

Ethical Theory
PHIL 340
Fall 2023
Meets T/Th 10:05-11:30 in Classroom Wing 110

Professor Lisa Tessman

Pronouns: usually *she*, but also fine to use *they*

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Office hours in person in LT 1215; Wed 11:45 AM-12:45 PM or by appointment.

Office hours by zoom: Tues 8:40-9:45 AM or by appointment.

Zoom link for office hours: <https://binghamton.zoom.us/j/99619382395>

Course Description:

This course is an introduction to the main Western philosophical theories of ethics, both historical and contemporary. Students will examine how particular moral problems are treated within frameworks that each emphasize different considerations, such as what sort of person is morally admirable, how one should live, what good motives for action are, whether there are certain actions that are morally obligatory or morally prohibited, whether one should consider anything other than the consequences of one's actions, what role the moral emotions should play, when impartiality is appropriate, and what the value of care is. The course includes work by feminists and critical race theorists who argue for the importance of examining moral life under real conditions, including conditions of oppression.

Course Objectives:

- To survey historical and contemporary work in Western philosophical ethics.
- To have students develop their own original, critical thinking about each of the theories studied, and identify and articulate their own position in ethics.
- To have students learn and practice philosophical skills.

This course satisfies the Humanities ("H") General Education Requirement.

Learning Outcomes: Students in H courses will demonstrate an understanding of human experience through the study of literature or philosophy.

Text:

Moral Philosophy: A Contemporary Introduction by Daniel DeNicola (Broadview Press, 2018).

Please purchase the textbook by the first day of class.

All other readings are available as PDFs on Brightspace.

Office hours offer an opportunity for students to meet individually with me. Please make use of this time to ask questions or engage in further discussion of the course material.

You don't need a specific reason to come to office hours – feel free to come to chat!

Course Requirements:

This course is a 4-credit course, which means that in addition to attending and participating in class meetings, students are expected to do at least 9.5 hours of course-

related work *outside of class* each week during the semester. This includes time spent completing assigned readings, taking notes and reflecting on the readings, writing responses, and studying for exams.

Class participation:

Students are expected to attend class unless you are ill. Please do *not* come to class if you are ill. You do not need medical documentation for missing class, but you do need to email me before class time to let me know if you must miss class, and your email must tell me your reason for missing class. Please get notes from another student if you miss class. Four or more missed classes without an acceptable reason will result in failure of the class.

Do give serious attention to the *quality*—not just the quantity—of your participation in discussions. If you find it difficult to speak in class discussions, please talk to me about this *during the first week or two of the semester* and we will devise a plan for you to practice this kind of speaking and for me to grade your participation appropriately. Otherwise, please volunteer regularly to speak.

If I, or your classmates, are pronouncing your name wrong, using the wrong pronouns for you, etc., please correct us! Also please let me know if there is anything I can do to facilitate your learning or accommodate your particular learning style.

Written responses (150-200 words each):

There are 10 written responses due, as listed in the schedule. They are due by 5:00 PM on the evening before the topic will be discussed in class and are to be submitted via Brightspace. The word limits are strict: each response must be between 150 and 200 words long. Late responses will not receive credit, nor will responses that are outside of the word limits. Use of generative AI (such as Chat GPT) is forbidden for written responses, and students who do make use of it will be charged with a violation of the Academic Honesty code.

There are two types of responses assigned:

- 1) Responses to “Questions for Discussion” (not to be confused with “Questions for Personal Reflection.”) These questions can be found at the end of each chapter of *Moral Philosophy*.
- 2) “Are you a _____?” responses (for example: “Are you a Utilitarian?”).
Each of these responses must begin with either “Yes,” “No,” or “It’s complicated,” and then go on to explain (why are you a _____? what are the claims made by _____ that you agree with?) and justify (that is, offer reasons in support of) your response. It is fine to change your mind about your position as the course progresses! (So, if in week 6 you claim that you are a Utilitarian, but then in week 7 you decide you are really a Kantian, your responses should reflect this change).

All responses should demonstrate a clear understanding of the relevant reading(s) and should engage critically with the reading(s); each response must include at least two page citations to the reading(s). Some assignments specify that you must discuss an article that we have read in addition to the textbook chapter; for these assignments, make sure that you refer directly to the article and explain your interpretation of it rather than just repeating the textbook’s interpretation. At least one of your page citations must be to the article rather than to the

textbook. Imagine you are writing for an audience who has not read the assigned reading, so first you have to explain the relevant points in the reading before you can respond to the question. All responses will be graded anonymously—I will see your names only after I have submitted grades for all responses.

Points given for written responses:

- 0 = did not complete the assignment (on time), or outside of word limits, or showed little or no understanding of the reading, or very poorly written, etc. Responses without the required two page citations (including at least one to an article outside of the textbook, if relevant) will receive a zero.
- 2 = showed at least some understanding of the reading (with proper citations) and at least some development of and argument in support of the response.
- 4 = showed a good or excellent understanding of the reading (with proper citations) and developed and supported the response well.

