

ETHICAL THEORY

TTh, 3:30-4:45

Course Information & Syllabus

Instructor: Dr. David Shoemaker (Dave)  
Office Hours: TTh, 1-2, and 4:45-5:30 (and I'll be available at many other times: just let me know and we can work out a time to meet); 113 Newcomb Hall  
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REQUIRED TEXTS:

Ethics: Essential Readings in Moral Theory, edited by George Sher (with apologies for its bulk!)

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES:

This course surveys the prominent ethical theories of our time. It focuses primarily on normative ethics. Theories to be examined include: relativism, egoism, utilitarianism/consequentialism, Kantianism, Rossian pluralism, contractualism, and virtue theory. We will aim throughout to identify the specific arguments at work and to learn how to critically evaluate them. We will also aim at developing your philosophical writing skills and preparing you to do more advanced work in moral philosophy.

PHILOSOPHY PROGRAM OUTCOMES:

1. For all outcomes 2-5 (below): Students develop core philosophical skills of critical analysis and acquire familiarity with an appropriate cross-section of historically significant thinkers.
2. Students a) develop basic skills in either formal or informal reasoning (or both), b) are introduced to major philosophic works of lasting significance and c) are able to demonstrate the ability to analyze ideas and present cogent and evidentially justified arguments.
3. Students will explore in depth selected areas of philosophical interest, including ethics and political philosophy, philosophy of mind and language, philosophy of religion and philosophy of art; alternatively or additionally, students will develop in depth familiarity with the major philosophical literature of a selected historical period and individual thinkers within it.
4. Students pursue two or more in-depth studies of a particular, significant philosophical author or authors and/or a specific area of philosophical problems.
5. Students draw together and demonstrate skills and ideas they have acquired across the program via their Capstone experience.

SPECIFIC COURSE OBJECTIVES:

1. To come to a sophisticated understanding of key contemporary theoretical approaches to ethical theory.
2. To learn how to read and discuss philosophical texts both more sympathetically and more critically.
3. To develop true philosophical writing skills.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

1. Attendance Policy: You've got to be here regularly to be a part of the discussion and keep up with our ongoing dialectic. Many need an incentive to do so. Consequently, if you miss more than FOUR class periods, for whatever reason, I reserve the right to subtract two points from your overall grade for each period over the four allowed that you have missed (this gets very damaging very fast). I will be taking attendance every day, so make sure you're here (on time) to sign in. If you come in more than ten minutes after the class period has begun, that will count as ½ a day's attendance.

2. Exam-Papers: For this class, I have designated a new category, “Exam-Papers.” These are questions about the material from the course that will be constructed as parts of a well-crafted philosophical essay. The point is to increase your skill at philosophical writing in a fairly constrained and disciplined fashion. The idea is that by the time the course is over, you will both know the material well AND you will know how to write a very good philosophical essay. There will be THREE exam-papers during the semester, each requiring you to focus on an individual body of material from the course, and then structuring a key feature of a philosophical essay around it. They will thus be written at home and brought to class on the due date (or submitted electronically). For each exam-paper, you may use no more than 2-3 quoted sentences in total. **Everything else must be written entirely in your own words.** See below about plagiarism and its consequences. Because you will have the questions well in advance of the due date, there will be NO MAKE-UP EXAMS.

The first exam-paper will focus on **exposition**, and will be worth 15% of your overall grade. The second exam-paper will focus on **critique and discussion**, and it will be worth 30% of your overall grade. The third exam-paper will focus on **comparing, contrasting, and evaluating**, and it will be worth 40% of your overall grade. The (tentative) due dates of each exam are on the syllabus.

3. Reading Questions: In order for me to ensure that you are reading the required material, you are to do a series of reading questions. These are simple: just TYPE up a single question about some feature of the assigned reading(s) for the week, and bring these with you to class on the due date (due about once a week). I will ask some of you to present these in class at random intervals, but you should also simply ask them in class when they are relevant. They will then be turned in at the end of class. No late papers will be accepted. Importantly, your questions should model the kind of philosophical-writing feature we are featuring in each section in the class. So your questions in the first part of the course should be expository; your questions in the second part should be critical; and your questions in the third part should be compare/contrast or evaluational.

