

Ethical Theory
PHIL 340
Fall 2024
Meets T/Th 1:15-2:40 in Classroom Wing 315

Professor Lisa Tessman

ltessman@binghamton.edu

Office: LT 1215.

Office hours: Tues 12:00 -1:00 PM and Thur 2:50 - 3:50 PM or by appointment.

Please come to office hours in person unless you are ill, in which case please request a zoom appointment. Zoom link for appointments: <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. In the first half of the course, we will focus on pre-20th century canonical works in Western philosophical ethics, and in the second half of the course we will read work by contemporary ethical theorists. 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, and when impartiality is appropriate. 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, and thus has the following learning outcomes: Students will:

- demonstrate knowledge of the conventions and methods of at least one of the humanities; and
- recognize and analyze nuance and complexity of meaning through critical reflections on text, visual images, or artifacts.

This course satisfies the Critical Thinking and Reasoning ("T") General Education Requirement, and thus has the following learning outcomes: Students will:

- clearly articulate an issue or problem;
- identify, analyze, and evaluate ideas, data, and arguments as they occur in their own or others' work;
- acknowledge limitations such as perspective and bias; and
- develop well-reasoned (logical) arguments to form judgments and/or draw conclusions.

Texts:

Books for this course may be purchased through the campus bookstore [here](#).

Every student must have the following four books, in hard copy, in the versions listed here (this translation, this publisher, this edition, etc.). During class and during exams, you will have access to these hard copies and you will be expected to have them with

you and be able to refer to them, and you will not have access to any electronic sources. Citations in your written work must be to these versions of the texts.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Translated by J.A.K. Thomson, Penguin Classics.
ISBN: 9780140449495

David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hackett Classics.
ISBN: 9780915145454

Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, translated by H.J. Paton, Harper Perennial.
ISBN: 9780061766312

John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, edited by George Sher, Hackett.
ISBN: 9780872206052

All of the contemporary readings are available as PDFs in a folder under “Content” on Brightspace. Please print these and bring them to class and to exams in hard copy.

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!

Email is a good way to communicate with me about practical things (telling me you will be out sick, scheduling an appointment, etc.) but I will not engage in substantive discussion over email. If you would like to ask a philosophical question or have a substantive discussion of any kind, come to office hours instead of emailing me.

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 9½ 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 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 or without letting me know ahead of time will result in failure of the class.

All electronic devices must be put away during class. We will be working entirely with hard copies of readings, and with pen and paper for notes. After experimenting with uses of generative AI (such as Chat GPT) in class for a couple of years, I have found that, in the context of a philosophy class, students learn better without it. We will thus do without electronic devices in order to eliminate the temptation to consult AI (or any other sources).

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.

Eight written responses (250-300 words each):

Eight written responses must be submitted via Brightspace. Each response must be between 250 and 300 words long and may contain no more than a total of 25 words of direct quotation. Late responses will not receive credit, nor will responses that are outside of the word limits. If you need an extension (for reasons of illness, etc.), email me at least 24 hours before the assignment is due; if I do not approve the extension, your response is still due by the original deadline. Using generative AI and/or consulting any sources other than the assigned material is forbidden for written responses, and students who use AI or sources that are not assigned will be charged with a violation of the Academic Honesty code. Each of the eight written responses must include at least two page-citations for paraphrases or direct quotations, at least one of which must be to the current reading, and the other of which may be either to the current reading or to a previously assigned reading. If you include any direct quotation (25-word limit), be sure to also interpret the quotation in your own words.

