Morality and Justice, Spring 2021

**Course Overview**

Lecture Location

Zoom

Class Time

MW 1:25-2:15

Professor

Jordan MacKenzie

Email

jmackenzie@vt.edu

Office Location

Major Williams Hall

Room 239

Office Hours

Monday 10:00 am-12:00 pm and by appointment

It is sometimes thought that moral questions have no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers. Even if this is the case (and I doubt that it is), we can nevertheless have better or worse reasons for adopting certain ethical positions. This class is designed to help students develop an understanding of what it means to have ‘a good reason’ for taking a certain ethical stance.

We will be asking questions like: what makes an action right or wrong? What should we care about, morally speaking? What is it to be a good person? Is morality just a matter of opinion? Is it permissible to eat meat? To own a gun? To buy or sell anything we’d like on the free market? What is consent, and why should we care about it? Through investigating both abstract and applied ethical questions, students will gain an understanding of the difficulty and importance of moral theorizing.

# Required Text

None—all readings will be posted on Canvas.

# GTAs

Ethan Higginbotham, ethanhiggs@vt.edu

Samantha (‘Sammy’) Hirshland,shirshland@vt.edu

# Sections

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **CRN** | **Time** | **Location** | **GTA** |
| 18724 | 8:00 am - 8:50 am | Zoom | Ethan |
| 18725 | 9:05 am - 9:55 am | Zoom | Sammy |
| 18727 | 10:10 am - 11:00 am | Zoom | Sammy |
| 18726 | 11:15 am – 12:05 am | Zoom | Ethan |
| 18728 | 12:20 pm – 1:10 pm | Zoom | Ethan |
| 18729 | 1:25 pm – 2:15 pm | Zoom | Sammy |

# Class Expectations and Policies

1. **Class Discussions:** Philosophy classes are only as good as the discussions that happen in them. As such, you will be expected to come to lectures and recitations having completed the readings, and prepared to talk. You will also be expected to treat your peers with respect.
2. **Accessibility**: I am committed to making this course accessible to everyone. If there is something that I can do to make this course more accessible for you, please come and speak to me. If you need disability-related accommodations, please contact VT’s Services for Students with Disabilities (<https://www.ssd.vt.edu/index.html>). Note, however, that you do not need to have an officially recognized or diagnosed disability to seek accommodations: you just have to come speak with me.
3. **Changes to the Syllabus**: The reading list on the syllabus is not a contract, and may change according to student interests or time constraints. I will announce any changes via email, and will update Canvas accordingly.

# Assignments

1. **Attendance and Participation (10%):** Do the readings, show up for class and recitation, and be an active and thoughtful participant in class discussions.
2. **Weekly Response Sheets (10%):** Every student is responsible for handing in **four out of six** response sheets over the course of the semester. The exact submission dates for this assignment will depend on your last name:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Last Names Beginning with A-M** | **Last Names Beginning with N-Z** |
| Jan 24 @ 11:59 pm | Jan 31 @ 11:59 pm |
| Feb 7 @ 11:59 pm | Feb 14 @ 11:59 pm |
| Feb 21 @ 11:59 pm | Feb 28 @ 11:59 pm |
| Mar 7 @ 11:59 pm | Mar 21 @ 11:59 pm |
| Mar 28 @ 11:59 pm | Apr 4 @ 11:59 pm |
| Apr 11 @ 11:59 pm | Apr 18 @ 11:59 pm |

Response sheets should be half a page in length. The topic of the response sheet will be announced one week in advance on CANVAS, and will relate to the next week’s readings. Full marks will be awarded just so long as you demonstrate reasonable philosophical engagement, write in full, grammatical sentences, and demonstrate familiarity with the assigned readings.

1. **Essay 1 (15%):** This is a short, four-paragraph essay that will test your ability to develop and respond to an objection.
2. **‘AITA?’ Assignment (20%):** This assignment has two parts. The first part features comprehension questions related to the ‘big three’ ethical theories covered in class (Utilitarianism, Deontology, and Virtue Ethics). The second requires you to select a post on [www.reddit.com/r/amitheasshole](http://www.reddit.com/r/amitheasshole) (this is a subreddit in which people write in to ask whether, in a given situation, they were an a\*\*hole). You will then select two of the theories discussed in Part 1, and explain how they would make a determination about whether the person in the post was indeed an a\*\*hole.
3. **Essay 2 (25%)**: This is a longer essay than Essay 1. It is optional. If you choose not to do it, this portion of your grade will be an average of your grades on the AITA assignment and the Final Exam.
4. **Final Exam (20%):** This final exam will test your comprehension of the material covered in the second half of term. It will be completed electronically and submitted on CANVAS.

# Grading Policies

1. **Assignment Submission:** All assignments are due by 11:59 pm on CANVAS unless otherwise specified. Due dates for assignments are firm, and you will be docked 5% of the assignment grade for every 24-hour period it is overdue. Your GTAs and I are, however, very generous about granting extensions so long as you request them to your GTA at least 24 hours in advance of the deadline. The exception to this rule are Response Sheets—the deadline for response sheets is firm, and late sheets will not be accepted.
2. **Anonymous Grading**:Please do not put your name on your papers—just write your student number.

