

# Ethical Theory

Geoffrey Hall

E-mail: ghall14@nd.edu

Office Hours:

Office:

Web:

Class Room:

---

## Course Description

This course is an introduction to some of the core issues in contemporary ethical theory. There are three parts to the course. The first investigates the foundations of ethics. We'll ask questions like: What is it for something to be morally good? What is it for an action to be obligatory? Can we acquire moral knowledge? And if so, how? Does morality depend on a higher power of some kind?

We will then look at some of the classical attempts to systematize (parts of) ethical theory. On one class of views, the ends always justify the means: a moral norm is genuine if and only if it recommends those actions in a situation which lead to the best overall consequences. On other views, the ends are, in a certain sense, irrelevant when determining the status of an action: the effects of the action do not matter, only its causes. In general we will look at specific examples of hard moral choices as a way to test some general attempts to systematize ethical theory.

The final part of the course concerns broadly applied questions about ethics. Our goal here will be to use some of the knowledge and skill acquired in the first part of the course to address more particular ethical questions: is animal consumption morally permissible? Is abortion morally permissible? What obligations do we have toward future generations? What obligations do we have toward those less well off than us? We'll also look at some power relations in society and ask whether or not they are morally justified. For example, does the state have a right to violence? Or do we have the right to defend ourselves against violence from the state? Is there a right to immigration? Or do states have right to bar potential immigrants as a matter of policy? The emphasis here is on moral rights, not legal rights. Our goal is to investigate the moral underpinnings of various aspects of our own society and others.

- Have knowledge of some of the main views in ethics and be able to apply this knowledge to some of the contemporary moral problems we are facing today.
- Have knowledge of the *philosophical* questions and problems concerning ethics, be able to articulate these questions and problems, be able to defend answers to these questions, and propose solutions to these problems.

- Be able to contribute to rigorous philosophical discussion and clearly present philosophical ideas in written form.

## Course Materials

There are two books that it may be useful to pick up, as there will be several readings assigned from them:

- Huemer's *Ethical Intuitionism*
- Rachel's *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (most recent edition)

Other readings will be shared on a private folder with the class.

- The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.
- Philosophy Compass.
- Jim Pryor's "Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper"

These sources can all be found by Googling. Wikipedia is, unfortunately, still not a reliable source of philosophical information.

## Assignments

### Discussion Responses

A large portion of the class will be dedicated to discussion, both in small groups and as a class. Students should write these discussion responses after, and in response to, the discussions had in class. These discussion should be about a page in length. The responses should relate to the discussions had during class meetings and should reflect the student's own thoughts on these topics. You are required to turn in a total of 10 discussion responses. These discussion responses should be written in a Google Docs document that I will share with you. Every Friday, I will check and grade these documents.

The discussion responses will be graded on a scale of 0-2. Students will receive a **0** for any missing discussion responses, a **1** if they fail to adequately engage with the discussion topic, and **2** for a response that thoughtfully engages with the topic.

### TPQs

You will be required to submit two questions each week prior to the last class period of the week. The questions will be submitted on a Google document that will be shared with you. The questions must be "Thought Provoking Questions" in the following sense: (i) they must demonstrate that you have actually engaged with the text. If I can settle the question by a quick Google search or by looking briefly through the text itself, then you have not done this. (ii) they should engage with the main arguments and positions that are talked about within the text. You should be looking for parts of the argument that you do not understand or that seem to you to be ill supported. Spend some time trying to work it out for yourself before submitting the question.

## Exams

There will be three take home exams throughout the course, corresponding to the three main units of the class. These exams will be handed out on Thursday and you will have until the next Tuesday to complete them. The exam will consist of essay questions. A week before the exam, I will share 8-10 possible questions that will be on the exam. I will distribute a grading rubric for the exam at that time.

## Participation

The course will be largely discussion based so participation and attendance are very important. Attendance is mandatory and students are expected to share their cameras throughout the class. All students will begin with a participation grade of 100%. Students will lose participation points for the following reasons: unexcused absence, consistent failure to engage in discussion, failure to answer PollEverywhere, disrespectful remarks towards others.

## Guided Reading Questions

I will post Guided Reading Questions on some readings. These questions are for your reference to help you understand and work through the readings. The goal of the Guided Reading Questions is to help students develop their independent learning skills, in particular, their reading comprehension. The questions will help students to extract the main these and arguments of the philosophical papers we read.