Tests:

There will be three exams (in addition to a final exam) that cover approximately one third of the course material each.

The purpose of the exams is for me to assess how well you have understood the course material and to assess your ability to respond to the material in original and critical ways. The introduction of [ChatGPT](#) and other generative artificial intelligence (AI) into our world (with more advanced technologies coming soon) has made it evident that generative AI can do quite a bit of what I expect you to be able to do in a course at this level! (However, do note that with ChatGPT's current abilities, the answers that it gives to the exam questions that I have asked in previous years in this course would get grades ranging from about D to B). This complicates assessment, but more importantly, it can complicate your learning if you make use of generative AI. We will discuss this. For instance, if AI can do certain things, is there any reason for humans to continue to learn how to do those things? I think the answer is: yes, there is still great value in understanding the philosophical ideas that previous thinkers have developed, even if AI can exhibit or appear to exhibit such understanding. Furthermore, there are things that AI cannot do and that humans who study philosophy can learn to do—like think original philosophical thoughts from the particular subjective perspective that you and only you occupy—but you cannot leapfrog over the task of understanding philosophical ideas (the task that you might be tempted to outsource to AI) and expect to then be able to engage in original ways with these ideas.

We will be using a variety of exam formats in this course because there is no one format that best encourages learning for everyone. It is possible that generative AI can assist us in our learning, rather than hinder our learning or offer a tempting way to avoid having to learn something. The first of the three exams will be an old-fashioned [blue book exam](#) given in class, without access to books, notes, or electronic devices. For the second and third exams, half the students will take an oral exam (5 minutes each, individually with me in the classroom) while half the students take a written exam on Brightspace (from a remote location) in which they show they are “better than the bot,” namely they will have access to ChatGPT but be asked to write an essay that is better than what ChatGPT writes. (The students who do an oral exam for the second exam will do a “better than the bot” exam for the third, and vice versa).

Final exam:

The final exam will be given during exam period, and will be an oral exam covering all of the course material.

Grading:

Written responses: 4 points each; 40 points total

Three exams: 10 points each; 30 points total

Final exam: 30 points.

A: 94-100 points

A-: 90-93 points

B+: 87-89 points

B: 84-86 points

B-: 80-83 points

C+: 77-79 points

C: 74-76 points

C-: 70-73 points

D: 60-69 points

F: 59 or below

The final grade may be raised or lowered by a plus or minus (e.g. from a B- to a B, from an A- to a B+, etc) depending on the quality of class participation.

Disability-related equal access accommodations:

I am happy to make accommodations (e.g. extended time) for any student with a documented need for it. Students needing accommodations to ensure their equitable access and participation in this course should register with Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) office as soon as they're aware of their need for such arrangements. [Visit the SSD website](#) or call 607-777-2686 for more detailed information. Students who are registered with SSD and who wish to make use of their accommodations should discuss with me the details of how the accommodations can best be implemented in this class.

Academic Honesty:

I follow the Philosophy Department guidelines on academic honesty (below). Students are responsible for being familiar with, and abiding by, the [Academic Honesty Code](#).

Philosophy Department Guidelines on Academic Honesty

The Philosophy Department considers plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty to be serious breaches of the code of ethics governing academic life. They are also violations of Harpur College and Binghamton University policies.

In order to contribute to a culture of Academic Honesty within both the Department and the University, the Philosophy Department has agreed on the following guidelines:

- 1) Instructors will include a statement describing their policy regarding Academic Honesty on all course syllabi.
- 2) When a student commits an act of academic dishonesty, the instructor will formally bring the violation to the attention of the Harpur College Academic Honesty Committee by either:
 - a. submitting an Admission of Dishonesty Form that has been signed by the student,
 - or*
 - b. initiating a hearing before the Harpur College Academic Honesty Committee.
- 3) When a student commits an act of academic dishonesty, the instructor for the course will not give the student credit for the assignment, whether or not the student re-submits honest work.
- 4) Instructors will decide what further grade consequences are appropriate in response to the dishonesty at their own discretion; the typical consequence is a grade of 'F' for the course.

Schedule

Week 1:

Tues, Aug 22

Introductions

Wed, Aug 23

Written response #1: Questions for Discussion #2 for *Moral Philosophy (MP)* chapter 1.

Due by 5:00 PM.

Thur, Aug 24

MP: Chapter 1, “Ethical Theory, Moral Concerns.”

This first chapter of the textbook is available as a PDF for students who are unable to get the book on time, but because of copyright restrictions no further chapters can be provided.

Week 2:

Tues, Aug 29

MP: Chapter 3, “Relativism.”

