ETHICAL THEORIES

Course Description

This course examines four central approaches to ethical theory on the contemporary scene—virtue ethics, deontology, consequentialism, and intuitionism—by a close reading of key texts:

- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*
- Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*
- Jeremy Bentham, *Principles of Morals and Legislation*
- John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*
- W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good*

Our discussion will not be limited to those texts; we will consider subsequent developments, especially recent contributions, and we will seek to identify and address the primary problems each tradition faces.

Prerequisite: Six semester hours of coursework in philosophy. This course counts toward the writing flag requirement.

Syllabus

All readings required for this course are linked from this page. There are also links to notes from class that will be active once students have submitted notes for the day. Some relevant secondary literature may be placed on Blackboard as the semester progresses. Those readings are not required, but will be recommended, especially for those who are writing papers on related topics.

Ethics and Ethical Theories

Aug 25  What is ethics?
Aug 27  Ethical theories

Common Sense Ethics: Intuitionism

Aug 30  Confucius, *Analects*
Sept 1  Confucius, *Analects*
Sept 3  Confucius, *Analects*
Sept 8  Prichard, "Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?"
Sept 10 Ross, *The Right and the Good*, I
Sept 13  *The Right and the Good*, II
Sept 15  *The Right and the Good*, II
Sept 17  The Right and the Good, III
Virtue Ethics
Sept 20  Plato, *Laches*
Sept 22  Plato, *Laches*
Sept 24  Plato, *Republic IV*; Augustine, *Confessions* VIII, 9, 10
Sept 27  Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I
Sept 29  Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I
Oct 1    Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* II
Oct 4    Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* II
Oct 6    Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* III-IV
Oct 8    Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* III-IV
Oct 11   Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VI, VII
Oct 13   Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII, IX
Oct 15   Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* X

Deontology
Oct 18   Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* I
Oct 20   Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* I
Oct 22   Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* I
Oct 25   Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* II
Oct 27   Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* II
Oct 29   Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* II
Nov 1    Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* II
Nov 3    Kant, "On a Supposed Right to Tell Lies from Benevolent Motives"
Nov 5    Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* III

Consequentialism
Nov 10   Mill, "Of the Logic of Practice", *A System of Logic*; "Bentham"
Nov 12   Bentham, *Pannomial Fragments* I; *The Rationale of Reward*, III, 1; *Deontology* I.3
Nov 17   Mill, *Utilitarianism* II
Nov 19   Mill, *Utilitarianism* II
Nov 29   *Utilitarianism* III, IV
Dec 1    Bentham, *Pannomial Fragments*, III
Dec 3    Mill, *Utilitarianism* V; paper draft due

This course carries a writing flag.
Requirements

COURSE OBJECTIVE

Your goal: an excellent 15 page (5000 word, more or less) paper on a topic of your choosing, relating to at least one of the approaches to ethical theory explored in this course. You will pursue this goal in five stages:

• Detailed notes on two sessions of the class, to be emailed to the professor within a week of that session. (10% of your grade.)

• A 1-3 page prospectus, explaining your topic, your objective, and how you plan to go about achieving it, due by November 8. (10% of your grade.)

• A draft of your paper, to be distributed to a group of students working on related topics as well as to the professor, due by December 3. (10% of your final grade.)

• Comments on other students' drafts, pointing out strengths and weaknesses, and giving advice for improvement, due by December 6. (10% of your final grade.)

• Your final paper, revised in light of comments from your group members and the professor, due by December 13. (50% of your final grade.)

• Class attendance and participation is 10% of the final grade.

Submit all of the above by emailing them to the professor.

Grading

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WRITING YOUR PAPER

A good paper will address an important topic; state clearly the thesis to be advanced; argue for that thesis clearly and compellingly; show an awareness of possible questions, objections, and counterarguments, indicating at least in outline how to respond to each; and show familiarity with some relevant secondary and contemporary literature. The Philosophers' Index is your friend.

Read carefully the advice on writing philosophy papers found on web sites linked from this page.

The only requirement for topics is that the paper have to do with ethics, and make some reference to at least one of the figures in the course (Confucius, Aristotle, Kant, Bentham, Mill, Prichard, Ross).
Kinds of papers students often write:

1. a historical paper: What did X really mean? What’s Y’s theory of Z?

2. a critical paper: X says that (or argues that) Z. But that’s wrong, because....

3. an analytical paper: If you examine X’s theory of Z, or the general problem of Y, or X’s argument for Z, you see that it has this structure, and rests on some assumptions....

4. an application paper: X’s theory of Z implies something interestingly true or false about W.... (some very good papers of this kind have been written about literature, movies, and TV shows—but avoid politics, because this course doesn’t cover crucial questions about the nature and role of government, which makes it very hard to write a sophisticated paper about those topics)

5. a comparative paper: If you compare X’s theory of Z to Y’s, you see that the crucial difference between them comes down to W (or, that they agree about Y)....