Altogether, your scores on these will constitute **15%** of your overall course grade. If you simply keep up with them, you should get an A for this portion of the course. A good question will receive a “check,” and a bad or non-existent question will receive a “zero.” A bad question may be one that is clearly answered in the text (and so reveals that you haven’t read the entire selection), or it may be one that is entirely off-topic, or completely misses the author’s point. And there are other reasons a question may receive a zero. As we start with a default of 50 (low F), every “check” you get will move you up the scale toward 100 by 4 points. So, e.g., getting only five “checks” for the course would get you a 70 (C-) overall for this 15% portion. **Every question must be written ENTIRELY in your own words.** See below about plagiarism.

4. Academic Honesty & Respect: There are very few things I will not tolerate, but here’s the list:
  - (a) **Plagiarism** is number one on my hit list. Plagiarism is theft, the presentation of someone else’s ideas as your own (unquoted or uncited). **I count as plagiarism copying more than 3-4 words in a row from someone else’s work.** This includes paraphrases that are “too close,” i.e., they are exactly like someone else’s sentence(s) but simply replace their words here and there with synonyms. Plagiarism, for our purposes, also includes drawing from independent (e.g., web) resources to help you with your reading questions, which are to be done **entirely on your own**. Let me be clear: in writing your reading questions, it is supposed to be just you grappling with the text, and the text alone. If you go on to the web to help you understand or provide insights, then it’s the web that understands, not you, and you will have gained nothing. Philosophical victories in understanding are hard-won, and the only way you learn is if you *struggle* with the primary text alone. If I judge that you have plagiarized in any aspect of the course—no matter how small—I will report you to the Honor Board. I take it very seriously—DO NOT DO IT!
  - (b) **Cheating or being involved in a conspiracy to cheat.** This gets you an F, either for the assignment or the course, depending on the nature of the violation, and gets you an Honor Board referral. This should be obvious, but there are two things worth pointing out regarding the conspiracy aspect of the policy. First, if you’ve worked out a plan to cheat and intend to carry out the plan, that’s sufficient to constitute cheating, *even if you don’t in fact carry out the plan or fail in your execution of the plan*. Second, conspiracy to cheat here includes making your own ideas for an assignment *available to someone else* for him/her to plagiarize it.

- (c) **Failing to respect either your classmates or me.** If you are disruptive, insulting, or engaging in any kind of harassment of others, I will do what I can to get you kicked out of the class, and, depending on the degree of the offense, out of the university.
- (d) **Cell phones/texting/laptops.** Unfortunately, ridiculously egregious conduct by prior students has forced me to put in place a rather draconian policy: all mobile phones, iPads, laptops, homing pigeons, or any other technology enabling texting, messaging, tweeting, e-mailing, web surfing or the like are not allowed in the classroom. Obviously, you can have them with you in your bags, but they are to appear **nowhere near your desk or hands** during class time. The reason is simple: it is an incredible distraction to me and your classmates. Even if you think you're being discrete with your tiny little cell phone, texting away under the desktop, *I can see you trying not to be seen*, and it is one giant distraction. Apparently, this rule needs to be enforced with an iron fist, so here's the deal: the first time I see you violate the policy, I'll call you out publicly on it and **deduct two points from your overall grade**. Every time it happens thereafter, you will be asked to leave the classroom, and I will **deduct 5 points**—fully ½ a letter grade—from your overall grade. As you might be able to tell, this is a genuine source of irritation.
5. Extra Credit: While there may be various extra credit opportunities throughout the semester (e.g., an outside philosophy colloquium), there is definitely one source of extra credit always available: simply get a letter to the editor of a real (local or national) newspaper published—on-line or in print—during the course of the semester (or get an e-mail from them promising to publish it), showing why someone's public argument was problematic. You'll be replying to one of four original sources: an editorial, a columnist's article, a news article with someone's argument laid out, or a previous letter to the editor. (Comments on a blog post don't count.) Getting a letter published (say, in the *Times-Picayune*) will be worth 3 points, tacked onto your *overall* grade tally (so it's significant). Getting one published in the *NY Times* will be worth 5 points. In other words, if you've got an 85 (mid-B) average after all your other assignments are tallied, and you publish a letter somewhere, you could get a B+ (88) for the course as a whole (or a 90/A- if you publish in the *NY Times*).
6. Miscellaneous: First, I take the grading scale seriously: a 'B' means your work is good—above average; an 'A' means your work is exceptional. Second, discussion is the life-blood of this course. Without it, there's just a bunch of texts by rotting, fetid, dead white guys. So what I'd like for us to create in here is a lively environment where we all contribute to the enterprise of making the issues relevant for our everyday lives. My hope, then, is that you'll jump in with your own thoughts whenever they arise; that is, whenever you have an objection, worry, question, or idea on the material, *say something* (to all of us, of course, not just to your imaginary pal). And if you're too shy to speak up in class, at least talk to me before or after class, or e-mail me with comments or questions. To encourage all such forms of participation, I offer an incentive: if you're a regular contributor to our class discussions (or e-mails to me, or after-class conversations), I'll count that in your favor in borderline final grade situations, giving you up to two points extra. So, for example, if you've averaged an 88 (a B+), but you've participated regularly, I'll gladly kick your grade up to an A- (i.e., 2 points tacked onto your *overall* grade tally). (Failing to participate, however, or staring at me with a surly expression the whole time, will not result in a lower score, although perhaps it should.)