1. **Resubmission**: I want you to succeed in this course. As such, you have the option of resubmitting any assignment in this course. If you are unhappy with a grade that you receive on an assignment, you have two weeks to rewrite it and resubmit it along with a paragraph describing how you have addressed the feedback that you received on the previous draft**.**
2. **Fake/Incorrect Submission:** In recent years, I’ve noticed an uptick in the number of students submitting blank pages, corrupted files, or the wrong documents in lieu of assignments. As of this semester, it is up to you to make sure that you’ve submitted the right file. If I receive any fake or incorrect documents, I’ll count the assignment as late.
3. **Citations**: Citations are absolutely required for all assignments. I don’t care what style you use, but you must include page numbers. A bibliography is not necessary unless you have more than three sources. Any paper with missing or inadequate citations will be docked 10%.
4. **Academic Integrity**: You are required to abide by the Honor Code at all times in this class. This means, among other things, that plagiarism is strictly prohibited. You are expected to know how to cite sources appropriately in all written assignments. If you are unclear about what this involves, you must talk to me in advance of assignment deadlines. For additional information about the Honor Code, please visit <http://honorsystem.vt.edu/> .
5. **Grade bumps**: I round final grades up to the nearest percent—so an 89.5% will be a 90%, but an 89.4% will not. If you are unsatisfied with your final grade, please know that I do not grant ‘grade bumps’ (beyond a half percent), and do not offer bonus assignments.

# Grading Scale

A grade in the ‘A’ range (90-93=A-, 94-96=A, 97-100=A+) demonstrates an impressive mastery of and insightful engagement with the course material. In written work, the A student is able to reconstruct philosophical arguments with precision and accuracy, develop criticisms that are original, persuasive, and well-developed. In class, the A student attends all or almost all classes having completed the readings, and always or almost always makes exceptionally thoughtful and respectful contributions to class discussions.

A grade in the ‘B’ range (80-83=B-, 84-86=B, 87-89=B+) denotes competent mastery of and reasonable insight into the course material. The B student is able to reconstruct philosophical arguments accurately and develop criticisms that are reasonably persuasive and well-developed. In class, the B student attends all or almost all classes, typically completes the readings, and often makes thoughtful and respectful contributions to class discussions.

A grade in the ‘C’ range (70-73=C-, 74-76=C, 77-79=C+) denotes inadequate comprehension and engagement with the course material. The C student is able to reconstruct philosophical arguments with some errors and develop criticisms that are generally relevant to the course material, if not convincing. In class, the C student attends some classes and recitations, does not regularly do the readings, and sometimes makes thoughtful and respectful contributions to class discussions.

A grade in the ‘D’ range (60-63=D-, 64-66=D, 67-69) denotes a lack of comprehension of and engagement with the course material. The ‘D’ student is unable to accurately reconstruct philosophical positions or develop critiques relevant to the course material. In class, the D student struggles with attendance, shows little evidence of having completed the readings, and rarely makes thoughtful and respectful contributions to class discussions.

# Course Schedule

Note: this schedule may change throughout the semester.

**Module: Introduction to Morality and Justice**

Jan 20: Introduction, no readings

**Module: Moral Relativism**

Jan 24: Response Sheet Due for A-M Group

Jan 25: James Rachels, “The Challenge of Cultural Relativism”

Jan 27: James Rachels, “The Challenge of Cultural Relativism”

**Module: Utilitarianism**

Jan 31: Response Sheet Due for N-Z Group

Feb 1: Peter Singer, Famine, Affluence and Morality (selections)

Feb 3: Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chpt 2

Feb 7:Response Sheet Due for A-M Group

Feb 8: Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chpt 2

Feb 10: Class Cancelled

**Module: Is Happiness All That Matters?**

Feb 14: Response Sheet Due for N-Z Group

Feb 15: Will MacAskill, “Replaceability, Career Choice and Making a Difference” (selections)

Feb 17: Thomas E. Hill, “Autonomy and Benevolent Lies” (selections)

Robert Nozick, “The Experience Machine” (skim—we won’t be talking about it for too long)

**Module: Deontology**

Feb 21: Response Sheet Due for A-M Group

Feb 22: Essay 1 Due

Feb 22: Kant, *Groundwork,* Reading 1

Feb 24: Kant, *Groundwork* Reading 2

Feb 28: Response Sheet Due for N-Z Group

Mar 1: Kant, *Groundwork* Reading 2

Mar 3: Onora O’Neill, “A Kantian Approach to Famine Relief”

**Module: Virtue Ethics**

Mar 7: Response Sheet Due for A-M Group

Mar 8: Susan Wolf, “Moral Saints”

Mar 10: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*,I.7-9, II.6-9

Mar 15: NO CLASS

Mar 17: NO CLASS

Mar 21: Response Sheet Due for N-Z Group

Mar 22: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III.6-9

Mar 24: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, IV.1.14

**Module: Civility**

Mar 28: Response Sheet Due for A-M Group

Mar 29: Cheshire Calhoun, “The Virtue of Civility”

Mar 31: Cheshire Calhoun, “The Virtue of Civility”

Apr 2: ‘AITA?’ Assignment Due

**Module: Autonomy, Paternalism, and Government**

Apr 4: Response Sheet Due for N-Z Group

Apr 5: Jessica Flanigan, “Seatbelt Mandates and Paternalism”

Apr 7: Sarah Conly, “Justifying Coercive Paternalism”

**Module: Protest**

Apr 11: Response Sheet Due for A-M Group

Apr 12: Bernard Boxill, “Self-Respect and Protest”

Apr 14: Bernard Boxill, “Self-Respect and Protest”

**Module: Choose Your Own Adventure**

Apr 18: Response Sheet Due for N-Z Group

Apr 19: Student-Chosen Topic

Apr 21: Student-Chosen Topic

Apr 23: Essay 2 Due

Apr 26: NO CLASS

**Module: Distrust and Trust, Course Wrap-Up**

Apr 28: Meena Krishnamurthy, “On the Democratic Value of Distrust”

May 3: Ryan Preston-Roedder, “Faith in Humanity”

May 10: Take-Home Exam Due