

Syllabus
Ethics: Theory and Practice
Instructor: Rachel Achs

Required Materials:

- *The Fundamentals of Ethics*, 4th ed. (2018), Russ Shafer-Landau [The Coop will have copies, but you can order this quite easily from amazon. Please let me know if you have any issues acquiring the textbook.]
- All other readings will be posted on the course website.

My Information:

E-mail: rachelachs@fas.harvard.edu

Office hours: By appointment.

Course Information:

Purpose: You will gain the ability to understand and engage with philosophical texts, apply highly theoretical ideas to real and fictional situations, and (hopefully) achieve a broader understanding of the surrounding world and your place in it. You will also come out knowing some particular views about different questions in ethics.

There will be a particular focus on developing the ability to understand the structure of an argument and engage constructively with it. Your homework assignments and many in-class activities will use the technique of *argument mapping*, an intuitive, visual way of breaking down arguments into their different parts and exhibiting the relations between those parts. Near the end of the session, we will stage in-class group debates about challenging moral issues, which will help you to engage constructively with your peers in discussion.

Description: We will explore a variety of ethical views in the three major subfields of ethics: normative ethics, meta-ethics, and applied ethics. We will begin by considering different ways of answering the question: What makes an action right? Next, we will consider questions such as: Are moral truths relative or universal? Is morality real or just a sham? We'll end with some views about applied ethical problems like labor rights and genetic selection.

Assessment: Since this course yields no letter grade, there is no strict rubric. Instead, you will receive written and verbal feedback on your performance in (1) classroom participation and (2) homework assignments.

A note about participation: Some students are very outgoing, while others are simply quieter. But philosophy essentially involves discussion and interaction with the ideas of others, so vocalizing some ideas is required. However, and we cannot emphasize this enough: *quality is preferred to quantity*. Don't be shy, but do think before you speak.

Assignments:

1. Do the reading before class. It isn't a lot **but it's hard**. So read the texts more than once. You should spend about 2 hours reading, re-reading, taking notes, and discussing with peers.

2. There will be daily writing or argument mapping assignments but no final exam. The daily writing or argument mapping assignment should take thirty minutes to an hour, depending on how much work you put into Step 1.

Expectations: Here are the two basic things you absolutely must do: respect each other and respect the instructor. This includes (but is obviously not limited to) the following: avoid both physical and verbal violence, do not plagiarize, attend *all* classes (there are only nine of them, after all!) and arrive on time, turn all electronic devices off (unless you have a pacemaker). In general, take the class and each other seriously, and take yourselves seriously. (Eating and so on is fine as long as it's not a nuisance.)

A note about plagiarism: Again, it should be clear what counts as plagiarism, but don't take chunks of things that aren't yours without citing the original source (yes, even if it's by a fellow student! and yes, even if you paraphrase!). Working together on homework is fine, but do any write-ups *separately*. (See below for a longer discussion of plagiarism.)

A note about computers: We will not be using laptops, tablets, or cell-phones in class. If you have a special need for a computer, please let me know.

A note about attendance: The university policy requires all students to attend all classes. If you cannot do so, please inform me, as well as contacting the Director of the Pre-College Program, Jacqueline Newcomb. Tardiness is frowned upon, and will affect the participation evaluation.

Academic Integrity: Harvard Summer School expects you to understand and maintain high standards of academic integrity and to take advantage of resources to support academic integrity. Breaches of academic integrity are subject to review and disciplinary action by the Administrative Board. Examples include the following:

Plagiarism: Plagiarism is the theft of someone else's ideas and work. It is the incorporation of facts, ideas, or specific language that are not common knowledge, are taken from another source, and are not properly cited. Whether you copy verbatim or simply rephrase the ideas of another without properly acknowledging the source, the theft is the same. In the preparation of work submitted to meet course, program, or school requirements—whether a draft or a final version of a paper, project, take-home exam, computer program, placement exams, application essay, oral presentation, or other work—you must take great care to distinguish your own ideas and language from information derived from sources. Sources include published and unpublished primary and secondary materials, the Internet, and information and opinions of other people.

What to do: Cite the sources that you use, including discussion with peers!

Inappropriate collaboration and other assistance: I encourage you to collaborate with your peers on all of your assignments. Discussion is an extremely important part of understanding difficult philosophical texts, and you will gain skills in articulating your ideas (and realize when they're not as clear as you thought!) However, students must acknowledge all collaboration and its extent in all submitted coursework.