The first four written responses are on the historical material (Aristotle, Hume, Kant, and Mill) and are due by 11:59 PM on the last day of discussion of each of the four historical texts, though it is a good idea to be working on the response throughout the time that we are studying each text. In each response, after demonstrating a clear understanding of the reading, say whether or not you endorse the ethical framework under consideration: do you consider yourself to be an Aristotelian (or more generally a “virtue ethicist”), a Humean (or more generally a “sentimentalist”), a Kantian (or more generally a “deontologist”), or a Utilitarian (or more generally a “consequentialist”) (for some reason people who agree with Mill don’t usually call themselves “Milleans”). With the exception of the first response, the responses should be comparative: if you decide you are a Humean, why are you a Humean rather than an Aristotelian? if you decide you are a Kantian, why are you a Kantian rather than an Aristotelian or a Humean? etc. By your fourth written response, try to settle on which of these four ethical traditions you most strongly endorse. When you endorse a position, defend it against objections (from the other positions, where relevant). When you reject a position, offer a critique of it (from the standpoint of the other positions, where relevant). It is fine to change your mind about your position as the course progresses!

The last four written responses are on the contemporary material. There are a total of eight contemporary readings assigned, and each student may choose any four of these eight on which to write a response (it goes without saying that it is not a very good idea to skip the first four and write on the last four). The response for any reading is due by 11:59 PM on the day on which we discuss that reading. I recommend writing the response when you do the reading (before we discuss it in class), and then revising it, if necessary, after the class discussion. In each response, first demonstrate your understanding of the author’s main point and their argument in support of this point; when relevant, identify the ethical tradition (e.g. virtue

ethics, deontology, etc.) within which the author situates themselves, and show how they make use of the assumptions of this tradition in their argument. Then either defend the author's position against an objection, critique the author's position by offering reasons to reject it, or propose a way to build on their position to support an original conclusion.

Grading for written responses:

- 95 = showed a good or excellent understanding of the reading (with proper citations) and developed and supported the response well.
- 85 = showed at least some understanding of the reading (with proper citations) and at least some development of and argument in support of the response.
- 75 = showed little understanding of the reading and/or offered misinterpretations and/or developed little argument in response, and/or was poorly written, etc.
- 65 = offered primarily misinterpretation, and/or developed almost no argument in response, and/or was very poorly written, etc.
- 55 = did not complete the assignment (on time), or outside of word limits, or did not include two page-citations, or showed no evidence of having done the reading.

Oral exams:

There will be two oral exams, the first on the historical material and the second on the contemporary material. I will provide study questions in advance. Each student will have a six-minute time slot to meet with me individually for the oral exam. Prepare notes for a one-to-two-minute response to each of the study questions. At the exam, you will choose one of the study questions randomly (out of a hat) and deliver your prepared response—but this is not the part of the exam that is most important. After your prepared response, I will ask follow-up questions that can be answered well only if you understand well what you said in your prepared response.

Final exam:

The final exam will be given during exam period and will be a written exam covering all of the course material. It is an open book exam, but no electronic devices are permitted. You are permitted to have with you only the assigned texts and any hand-written notes that you have taken yourself (not anything copied from another student or from an online source or from any other source).

Grading:

Written responses (average grade for the eight responses): 30% of final grade.

Oral exams: 15% of final grade each (30% total).

Final exam: 40% of final grade.

Grading scale:

- A 94-100
- A- 90-93
- B+ 87-89
- B 84-86
- B- 80-83
- C+ 77-79
- C 74-76
- C- 70-73

- D 60-69
- 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, including the brief presentation on the last day of class.

Disability-related equal access accommodations:

I am happy to make accommodations 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 the [Services for Students with Disabilities \(SSD\) office](#) as soon as they are aware of their need for such arrangements. 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. Accommodations are not in effect until the student has initiated a discussion with me about them.

Academic Honesty:

Students are responsible for being familiar with, and abiding by, the [Academic Honesty Code](#). If I suspect a violation of the academic honesty code, I will discuss my concerns with the student, and if I continue to suspect that a violation has occurred, I will either offer the student the opportunity to sign an admission of dishonesty form or will initiate a hearing before the Harpur College Academic Honesty Committee. If the student either signs the admission of dishonesty form or is found by the Academic Honesty Committee to have violated the academic honesty code, the typical consequence will include an “F” in the course, and further consequences may be imposed by the Academic Honesty Committee.

