

INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS

(PHIL 1441)

Instructor: Dr. Jake Wright
Email: jwwright@r.umn.edu
Office Hours: Monday, 11:30–1:00
Tuesday, 12:30–2:00
Wednesday, 12:00–1:30¹
Course Website: Canvas
Course Meetings: 11:00–12:15, Tuesdays and Thursdays (USq 415)
Required Texts: None. All texts will be provided via the course site.

WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL, ANYWAY?

At its core, ethics is about answering two questions. First, what should I value? Second, how should I live? In other words, ethics asks us to consider what is most important in our lives and what we should (or shouldn't) do to get those valuable things. One way of thinking about these issues is to think of ethics as helping you develop a *way of life* that leads to a special state known as *flourishing*.

Many of us have concepts of value, how we should live, and what a flourishing life would look like. Perhaps you received such concepts from your parents, your religious tradition, or your cultural upbringing. Likely, they are important, valuable pieces of your core self-identity. Unfortunately, however, we rarely get the chance to examine these commitments closely, which is what this course tries to do.

By the end of this course, you will be able to articulate and defend a view of the good life and how you can achieve it. It may be that the view you present at the end of the semester will be radically different from what you believe now. It may also be that the view you present will be largely identical to your present views. What will matter, and what will govern success in this course, will be your ability to think critically about, articulate, and defend your view, whatever it is.

WHAT ARE THE EXPECTATIONS?

Every classroom is its own learning community. One of the most important features of healthy communities is trust in one another. This means that I as the instructor will be placing an enormous amount of trust in you, the student, in a couple ways. One of the most obvious is in how we will develop community guidelines for our class. Because we are all adults, we'll spend some time in the first week of class developing community guidelines that will govern our interactions with each other. That being said, there are some basic expectations that are non-negotiable.

¹ These hours are general and subject to change. For an up-to-date calendar, see here: <https://r.umn.edu/academics-research/academic-resources/just-ask>

You are expected to contribute to an academic community. This means that you should be prepared to have in-depth discussions of the material we are covering in class each day. Since this is an Intro class, you aren't expected to start off with any philosophical background, and you're not expected to show up having mastered the material.

I am expected to explain course content clearly, be available for discussion during regular office hours, grade work in a timely fashion, address concerns as they arise, and keep up with the logistics of the class (e.g., posting resources and responding to emails).

Everyone is expected to treat each other with respect. This class has two Golden Rules.

The first is the Principle of Charity: The things we will be doing in this class will often be new and difficult. (This includes some of the things I will be doing in class.) I expect everyone to fail or struggle at some point during the semester because that's how learning happens. Sometimes, this will mean that fellow students will struggle with tasks that seem incredibly easy to you. Sometimes, this will mean that students will struggle to express themselves clearly. When things like this happen, it's important to be *charitable*, which is to say you should start with the idea that the other person is trying their best and that they are trying to make a coherent, reasonable point, even if they are struggling to do so.

The second rule is to not make things personal. Philosophy is about ideas, not people, and we're going to be discussing some beliefs that are core parts of some people's identity. Good philosophy will investigate claims critically, which means taking a long, hard look at the evidence for and against a claim. We can (and should) be critical without criticizing or belittling.

The environment should be one that allows you to learn and demonstrate that learning effectively. So, if you are entitled to an accommodation under the ADA, please speak with me so we can make sure that your needs are being met. If there's something about the environment that you think is not conducive to either your learning or your ability to demonstrate that learning, please speak to me even if you are not entitled to an accommodation. There are often tweaks and adjustments we can make to improve conditions to everyone's benefit regardless of whether anyone is legally entitled to those adjustments.

Oh, and one more thing...

My wife and I are expecting our second child in late October (the due date is October 28). Though I am not planning on taking parental leave during the semester, baby's arrival will almost certainly be disruptive to our class both when it arrives and after. I will, at a minimum, be fantastically sleep-deprived for the last third of the class. I will do my best to keep such disruptions to a minimum, but I appreciate your grace, humor, and understanding in advance.