If you have any questions about the standards of Academic Integrity I expect you to meet, please meet with me to discuss! And for more information, please see <https://www.summer.harvard.edu/policies/student-responsibilities>.

Extra Support: If you have a physical or learning disability that requires accommodation, please register with the summer school Accessibility Services Office. For more information, please see <http://www.summer.harvard.edu/resources-policies/accessibility-services>.

Course Schedule

Unit I: Introduction, Argument Mapping

July 22:

- **Arguments and Argument Mapping**

Goals — To understand what an argument is, why arguments are important, and how to use the tool of *argument mapping*.

- **Introduction to Ethics**

Goals — To understand the subject matter of ethics and how to reason about morality.

Unit II: Normative Ethics

Normative ethics – the study of theories about how we should think, feel, and behave

July 23:

- **Hedonism and Desire Satisfaction**

Hedonism – the view that enjoyment is the only thing that matters fundamentally to well-being

Desire Satisfaction – the view that satisfying one’s desires is the only thing that matters fundamentally to well-being

July 24:

- **Consequentialism and Utilitarianism**

Consequentialism – the view that we should maximize whatever is intrinsically valuable

Utilitarianism – the view that we should do what maximizes well-being (i.e., “utility”)

July 25:

- **Kantianism**

Kantianism – the view that we should always do what’s fair and respectful.

July 26

- **Pluralism and the Trolley Problem**

Ethical Pluralism – the view that there is a plurality of fundamental moral rules

Unit III: Metaethics and Responsibility

Metaethics – the study of the nature of moral facts and statements

July 29:

- **Moral Relativism, Moral Nihilism, and Moral Objectivism**

Moral relativism – the view that ethical statements are true, but only relative to individuals (*subjectivism*) or group of people (*cultural relativism*)

Moral nihilism – the view that there are no ethical truths

Moral objectivism – the view that there are ethical truths that are the same for everyone, independent of their preferences, desires, etc.

July 30

- **Responsibility and Free Will**

Unit IV: Applied Ethics

Applied ethics – how we should think, feel, and behave in particularly sticky situations

July 31-August 1:

Different ways in which the above theories have tangible consequences for practical issues

Reading Schedule

Please note that readings are subject to change. I may revise reading assignments according to student ability and/or interest.

All readings other than those from The Fundamentals of Ethics will be posted on the course website.

Introduction

June 29: Introduction

Outline of the course, introduction to philosophy and philosophical thinking.

OPTIONAL: “Introduction,” *The Fundamentals of Ethics*

Normative Ethics: How to Behave

June 30: Hedonism and Desire Satisfaction

Chs. 1 and 3 of *The Fundamentals of Ethics*: “Hedonism: Its Powerful Appeal,” and “Getting What You Want”

July 1: Consequentialism.

John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, “What Utilitarianism Is”

July 2: Kantianism.

Kant, selections from the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*

Chs. 11 and 12 (**up to page 183**) of *The Fundamentals of Ethics* “The Kantian Perspective: Fairness and Justice” and “The Kantian Perspective: Autonomy and Respect”

JULY 3: NO CLASS

July 2: The Trolley Problem and Ethical Pluralism

Ch 15 “Ethical Pluralism and Absolute Moral Rules” (**pp. 221-225 only**) and Ch 16 “Ethical Pluralism” (**pp. 239-249 only**)

Judith Jarvis Thomson “The Trolley Problem”

Metaethics and Responsibility

July 29: Moral Relativism, Moral Nihilism, and Moral Objectivism

Chs. 19 and 20 of *The Fundamentals of Ethics* “Ethical Relativism” and “Moral Nihilism”

July 30: Freedom of the Will and Moral Responsibility

Peter van Inwagen “The Powers of Rational Beings”

Harry Frankfurt “Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility”

Applied Ethics

July 31: Demandingness and Exploitation

Discussion of Global Poverty

“Famine, Affluence, Morality,” by Peter Singer

Sweatshops Debate

Matt Zwolinski “Sweatshops, Exploitation, and Choice”

Jeremy Snyder “Exploitation and Demeaning Choices”

August 1: Future People

Climate Change

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, “It’s Not *My* Fault: Global Warming and Individual Moral Obligations”

Disability Selection Debate

Jeff McMahan, “Causing Disabled People to Exist and Causing People to be Disabled”

Elizabeth Barnes, “Valuing Disability, Causing Disability”

August 2: Moral Education

Justin P. McBrayer, “Why Our Children Don’t Think There Are Moral Facts” *The New York Times*, March 2, 2015