Schedule

Week 1:

Tues, Aug 20

Introductions

Thur, Aug 22

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I (you may skip chapters *vi*, *ix*, *xi*, and *xii*) (pp. 3-9; 13-20; 22-25; 27-30).

Week 2:

Tues, Aug 27

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II (pp. 31-49).

Thur, Aug 29

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III chapter *i* and Book VII chapters *i*, *viii*, and *x* (pp. 50-54; 167-169; 185-187; 189-190).

Written response due at 11:59 PM.

Week 3:

Tues, Sept 3

David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Section II (“Of Benevolence”) and Part I of Section III (“Of Justice”) (pp. 16-27).

Thur, Sept 5

David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Section IX (“Conclusion”) (pp. 72-82).

Written response due at 11:59 PM.

Week 4:

Tues, Sept 10

Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, Chapter I (pp. 61-73).

Thur, Sept 12

Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, Chapter II up to “The Formula of Universal Law” (pp. 74-88).

Week 5:

Tues, Sept 17

Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, Chapter II up to “The Formula of Autonomy” (pp. 88-98).

Thur, Sept 19

Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, to the end of Chapter II (pp. 98-113).

Written response due at 11:59 PM.

Week 6:

Tues, Sept 24

John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chapter II and Chapter III (pp. 6-34).

Thur, Sept 26

John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chapter IV and Chapter V (pp. 35-64).

Written response due at 11:59 PM.

Week 7: no classes

Week 8:

Tues, Oct 8 – no class (this Tuesday is a Friday)

Thur, Oct 10

Review of Aristotle, Hume, Kant, and Mill.

Week 9:

Tues, Oct 15

Oral exam 1.

Thur, Oct 17

Oral exam 1.

Week 10:

Tues, Oct 22

Michael Stocker. (1976). "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories." *The Journal of Philosophy* 73 (14): 453-466.

Written response due at 11:59 PM for those writing on Stocker.

Thur, Oct 24

Susan Wolf. (1982). "Moral Saints." *The Journal of Philosophy* 79 (8): 419-439.

Written response due at 11:59 PM for those writing on Wolf.

Week 11:

Tues, Oct 29

Jonathan Haidt. (2001). "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment." *Psychological Review* 108 (4): 814-834.

Written response due at 11:59 PM for those writing on Haidt.

Thur, Oct 31

David Wong. (2010). "Pluralism and Ambivalence," in Michael Krausz, ed., *Relativism: A Contemporary Anthology*: 254-267.

Written response due at 11:59 PM for those writing on Wong.

Week 12:

Tues, Nov 5 *VOTE*

Carol Hay. (2011). "The Obligation to Resist Oppression." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 42 (1): 21-45.

Written response due at 11:59 PM for those writing on Hay.

Thur, Nov 7

Serene Khader. (2017). "Transnational Feminisms, Nonideal Theory, and 'Other' Women's Power." *Feminist Philosophical Quarterly* 3 (1).

Written response due at 11:59 PM for those writing on Khader.

Week 13:

Tues, Nov 12

Myisha Cherry. (2022). "Political Anger." *Philosophy Compass* 17 (2).

Written response due at 11:59 PM for those writing on Cherry.

Thur, Nov 14

Review of Stocker, Wolf, Haidt, Wong, Hay, Khader, and Cherry.

Week 15:

Tues, Nov 19

Oral exam 2.

Thur, Nov 21

Oral exam 2.

Week 16 – no classes (Tuesday is a Friday; Thursday is Thanksgiving)

Week 17:

Tues, Dec 3

Kathryn Norlock. (2019). "Perpetual Struggle." *Hypatia* 34 (1).

Written response due at 11:59 PM for those writing on Norlock.

Thur, Dec 5

Three-minute oral presentations: what ethical framework do you support, or which ethical claim do you think it is most important to defend? Why?

Exam week: final exam.