ANY OTHER MAJOR POLICIES?

Don't cheat. Not only will the consequences be serious for you, but in cases where work is group-based, the consequence will be serious for your fellow students, too.

I won't take late work unless there's a verifiable excuse like illness *and* the request is made no more than 24 hours after the assignment is due.²

Take care of yourself and your health. College is a stressful time where new challenges can present themselves quickly and unexpectedly. If your physical or mental health is in need of attention, please make that your priority. You're not doing anyone—including and especially yourself—any favors by pushing through physical or mental health challenges unnecessarily.

Additional rules, along with more precise articulations of these rules, can be found in the boilerplate information below.

WHAT WILL WE THINK ABOUT?

Class is divided up into five units that generally ask a couple big questions each. Because 1000-level courses assume no disciplinary background, Unit 1 will be a brief introduction to how philosophy works. The other units will build from questions about what is valuable towards a final question about what *you* should value and how you should try to obtain or live in accordance with those values.

UNIT 1: WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

What is philosophy? What does it try to do? How do we do philosophy?

UNIT 2: WHAT SHOULD I VALUE?

Does it matter what I think is important? Are there particular things that are most valuable? If so, what are those things?

UNIT 3: WHAT ARE THE RULES?

Are there rules that govern our actions? If so, how can we know them? What are they? Are there any reasons to think there are no rules?

UNIT 4: HOW SHOULD WE LIVE?

How should societies organize themselves? Is government just the application of power? Are there things governments must do? Are there things they should never do?

UNIT 5: HOW SHOULD I LIVE?

Given what we have studied this semester, how should I live my life? What should I value, and how should I pursue those valuable things?

² I'll be somewhat flexible on the 24-hour rule in case of extreme, unforeseeable emergencies (e.g., emergency surgery, alien invasions, the CIA needing your expertise for a covert operation requiring radio silence), but contact me ASAP in such cases. It's easier to ask in advance because any exception to this policy requires justifying both an extension and an exception to the policy that other students don't receive.

HOW ARE WE GOING TO DO THIS?

We're going to read, talk, work on group assignments, do homework, and write papers. Most of this will explicitly count towards your final grade. Work that we do over the semester that isn't part of the assignments described below will collectively count towards 10% of your final grade. Each unit will have a major assignment associated with it. In addition, you will have a practical assignment that you will have most of the semester to complete. I'll provide more detail on these assignments as they're assigned, but here is a brief description of them:

UNIT 2: THE OBITUARY AND THE JOB APPLICATION

In this assignment you will be asked to write a cover letter for a job application and an obituary for your future self, as well as a brief comparison of these two compositions. This assignment may not be rewritten. (15% of your final grade)

UNIT 3: THE ARGUMENT SUMMARY

In this assignment you will be asked to summarize one of the main arguments presented by the ethical theories we examine, outlining why the author thinks we should accept the argument in question. This assignment has the option of being rewritten. (15% of your final grade)

UNIT 4: THE ARGUMENT RESPONSE

In this assignment you will be asked to respond to one of the main arguments presented by the political theories we examine, outlining why one might reject the argument in question. This assignment has the option of being rewritten. (15% of your final grade)

UNIT 5: THE APOLOGY

In this assignment you will be asked to present and defend a view of the good life, including what you view as most valuable, how we should live in order to achieve or live in accordance with these values, and how you plan to live thusly. This assignment may not be rewritten. (30% of your final grade)

ONGOING: ETHICS AS A WAY OF LIFE

Over the course of the semester, you will be asked to complete a number of practical tasks and reflect on them. (15% of your final grade, with the possibility of extra credit)³

WHEN IS STUFF DUE?

Readings are due before each class so that we can discuss the material like the smart people we are.

Unless otherwise stated, homework assignments are due at 11:59 pm the day before the next class. So, if I give you an assignment during Tuesday's class, you should upload it to Canvas before 11:59 pm on Wednesday.

³ The Ethics as a Way of Life assignment is the only opportunity for extra credit in the class. Instructions on how to receive extra credit will be included in the assignment instructions.