## Grading

Final grades will be determined by four components:

- Discussion Responses: 20%
- TPQs: 20%
- Exams: 40%
- Participation: 20%

The exams are required in the sense that failure to complete any exam will result in a failing grade for the course.

## Reading Schedule

Date	Topic	Reading
<b>Week 1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	
Feb 4th	Introduction to the Course	Rachels, <i>The Elements of Moral Philosophy</i> , ch. 1 (optional)
<b>Week 2</b>	<b>Subjectivism</b>	
Feb 9th	God and Ethics	Rachels, <i>The Elements of Moral Philosophy</i> ch. 4 Murphy "Theological Voluntarism" (Optional)
Feb 11th	Antirealism	Huemer, <i>Ethical Intuitionism</i> , ch. 3 (skip 3.5)
<b>Week 3</b>	<b>Realism</b>	
Feb 16	Reductionism	Huemer, <i>Ethical Intuitionism</i> , ch. 4 (skip 4.3.2-4.3.5, 4.4.3-4.4.4)
Feb 18	Intuitionism	Huemer, <i>Ethical Intuitionism</i> , ch. 5 (skip 5.6-5.7)
<b>Week 4</b>	<b>Moral Knowledge</b>	
Feb 23	Debunking	Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value"
Feb 25	The Theistic Response	Crummett and Swenson, "God and Moral Knowledge" Exam One Assigned
<b>Week 5</b>	<b>Utilitarianism</b>	
Mar 2nd	No Class	Exam One Due
Mar 4th	Hedonism	Smart, "An Outline of a System of Utilitarian Ethics"
<b>Week 6</b>	<b>Objections to Utilitarianism</b>	
Mar 9th	Overview	Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism"
Mar 11th	Alienation and Isolation	Railton, "Alienation, Consequentialism and the Demands of Morality" Nozick, "The Experience Machine"
<b>Week 7</b>	<b>Deontology</b>	
Mar 16th	Strong Deontology	Rachels <i>The Elements of Moral Philosophy</i> , ch. 9
Mar 18th	Weak Deontology	Ross, "What Makes Right Acts Right"
<b>Week 8</b>	<b>Objections to Weak Deontology</b>	
Mar 23	From Consequentialism Again	Huemer, "Paradox for Weak Deontology"
Mar 25	From Strong Deontology	Thomson, "Turning the Trolley"
<b>Week 9</b>	<b>Virtue and Sainthood</b>	
Mar 30	Virtue Ethics	Rachels, <i>The Elements of Moral Philosophy</i> , ch. 12
Apr 1	Moral Saints	Wolf, "Moral Saints" Exam Two Assigned
<b>Week 10</b>	<b>Ethical Vegetarianism</b>	
Apr 6	Equality of Animals	Singer, "All Animals Are Equal" Exam Two Due
Apr 8	The Argument from Pain and Suffering	Huemer, <i>Dialogues on Ethical Vegetarianism</i> , ch. 1-2
<b>Week 11</b>	<b>Non-Identity and Repugnance</b>	
Apr 13	The Non-Identity Problem	Parfit, <i>Reasons and Persons</i> (selection)
Apr 15	The Repugnant Conclusion	Parfit, <i>Reasons and Persons</i> (selection)
<b>Week 12</b>	<b>Abortion</b>	
Apr 20	Pro Choice	Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion"
Apr 22	Pro Life	Marquis, "Why Abortion is Immoral"
<b>Week 13</b>	<b>Poverty and Parity</b>	
Apr 27	Poverty	Singer, "Famine, Affluence and Morality."
Apr 29	Moral Parity	Brennan, "When May we Kill Government Agents?"
<b>Week 14</b>	<b>Equality and Freedom</b>	
May 4	Free Speech and Harm	van Mill, "Freedom of Speech"
May 6th	Equality and Value	Anderson, "What is the Point of Equality?" Huemer, "Against Equality"
<b>Week 15</b>	<b>Ethics and Immigration</b>	
May 11	The Moral Question of Immigration	Wellman, "Immigration"
May 13	Review	No Readings Final Exam Assigned (Due on assigned day of final exam).

