

**Contemporary Ethics**  
**PHIL 505**  
Fall 2020

Prof. Lisa Tessman  
ltessman@binghamton.edu  
Zoom office hours: Tues/Thur 2:45-3:45 or by appointment.

Zoom link for seminar meetings:  
<https://binghamton.zoom.us/j/92225992192>

Zoom link for office hours:  
<https://binghamton.zoom.us/j/97417174593>

**Course Description:**

This course serves as the required ethics seminar for SPEL Philosophy graduate students. The course surveys some questions that have been addressed in contemporary, mostly analytic, normative ethics and a bit of metaethics. We will read works—some more traditional, some more critical (feminist, anti-racist, etc.)—in deontology, contractualism, consequentialism, virtue ethics, sentimentalism, naturalism, moral pluralism, relativism, and care ethics.

**Course Objectives:**

- To survey contemporary work in philosophical ethics and provide graduate students with a background for further study in a variety of areas within ethics.
- To have students develop their own original, critical thinking about the covered topics.
- To have students learn and practice philosophical skills as part of their training to become professional philosophers.
- To advance students in their ability to write papers that will be accepted for philosophical conferences and/or eventual publication. Students in this course will get practice in writing a conference-length paper.

**Texts:**

All readings are available electronically, either as an ebook through the BU library or as a PDF under “course materials” on MyCourses.

**Course Requirements:**

**Class preparation and participation:** All seminar meetings will be held synchronously via Zoom. Please attend and participate in all seminar meetings, unless you have a good reason (such as illness or emergency) not to, and please keep your video on, unless you have a good reason not to.

If you must miss class:

- Please email me before class time to let me know.
- If it is your week to present, please video your presentation and upload it to MyCourses before class time for the class to watch. To record or upload a video, click on Panopto video in MyCourses, then click on the “Student video presentations” folder, then click

on “create” and either record or upload your video; it will be visible to everyone in the class. Videos can take a long time to upload, so leave yourself plenty of time for this.

- If it is not your week to present, please respond to several other students’ Discussion Board posts before class time.

**Weekly assignments** are due on Tuesday evenings by 8:00 PM:

- 1) **Summaries:** Please submit (as an Assignment, after clicking on “Course Materials” on the MyCourses menu) a 150-200 word paragraph summarizing the main idea/argument/position in that week’s reading. This should be a formal, polished piece of writing. Imagine that you were writing a paper for publication in which, as background, you had to very briefly convey to the reader the main points of the text. I will use anonymous grading for weekly summaries.
- 2) **Discussion Board:** Unless you are the presenter that week, please post under the week’s Forum on Discussion Board (click on “Discussions” on the MyCourses menu) a 150-200 word paragraph explaining your response to the week’s material. This could include critical points about the reading, what you take the implications of the reading to be, or interesting ways of extending or building on the author’s position. This paragraph can be informal. Sometime before class, please read everyone else’s paragraphs (you may respond on Discussion Board if you wish or wait until class time to respond verbally).

**Presentations:** Each student will do one presentation (on the first day of class I will ask you to send me a ranked list of your preferences for presentation date). You are encouraged to consult with me as you are preparing your presentation. Plan on speaking for 15-20 minutes, with or without accompanying slides. You may either present live during the Zoom meeting, or if you prefer, you may video your presentation and we will watch it together during the Zoom meeting (you may share your screen to play the video for the rest of the class). If you are going to present live, please practice the presentation ahead of time in order to time it; you may also wish to video your practice presentation so that you can watch the video to determine what needs improvement before presenting in class. The presentation should consist of your own critique of or constructive engagement with the material that we have read for that week (but may also tie back to earlier readings); it should not include any summary of the material that we have read. Be creative with your presentation. After your presentation, please solicit responses (questions, comments, responses to a question that you have posed) to your presentation from the rest of the class.

**Seminar paper:** Seminar papers are expected to draw centrally on the course readings. If you would like to also draw on material not assigned in the class, please check with me first; in any case, the primary focus must be on assigned material. The seminar paper has a strict 3,000 word limit—in other words, it is the typical length of a conference paper (i.e. a paper with a 20-minute reading time). You are encouraged to base your seminar paper on your presentation. If you wish to coauthor your paper with another student in the class, please speak with me ahead of time about this. A full draft of the paper is due on the last day of class, and you will be expected to do a brief presentation based on your paper on that day. I encourage each of you to meet with me several weeks before the paper is due to start discussing your paper topic, and to continue to consult with me throughout the writing process, to whatever extent this is helpful to you. I will meet with each of you after you present your first draft to discuss revisions. The final draft is due on December 9<sup>th</sup>.

**Grading:**

Weekly summaries: 30%

Presentation: 20%

Seminar paper: 50%

The final grade may be adjusted upward or downward based on class participation (including the Discussion Board). Do give serious attention to the *quality*—not just the quantity—of your participation in discussions. Academic dishonesty will result in failure of the class and possible further action, including severance from the SPEL program.

**Schedule****Week 1 (Wed August 26):** Introductions

During class, we will look at excerpts from the following (no need to read them in advance), all related to the distinction between agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons:

Bernard Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism” in Bernard Williams & J.J.C. Smart, *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, Cambridge University Press, 1973. (pgs 98-99).

Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford University Press, 1984. (p 143).

Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986. (pgs 152-154; 164-166).

Optional additional reading:

Christine Korsgaard, “The reasons we can share: An attack on the distinction between agent-relative and agent-neutral values,” in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, Cambridge University Press, 1996: 275-310. [Available as a PDF].

**Week 2 (Wed Sept 2):** Deontology

Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, Cambridge University Press, 1996. Prologue and Lectures 1 and 2. [Available as an ebook through the BU library].

**Week 3 (Wed Sept 9):** Deontology

Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, Lectures 3 and 4.

**Week 4 (Wed Sept 16):** Contractualism

T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, Harvard University Press, 1998. Introduction and Chapter 5. [Available as two separate PDFs].

**Week 5 (Wed Sept 23):** (Act) Consequentialism

Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Spring, 1972), pp. 229-243. [Available as a PDF].

Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality*, Oxford University Press, 1991. Chapter 1, "Against Ordinary Morality." [Available as an ebook through the BU library].

**Week 6 (Wed Sept 30):** (Rule) Consequentialism

Brad Hooker, *Ideal Code, Real World*, Oxford University Press, 2003. Chapters 1-4. [Available as an ebook through the BU library].

**Week 7 (Wed Oct 7):** A variety of criticisms of the sort of theories we have read so far.

Michael Stocker, 1976. "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," *The Journal of Philosophy* 73(14): 453-466. [Available as a PDF].

Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character and Morality" chapter 1 in *Moral Luck*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981: 1-19. [Available as a PDF].

Susan Wolf, "'One Thought Too Many': Love, Morality, and the Ordering of Commitment," chapter 9 in *The Variety of Values: Essays on Morality, Meaning, and Love*, Oxford University Press, 2015. [Available as a PDF; or as an ebook through the BU library].

Bernard Williams, "Morality, the Peculiar Institution" chapter 10 in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Harvard University Press, 1985: 174-196. [Available as a PDF].

Charles Mills, 2005. "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology" *Hypatia* 20 (3): 165-184. [Available as a PDF].

**Week 8 (Wed Oct 14):** Virtue Ethics

Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, Oxford University Press, 2002. Introduction and Part I (chapters 1-3). [Available as an ebook through the BU library].

**Week 9 (Wed Oct 21):** Virtue Ethics/Politics

Christopher Lebron, *The Color of Our Shame: Race and Justice in Our Time*. Oxford University Press, 2013. [Available as an ebook through the BU library].

**Week 10 (Wed Oct 28):** (Neo) Sentimentalism

Jonathan Haidt, 2001. "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment," *Psychological Review*, Vol. 108, No. 4 (2001), pp. 814-834. [Available as a PDF].

Jesse Prinz, *The Emotional Construction of Morals*, Oxford University Press, 2009. Chapters 1-3. [Available as an ebook through the BU library].

Myisha Cherry, "The Errors and Limitations of Our 'Anger-Evaluating' Ways," in *The Moral Psychology of Anger*, edited by Myisha Cherry and Owen Flanagan, Rowman & Littlefield, 2019: 49-65. [Available as a PDF].

**Week 11 (Wed Nov 4):** Naturalized approaches to ethics / Relativism / Pluralism

Charles Mills, "White Right: The Idea of a *Herrenvolk* Ethics," in *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race*, Cornell University Press, 1998: 139-166. [Available as a PDF].

Margaret Urban Walker, "Seeing Power in Morality: A Proposal for Feminist Naturalism in Ethics," in *Moral Contexts*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2003: 103-116. [Available as a PDF].

David Wong, "Pluralism and Ambivalence," in Michael Krausz, Ed., *Relativism: A Contemporary Anthology*, Columbia University Press, 2010: 254-267. [Available as a PDF].

**Week 12 (Wed Nov 11):** Care Ethics

Eva Feder Kittay, *Learning from My Daughter: The Value and Care of Disabled Minds*, Oxford University Press, 2019. Part I. [Available as an ebook through the BU library].

**Week 13 (Wed Nov 18):** Care Ethics

Eva Feder Kittay, *Learning from My Daughter*, Part III.

**Week 14 (Wed Dec 2):**

Full draft (3,000 words) of seminar paper due before the beginning of class.  
Presentations in class, or video presentations due by 10:00 AM (with Q&A/feedback in class).

**Dec. 3-4:** Individual appointments with me for discussion of seminar paper drafts.

**Dec. 9:** Final version of seminar paper due by midnight.