Major assignments are due at the conclusion of their respective units. These dates can be found in the course calendar.

I'M GOING TO MED SCHOOL. HOW DO I GET AN A?

There are lots of things you can do in this class that will help you get an A. None of them will *guarantee* an A, but they're the sorts of things that A-level students have done in the past.

First, be an active participant in class and ask questions when you have them. Discussion isn't part of your grade, but being an active learner means being engaged. Active learners do better than passive learners on the stuff that counts because they understand the material better. This is an intro class, so I promise there are no stupid questions.

Second, have a reliable, helpful note-taking strategy. Good note-taking will be different from person to person, but there are a few things that I can predict will *not* help you learn the material. If you read but don't take notes, or if you only underline or highlight the readings, you won't understand the material as well as you could or should. The same goes for class. If you just underline or highlight the handout (or do nothing), you won't get the full benefit of our time together. Basically, it's vital to be active and write stuff down, even if it makes sense in the moment; when you come back to it later, your notes will be invaluable. Share your notes with a classmate so you can compare and learn from each other.

Third, do the reading. Some of it will be hard and confusing, and I'm sorry about that. But it will be helpful. You'll come to class with at least a basic idea of what we're talking about, and you'll go into papers with a much deeper understanding of what the authors are saying. When I grade papers, it's usually pretty easy to figure out how much reading a student has done, and I can tell you that the students who do the reading usually write better papers.

Finally, come to office hours. I have a ton of them because I want to meet with you and talk about philosophy. Almost every past student I've had has said one of two things. They've either said, "I'm so glad I came to office hours. They were super helpful," or, "I wish I would have come to office hours. I would have done so much better." I want to talk to you! Please don't make me sit there and talk to the other faculty.

Date	Unit	Reading	Major Assignment
3-Sep		none	
5-Sep	What is philosophy?	"The behavior of ethicists," by Eric Schwitzgebel and Joshua Rust	
10-Sep		"The philosophy and politics of early abortion in the U.S.," by Justin Weinberg	
12-Sep		"The moral bucket list," by David Brooks	
17-Sep		"Your professional decline is coming (much) sooner than you think," by Arthur Brooks	
		"Letter to Menoeceus," by Epicurus	
		"A brain in a vat," by John Pollock	
19-Sep	What should I value?	The allegory of the cave (from The Republic, by Plato, Book VII, 514a-521d)	
24-Sep		<i>The Nicomachean Ethics, by Aristotle (Book I)</i>	
26-Sep		"Kierkegaard on 'truth is subjective' and 'the leap of faith,'" by Richard Schacht (Part II)	
1-Oct		"YOLO apologetics," by Barry Lam (from HiPhi Nation)	
		"The myth of Sisyphus," by Albert Camus	
3-Oct		"Setting the wheel of Dharma in motion" (excerpt)	
8-Oct		The Kantian perspective: Autonomy and respect," by Russ Shafer-Landau	Obituary and Application
10-Oct		"Letter from a Birmingham Jail," by Martin Luther King, Jr.	
15-Oct		"Consequentialism: Its nature and attractions," by Russ Shafer-Landau	
17-Oct	What are the rules?	"The Singer solution to world poverty," by Peter Singer	
22-Oct		"The ethics of care as moral theory," by Virginia Held (from The Ethics of Care)	
24-Oct		"A defense of abortion," by Judith Jarvis Thomson (excerpt)	
29-Oct		"The argument from strangeness," by Jake Wright	
31-Oct		"Moral saints," by Susan Wolf (parts I and III)	
5-Nov		"The case for reparations," by Ta-Nehesi Coates	Argument Summary
7-Nov		<i>A Theory of Justice, by John Rawls (excerpt)</i>	
12-Nov	How should we live?	<i>Anarchy, State, and Utopia, by Robert Nozick (excerpt)</i>	
14-Nov		<i>Leviathan, by Thomas Hobbes (excerpt)</i>	
19-Nov		<i>Marx: A Very Short Introduction, by Peter Singer (Chapter 9: Communism)</i>	
21-Nov		"The nature and destination of government," by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (from Confessions of a Revolutionary)	
26-Nov		<i>Eichman in Jerusalem, by Hannah Arendt (excerpt)</i>	Argument Response
28-Nov		Thanksgiving (no class)	
3-Dec	How should I live?	"The ones who walk away from Omelas," by Ursula K. Le Guin	
5-Dec		"Story of your life," by Ted Chiang	
10-Dec		"The inner light," by Morgan Gendal and Peter Allen Fields	
12-Dec	Exam week		Apology due

