and not on the course website, can be found online. Maybe start with library.nyu.edu and jstor.org. [Philpapers.org](http://philpapers.org) is also an excellent resource. Historical materials are generally not behind paywalls.

You are welcome to read anything else that interests you. In general, the more you read, the better a sense you will have of the strengths and weaknesses of prominent views in any given topic, and of typical forms of argument in the area.

WRITING

An important goal of this course is for you to develop your skills in philosophical writing. I will distribute a guide to writing philosophical prose in the first class. Please also read Strunk & White's *The Elements of Style*, George Orwell's 'Politics and the English Language,' and Jim Pryor's 'Guide to Writing Philosophy Papers.'

ASSESSMENT

You will write two short essays (1000 words each), and one longer essay (2,500 words). In addition there will be a short question-and-answer test towards the end of the semester. Your grade for the course will be determined as follows:

- The two short essays amount to 30%
- The longer essay amounts to 40%
- The test is 15%
- The remaining 15% will be determined by your attendance and contributions in discussion group.

POLICIES

The course will adhere throughout to all binding NYU policies, including with respect to Attendance and Academic Integrity:

<http://bulletin.cas.nyu.edu/page/academic.policies#ATTENDANCE>

<http://bulletin.cas.nyu.edu/page/academic.policies#STANDARDS>

TOPICS

The semester is divided into several sections. After thinking about a famous article by Peter Singer, we do some metaethics and some moral epistemology. Then we'll think about the good life for individuals and the good life for societies. Then we'll do some normative ethics, thinking about various different features of the ethical domain. Finally we'll consider some particular issues.

The topics and readings are provisional. If you have a topic or reading you'd like us to cover, please let me know.

Date Topic and Readings

27-Jan Introduction. No readings

29-Jan Obligations to Others
 Peter Singer, 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality'

Metaethics

- 3-Feb Divine Command Theory
Alfred Plato, 'Euthyphro'
Robert Merrihew Adams, 'A New Divine Command Theory'
- 5-Feb Why be moral?
Philippa Foot, 'Morality as a system of hypothetical imperatives'
- 10-Feb Psychological Egoism
Joel Feinberg, 'Psychological Egoism'
- 12-Feb Metaethical Constructivism
Sharon Street, 'What is constructivism in ethics and metaethics?'
(online)
- 17-Feb Moral Realism
Russ Shafer-Landau, 'Ethics as Philosophy: A Defence of Ethical
Nonnaturalism'
Optional: Judith Jarvis Thomson, 'Moral Objectivity' (selections on
website)

Moral Epistemology

- 19-Feb Evolutionary Challenge
Sharon Street, 'Does Anything Really Matter or Did we just evolve to
think so?' (website)
- 24-Feb Optional: The Argument from Disagreement
John Mackie, 'Ethics, Inventing Right and Wrong' (selections on
website)
- 26-Feb The Argument from Advice
Sarah McGrath, 'Skepticism about Moral Expertise as a Puzzle for
Moral Realism' (online)
- 3-Mar Reflective Equilibrium
T.M. Scanlon, 'Rawls on Justification' (website)

The Good Life for an Individual

- 5-Mar Hedonism
John Stuart Mill, 'Hedonism'
Robert Nozick, 'The Experience Machine'

7-Mar **FIRST PAPER DUE BY 6PM**

10-Mar Living Well
Thomas Hurka, 'The Best Things In Life' (selections on website)

The Good Life in a Community

12-Mar Democracy
Optional: Alex Guerrero, The Lottocracy (website)
Optional: Adam Swift, 'What is Democracy' (in 'A Beginner's Guide, on website)

24-Mar Socialism
G.A. Cohen, 'Why Not Socialism' (website)
Optional: Kurt Vonnegut, 'Harrison Bergeron' (online)

26-Mar **Guest Lecture from Professor Bertell Ollman**
In advance, read: Marx & Engels, Communist Manifesto (online)

31-Mar Freedom
Susan Wolf, 'Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility'.
Optional: Sarah Buss, 'Valuing Autonomy and Respecting Persons' (website)

2-Apr Libertarianism
Milton Friedman, 'The Distribution of Income' (in Capitalism and Freedom, on website)

4-Apr **SECOND PAPER DUE AT 6PM**

Ethical Theory

7-Apr Agent-Side Considerations
Robert Nozick, 'The Rationality of Side Constraints'

9-Apr Rights, Duties, Entitlements, etc.
Onora O'Neill, 'Kantian Approaches to Some Famine Problems'

14-Apr Patient-Side Considerations
Julia Driver, 'Contemporary Consequentialism' (in Ethics, The Fundamentals, on website)

- 16-Apr Partiality
Peter Railton, 'Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality'
- 21-Apr Virtue
Aristotle, 'The Nature of Virtue'
- 28-Apr **Guest Lecture by Amanda MacAskill**
Read: Peter Singer, All Animals Are Equal
- 30-Apr Care
Nell Noddings, 'An Ethic of Caring'

Some Ethical Questions

- 5-May Is it wrong to lie?
Rae Langton, 'Maria von Herbert's Challenge to Kant' (online)
- 1 May **Test: distributed 5pm, due to your TA at 5pm on 2 May**
- 7-May What on earth are we going to do about climate change?
Ronald Sandler, The Ethics of Species (selections, website)
- 12-May On the importance of life after death
Samuel Scheffler, Death and the Afterlife (selections on website)
- 16-May **FINAL PAPER DUE BY 6pm**

End of class.