6. a synthetic paper: If you take some elements of X’s theory of Z, and combine it with some aspects of Y’s theory, together with some highly original ideas of my own, you get a much better theory of Z.

READING PHILOSOPHY

Jim Pryor of New York University has an excellent guide to reading philosophy. There is a helpful guide at Philosophy Pages. Most philosophers read with a pencil at hand, marking a line in the margin beside important sections, underlining key definitions and theses, and jotting notes and questions in the margin. Don’t try to read philosophy without marking or writing anything; you won’t retain enough of what you read. And don’t use a highlighter; it’s too indiscriminate. Look for key theses, terms, and arguments; mark them; and think about them. Thinking about concrete cases often makes it clearer what the philosopher is trying to say—and also where its inadequacies are.

WRITING

To write philosophy well, you first need to know how to write! You might think you already know how to do that. But effective writing isn’t something most people learn until they’re out of college.

The best guide to writing I’ve found is The Elements of Style, by William Strunk and E. B. White. It’s still in print, and in a fourth edition; you can find the original 1918 version online. Some of the book’s rules of composition and style are especially important in philosophical writing:

Strunk and White’s Rules

1. Use the active voice.
2. Put statements in positive form.
3. Use definite, specific, concrete language.
4. Omit needless words.
5. Avoid a succession of loose sentences.
6. Keep related words together.
7. Write in a way that comes naturally.
8. Write with nouns and verbs.
9. Revise and rewrite.
10. Do not overwrite.
11. Do not overstate.
12. Avoid fancy words.
13. Be clear.
14. Do not take shortcuts at the cost of clarity.

There are some rules of style that are suspended in philosophy. First, feel free to use the first person. Philosophers often write “I think,” “I want to argue,” and the like. In philosophical writing, you want to take a stand, advance an argument for it, and contrast your view with the views of others. Using the first person is a good way of doing that. Second, don’t worry about using the verb ‘to be.’ Philosophers need to define terms, and ‘is’ and ‘are’ are useful for that purpose, among others. Third, sometimes it’s best to use foreign terms. Philosophical terms such as ren, li, dao, eudaimonia, quidditas, de re, a priori, and Geist have no precise English equivalents. Avoid them when you can, but don’t sacrifice clarity and precision to do so.

WRITING PHILOSOPHY

Jim Pryor also has an outstanding guide to writing philosophy. I urge you to consult it. Peter Horban of Simon Fraser University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Philosophy Pages, and the University of Wisconsin – Madison all have excellent pages devoted to the topic.

One rule is so important and so widely violated that I’ll stress it here. Start your paper by stating your goal. Say clearly what you’re going to accomplish. A well-known paper by Peter Geach begins, “I am arguing that identity is relative.” Aspire to such clarity. Don’t write fluff. (“Philosophers have argued about identity for centuries....” Ugh.) Don’t keep the reader in suspense. Philosophy isn’t a mystery story. State your conclusion at the beginning.

Pryor’s Rules

1. Use simple prose. If you wouldn’t say it, don’t write it.
2. Make the structure of your paper obvious.
3. Be concise, but explain yourself fully.
4. Say exactly what you mean.
5. Pretend that your reader is lazy, stupid, and mean.
6. Use plenty of examples and definitions.
7. Present and assess the views of others critically, but with understanding.
8. Anticipate objections.
9. If something in a view you’re examining is unclear to you, don’t gloss it over. Call attention to the unclarity. Suggest several different ways of understanding the view.
Policies

The grading system for this course uses pluses and minuses.

Out of respect for your fellow students, please do not use cell phones in class.

Your papers must be your own work. You must not use material without citing your sources.

HONOR CODE

The core values of The University of Texas at Austin are learning, discovery, freedom, leadership, individual opportunity, and responsibility. Each member of the university is expected to uphold these values through integrity, honesty, trust, fairness, and respect toward peers and community.

RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS

Religious holidays will be respected in accordance with University policy.

DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities may request appropriate academic accommodations from the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, Services for Students with Disabilities, 471-6259 (voice) or 232-2937 (video phone).

IMPORTANT DATES

8/30 Last day of the official add/drop period; after this date, changes in registration require the approval of the department chair and usually the student’s dean.

9/10 Twelfth class day; this is the date the official enrollment count is taken. Last day an undergraduate student may add a class except for rare and extenuating circumstances. Last day to drop a class for a possible refund.

9/22 Last day to drop a class without a possible academic penalty.

10/20 Last day an undergraduate student may, with the dean’s approval, withdraw from the University or drop a class except for urgent and substantiated, nonacademic reasons. Last day a student may change registration in a class to or from the pass/fail or credit/no credit basis.