I'M HAVING TROUBLE SLEEPING. DO YOU HAVE SEVERAL PAGES OF BOILERPLATE THAT GOES INTO EXCRUCIATING DETAIL ABOUT SPECIFIC UNIVERSITY AND COURSE POLICIES?

You bet I do!

Student Conduct Code

The University seeks an environment that promotes academic achievement and integrity, that is protective of free inquiry, and that serves the educational mission of the University. Similarly, the University seeks a community that is free from violence, threats, and intimidation; that is respectful of the rights, opportunities, and welfare of students, faculty, staff, and guests of the University; and that does not threaten the physical or mental health or safety of members of the University community.

As a student at the University you are expected adhere to Board of Regents Policy: Student Conduct Code. To review the Student Conduct Code, please see:

http://regents.umn.edu/sites/regents.umn.edu/files/policies/Student_Conduct_Code.pdf.

Note that the conduct code specifically addresses disruptive classroom conduct, which means "engaging in behavior that substantially or repeatedly interrupts either the instructor's ability to teach or student learning. The classroom extends to any setting where a student is engaged in work toward academic credit or satisfaction of program-based requirements or related activities."

Use of Personal Electronic Devices in the Classroom

Using personal electronic devices in the classroom setting can hinder instruction and learning, not only for the student using the device but also for other students in the class. To this end, the University establishes the right of each faculty member to determine if and how personal electronic devices are allowed to be used in the classroom. For complete information, please reference:

<http://policy.umn.edu/education/studentresp>.

Scholastic Dishonesty

You are expected to do your own academic work and cite sources as necessary. Failing to do so is scholastic dishonesty. Scholastic dishonesty means plagiarizing; cheating on assignments or examinations; engaging in unauthorized collaboration on academic work; taking, acquiring, or using test materials without faculty permission; submitting false or incomplete records of academic achievement; acting alone or in cooperation with another to falsify records or to obtain dishonestly grades, honors, awards, or professional endorsement; altering, forging, or misusing a University academic record; or fabricating or falsifying data, research procedures, or data analysis. (Student Conduct Code:

http://regents.umn.edu/sites/regents.umn.edu/files/policies/Student_Conduct_Code.pdf) If it is determined that a student has cheated, the student may be given an "F" or an "N" for the course, and may face additional sanctions from the University. For additional information, please see:

<http://policy.umn.edu/education/instructorresp>.

The Office for Community Standards has compiled a useful list of Frequently Asked Questions pertaining to scholastic dishonesty: <https://communitystandards.umn.edu/avoid-violations/avoiding-scholastic-dishonesty>. If you have additional questions, please clarify with your instructor for the course. Your instructor can respond to your specific questions regarding what would constitute scholastic dishonesty in the context of a particular class-e.g., whether collaboration on assignments is permitted, requirements and methods for citing sources, if electronic aids are permitted or prohibited during an exam.

Makeup Work for Legitimate Absences

Students will not be penalized for absence during the semester due to unavoidable or legitimate circumstances. Such circumstances include verified illness, participation in intercollegiate athletic events, subpoenas, jury duty, military service, bereavement, and religious observances. Such circumstances do not include voting in local, state, or national elections. For complete information, please see:

<http://policy.umn.edu/education/makeupwork>.

Appropriate Student Use of Class Notes and Course Materials

Taking notes is a means of recording information but more importantly of personally absorbing and integrating the educational experience. However, broadly disseminating class notes beyond the classroom community or accepting compensation for taking and distributing classroom notes undermines instructor interests in their intellectual work product while not substantially furthering instructor and student interests in effective learning. Such actions violate shared norms and standards of the academic community. For additional information, please see: <http://policy.umn.edu/education/studentresp>.