#### IMPORTANT DATES:

- Last day to register/add: September 5
- Last day to drop without record: September 26
- Last day to drop: October 27

PROVISIONAL SYLLABUS  
(Any changes will be announced in class)

<u>DATES</u>	<u>TOPICS</u>	<u>READINGS &amp; ASSIGNMENTS</u>
Week 1 (8/26-8/28)	- The Structure and Evaluation of Metaethical and Moral Theories	
Week 2 (9/2-9/4)	- Why be moral?	David Gauthier, "Morality and Advantage" (34-42); Christine Korsgaard, "The Authority of Norms" (43-54) ( <b>Question on Gauthier and/or Korsgaard due 9/2</b> )
Week 3 (9/9-9/11)	- Subjective or Objective Values?	J.L. Mackie, "The Subjectivity of Values"; Thomas Nagel, "The Objectivity of Ethics" (195-208) ( <b>Question on Mackie and/or Nagel due 9/9</b> )
Week 4 (9/16) <i>No class 9/18</i>	- Utilitarianism  <b>Exam-Paper 1 Due 9/18, NOON</b>	John Stuart Mill, "Utilitarianism" (241-252) ( <b>Question on Mill due 9/16</b> )
Week 5 (9/23-9/25)	- Objections to Utilitarianism	Robert Nozick, "The Experience Machine" (550-551); Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism" (253-261); John Rawls, "Classical Utilitarianism" (262-265) ( <b>Question on Nozick, Williams, and/or Rawls due 9/23</b> )
Week 6 (9/30-10/2)	- Demandingness in Morality	Peter Railton, "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality" (266-280) ( <b>Question on Railton due 9/30</b> )
Week 7 (10/7; <i>no class on 10/9 for Fall Break</i> )	- Rule Consequentialism	Brad Hooker, "Rule-Consequentialism" (281-295) ( <b>Question on Hooker due 10/7</b> )
Week 8 (10/14-10/16)	- Kantian Deontology	Immanuel Kant, "Morality and Rationality" (327-342) ( <b>Question on Kant due 10/14</b> )
Week 9 (10/21-10/23)	- Kantian Moral Theory and its Critics	Joshua Greene, "The Secret Joke of Kant's Soul" (703-724) ( <b>Question on Greene due 10/23</b> )
Week 10 (10/28-10/30)	- Empirical Objections to Kant  - Contractualism	Thomas Scanlon, "Contractualism and Utilitarianism" (403-409) ( <b>Question on Scanlon due 10/30</b> )
Week 11 (11/4-11/6)	<b>Exam-Paper 2 Due 11/4</b>  - Concluding Contractualism	
Week 12 (11/11-11/13)	- Moral Pluralism  - Virtue Ethics	W.D. Ross, "What Makes Right Acts Right?" (410-417) ( <b>Question on Ross due 11/11</b> )  Aristotle, "The Nature of Moral Virtue" (433-440; <i>not the whole article</i> )

Page numbers in parentheses refer to pages in the Rachels textbook.

DATESTOPICSREADINGS & ASSIGNMENTS

Week 13 (11/18-11/20)	- Aristotle Concluded	<b>(Question on Aristotle due 11/18)</b>
Week 14 (11/25— <i>no class 11/28</i> )	- The Disappearing Character	John Doris, “A Situationist Theory of Character” (525-540) <b>(Question on Doris due 11/25)</b>
Week 15 (12/2-12/4)	- How Much Does Morality Even Matter?  <b>Exam-Paper 3 Due 12/10, 1 p.m.</b>	Susan Wolf, “Moral Saints” (500-513) <b>(Question on Wolf due 12/2)</b>