Thur, Aug 31

Go to <https://yourmorals.org>, register, and answer the demographic questions.

Under “Surveys”:

- first take the Moral Foundations Questionnaire. Download your results from the questionnaire—the results will show how your answers to questions about the importance of each of the moral foundations (care, equality, loyalty, authority, purity, proportionality) compares to the average.
- then take the Schwartz Values Scale survey.
(Bring your results to class)

Then watch Jonathan Haidt, “[The Moral Roots of Liberals and Conservatives](#)” (20 minute video):

Then read/browse: <https://moralfoundations.org/>

Week 3:

Tues, Sept 5 – no class (Monday classes meet)

Wed, Sept 6

Written response #2: “Are you a moral relativist?” and/or “Are you a moral value pluralist?”

This written response must engage with the textbook reading and Wong’s article, and you may also (optionally) refer to Moral Foundations theory.

Due by 5:00 PM.

Thur, Sept 7

David Wong. 2010. “Pluralism and Ambivalence,” in Michael Krausz, Ed., *Relativism: A Contemporary Anthology* (pgs. 254-267).

Available as a PDF.

Refer to the document entitled “Wong Class Preparation” to guide you through this reading.

Week 4:**Tues, Sept 12**

MP: Chapter 5, "Egoism."

Wed, Sept 13

Written response #3: "Are you an ethical egoist?"

This written response must engage with both the textbook reading and Batson's article.

Due by 5:00 PM.

Thur, Sept 14

C. Daniel Batson. 2012. "The Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis: Issues and Implications," in Jean Decety, Ed., *Empathy: From Bench to Bedside* (pgs. 41-54).

Available as a PDF.

Week 5:**Tues, Sept 19**

Exam #1

Thur, Sept 21

MP: Chapter 6, "Utilitarianism."

Week 6:**Tues, Sept 26**

John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chapter II and Chapter IV.

Available as two PDFs.

Wed, Sept 27

Written response #4: "Are you a Utilitarian?"

This written response must engage with the textbook reading and either with Mill's chapters or with Singer's article (or, optionally, with both).

Due by 5:00 PM.

Thur, Sept 28

Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality."

Available as a PDF.

Week 7:**Tues, Oct 3**

MP: Chapter 7, "Kantianism."

Wed Oct 4

Written response #5: "Are you a Kantian?"

This written response must engage with both the textbook reading and Kant's chapter.

Due by 5:00 PM.

Thur, Oct 5

Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, Chapter I.

Available as a PDF.

Week 8:

Mon, Oct 9

Written response #6: “Are you a Contractarian?”
Due by 5:00 PM.

Tues, Oct 10

MP: Chapter 8, “Contractarianism.”

Thur, Oct 12

MP: Interlude, “Principled Ethics.”

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

Week 9:

Tues, Oct 17

Catch up day / review.

Thur, Oct 19 – no class (fall break)

Week 10:

Tues, Oct 24

Exam #2

Thur, Oct 26

MP: Chapter 9, “Virtue Ethics.”

Week 11:

Mon, Oct 30

Written response #7: “Are you a virtue ethicist?”
This written response must engage with the textbook reading and Aristotle’s chapters.
Due by 5:00 PM.

Tues, Oct 31

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books I and II.
Available as two PDFs.

Thur, Nov 2

MP: Chapter 10, “Emotions and Moral Sentiment Theory.”

Week 12

Mon, Nov 6

Written response #8: “Are you a sentimentalist?”
This written response must engage with the textbook reading and Haidt’s article.
Due by 5:00 PM.

Tues, Nov 7

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.

Thur, Nov 9

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 13:**Tues, Nov 14**

Amia Srinivasan. (2018). "The Aptness of Anger," *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol 26, No. 2, pp. 123-144.

Available as a PDF.

Wed, Nov 15

Written response #9: "Are you a care ethicist?"

This written response must engage with the textbook reading.

Due by 5:00 PM.

Thur, Nov 16

MP: Chapter 11, "Care Ethics and the Feminist Standpoint."

Week 14 – no classes (on Tues, Fri classes meet; Thur is Thanksgiving)**Week 15:****Tues, Nov 28**

MP: Chapter 14, "Moral Theory and the Good Life."

Susan Wolf. "Moral Saints." In *The Variety of Values: Essays on Morality, Meaning, and Love*.

Available as a PDF.

Thur, Nov 30

Exam #3.

Week 16:**Mon, Dec 4**

Written response #10: Questions for Discussion #8 for *MP* chapter 14.

Due by 5:00 PM.

Tues, Dec 5

Lisa Tessman. "Idealizing Morality." *Hypatia* vol 25, No. 4 (2010).

Available as a PDF.

Thur, Dec 7

Kathryn Norlock, "Perpetual Struggle." *Hypatia* vol 34, No. 1 (2019).

Available as a PDF.

Exam week: final exam