Grading and Transcripts

University Grading Scales

The University has two distinct grading scales: A-F and S-N. This course uses A-F grading.

A-F grading scale.

The A-F grading scale allows the following grades and corresponding GPA points:

Grade	GPA Points	Definitions for undergraduate credit
A	4.000	Represents achievement that significantly exceeds expectations in the course.
A-	3.667	
B+	3.333	
B	3.000	Represents achievement that is above minimum expectations in the course.
B-	2.667	
C+	2.333	
C	2.000	Represents achievement that meets the minimum expectations in the course.
C-	1.667	
D+	1.333	
D	1.000 -	Partially meets min. expectations. Credit, but may not fulfill requirements.
F	0.000	

For additional information, please refer to: <https://policy.umn.edu/education/gradingtranscripts>.

Sexual Harassment

"Sexual harassment" means unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and/or other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature. Such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work or academic performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working or academic environment in any University activity or program. Such behavior is not acceptable in the University setting. For additional information, please consult Board of Regents Policy:

https://regents.umn.edu/sites/regents.umn.edu/files/policies/Sexual_Harassment_Sexual_Assault_Stalking_Relationship_Violence.pdf

Equity, Diversity, Equal Opportunity, and Affirmative Action

The University provides equal access to and opportunity in its programs and facilities, without regard to race, color, creed, religion, national origin, gender, age, marital status, disability, public assistance status, veteran status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. For more information, please consult Board of Regents Policy:

http://regents.umn.edu/sites/regents.umn.edu/files/policies/Equity_Diversity_EO_AA.pdf.

Disability Accommodations

The University of Minnesota views disability as an important aspect of diversity, and is committed to providing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students. The Disability Resource Center (DRC) is the campus office that collaborates with students who have disabilities to provide and/or arrange reasonable accommodations.

If you have, or think you have, a disability in any area such as, mental health, attention, learning, chronic health, sensory, or physical, please contact the DRC office on your campus (UMR: disability@r.umn.edu or 507-258-8085) to arrange a confidential discussion regarding equitable access and reasonable accommodations.

Students with short-term disabilities, such as a broken arm, can often work with instructors to minimize classroom barriers. In situations where additional assistance is needed, students should contact the DRC as noted above.

If you are registered with the DRC and have a disability accommodation letter dated for this semester or this year, please contact your instructor early in the semester to review how the accommodations will be applied in the course.

If you are registered with the DRC and have questions or concerns about your accommodations please contact your (access consultant/disability specialist). Additional information is available on the DRC website: <http://r.umn.edu/student-life/student-services/disability-resources>

Mental Health and Stress Management

As a student you may experience a range of issues that can cause barriers to learning, such as strained relationships, increased anxiety, alcohol/drug problems, feeling down, difficulty concentrating and/or lack of motivation. These mental health concerns or stressful events may lead to diminished academic performance and may reduce your ability to participate in daily activities. University of Minnesota services are available to assist you. You can learn more about the broad range of confidential mental health services available on campus via the Student Mental Health Website: <http://www.mentalhealth.umn.edu>.

Academic Freedom and Responsibility

Academic freedom is a cornerstone of the University. Within the scope and content of the course as defined by the instructor, it includes the freedom to discuss relevant matters in the classroom. Along with this freedom comes responsibility. Students are encouraged to develop the capacity for critical judgment and to engage in a sustained and independent search for truth. Students are free to take reasoned exception to the views offered in any course of study and to reserve judgment about matters of opinion, but they are responsible for learning the content of any course of study for which they are enrolled.

Reports of concerns about academic freedom are taken seriously, and there are individuals and offices available for help. As a first step, please contact me as the instructor. If you believe your concerns have not been adequately addressed, the next step would be to contact Dr. Jeffrey Ratliff-Crain (ratliffj@r.umn.edu), the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs.