

Introduction to Ethics

PHL 318

Burdine Hall, Room 134

Instructor Information

Instructor	Email	Office Location & Hours
Justin Morton	mortonjj@utexas.edu	WAG 411 MW 11:00-12:00
Grader	Email	Office Location & Hours
Elliot Goodine	egoodine@utexas.edu	WAG 319 THUR 1:00-3:00

General Information

Description of Course Content

You are all in college because you think it will make your life better. But what makes a life good?

When I was little, I used to pick on my little brother just for fun, and that was wrong. But why was it wrong?

Caligula was a notoriously sadistic Roman emperor. Suppose that he really thought he was doing the right thing in torturing someone—would it still be wrong? Or does its wrongness depend somehow on what Caligula believes?

These are some of the kinds of questions we will be considering this semester. We will investigate the nature of the good life, when and why acts are morally wrong, whether moral truths are objectively or only relatively true, and whether (and how) God is necessary for morality. The promise of this course is that you will understand and be able to reason clearly about some of the deepest questions about morality.

Course Objectives

- Understand the major positions in ethical theory.
- Develop the abilities to reason about and debate these issues.

Course Materials

Required Materials

- Russ Shafer-Landau, *The Fundamentals of Ethics* (this will be abbreviated as “RSL” in what follows)

All other materials will be made available throughout the term, with the exception of any movies assigned.

Course Schedule

Week	Topic	Reading
Weeks 1 & 2 Jan. 18-20 Jan. 23-27	Introduction and Syllabus/ What is the good life?	RSL, Introduction RSL, Ch. 1: Hedonism: Its Powerful Appeal Watch <i>The Truman Show</i> (movie)* RSL, Ch. 2: Is Happiness All that Matters? ○ First homework due Jan. 27
Week 3 Jan. 30-Feb. 3	What is the good life?	RSL, Ch. 3: Getting What You Want News Excerpt: “Man Tries to Cut Off his Arms at California Home Depot” RSL, Ch. 4: Problems for the Desire Theory
Week 4 Feb. 6-10	What is the good life?	Jean Kazez, “Necessities”
Week 5 Feb. 13-17	How should I live?	Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” RSL, Ch. 9: Consequentialism: Its Nature and Attractions ○ First paper due Feb. 15
Week 6 Feb. 20-24	How should I live?	RSL, Ch. 9 (cont.) Watch <i>The Dark Knight</i> (movie)* RSL, Ch. 10: Consequentialism: Its Difficulties
Week 7 Feb. 27-Mar. 3	How should I live?	Watch short video on self-driving cars Kant, selection from <i>Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals</i> RSL, Ch. 11: The Kantian Perspective: Fairness and Justice
Week 8 Mar. 6-10	How should I live?	Jesus, selection from <i>The Sermon on the Mount</i> RSL, Ch. 17: Virtue Ethics ○ Second paper due Mar. 10

Week	Topic	Reading
Week 9 Mar. 20-24	Why should I be moral?	Plato, <i>The Ring of Gyges</i> Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints" RSL, Ch. 8: Ethical Egoism
Week 10 Mar. 27-31	Is moral truth objective?	RSL, Ch. 19: Ethical Relativism RSL, Ch. 20: Moral Nihilism
Week 11 Apr. 3-7	Is moral truth objective?	David Enoch, "Why I am an Objectivist About Ethics" RSL, Ch. 21: Eleven Arguments Against Moral Objectivity
Week 12 Apr. 10-14	Is God necessary for morality?	Plato, selection from <i>Euthyphro</i> Alston, "What Euthyphro Should Have Said" ○ Third paper due Apr. 14
Week 13 Apr. 17-21	Is God necessary for morality?	Dostoevsky, selection from <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i> Linda Zagzebski, "Does Ethics Need God?"
Week 14 Apr. 24-28	Choice Week**	
Week 15 May 1-5	Choice Week**	

* Movies can be watched privately, but I will also screen them on campus, outside of class hours.

** At some point midway through the semester, you as a class will vote on what topics you want to cover in the final two weeks of class. I will give you a list of possible topics, such as:

- The problem of evil (what the existence of evil tells us about the existence of God)
- Monism/Pluralism (whether there is more than one fundamental moral principle)
- Feminist Ethics
- Immigration
- Abortion
- The Moral Status of Animals
- Human Genetic Enhancement
- Affirmative Action

- ...Or suggest another topic to me or Elliot!

Evaluation

First Short Paper | 10%

Second Short Paper | 15%

Third Short Paper | 25%

Final Exam | 20%

Two Homework Assignments | 10% each

Participation/Attendance | 10%

The **short papers** will each isolate a reasoning/writing skill, and will build on each other. You will be given prompts as the date approaches.

The **first homework assignment** will help you develop the ability to construct and evaluate formal arguments. The **second homework assignment** will be to write a very short summary of some ethical issue that you have seen in popular media (the news, a TV show, a Facebook debate, etc.).

Policies

Attendance. You may miss 5 classes, unexcused. Miss any more and you will lose this portion of your grade.

Electronic Devices. You may NOT use cell phones or other electronic devices in class, unless specifically authorized by me. (If, for example, you are waiting on a very important phone call, see me before class.) Failure to follow this policy will result in losing all participation/attendance points.

Grades. Grades will be assigned numerically (e.g., “96”) and then translated at the end of the course into letter grades, according to the standard university distribution.

Further Information

Students With Disabilities

Students with disabilities may request appropriate academic accommodations from the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, Services for Students with Disabilities, 471-6259.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism will not be tolerated. Any instance may be punished by a report to the relevant dean, as well as failure of the assignment or course. Please see me if you are unclear about either the definition of plagiarism in general, or about whether some particular case is an instance of plagiarism.