

PHIL 3720: Contemporary Ethics

Fall 2024

Instructor: Prof. Jordan MacKenzie (you can call me Jordan)
Email Address: dfs8zy@virginia.edu
Course Meetings: T and Th 3:30-4:45 pm, New Cabell Hall 389
Office Hours: W 12:30-2:30 pm and by appointment
Cocke Hall, Room 209 or [Zoom](#)

Course Description

This course will give you an opportunity to read some of the ‘greatest hits’ from normative ethics in the 20th (and beginning of the 21st) century. We’ll begin by looking at some of the ‘anti-theoretical’ challenges to Utilitarianism and Kantian ethics that spearheaded the resurgence of virtue ethics.

From there, we’ll move on to questions about moral responsibility and the appropriateness of guilt and blame. Throughout the course, we’ll be asking questions like: what should a moral theory give us? What are the limits of morality? What attitudes, behaviors, and actions are morally assessable?

And what role should morality, and moral philosophy, play in our daily lives?

Required Texts

None. All readings will be posted on Canvas.

Classroom Expectations and Course Policies

1. **Class Discussions:** Philosophy classes are only as good as the discussions that happen in them. As such, you will be expected to be active, respectful participants in class discussions. You are not required to have your cameras on for the duration of class, but it is strongly encouraged. Trust me—it will make the class go better for everyone.
2. **Accessibility:** I am committed to making this course as accessible as possible. 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 [UVA’s Student Disability Access Center](#). 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.

Grading Policies

1. **Honor Code:** It is the responsibility of every student at UVA to obey and support the enforcement of the Honor Code, which prohibits lying, cheating, or stealing. Each student is responsible for becoming familiar with the details of the honor system. For more information on the UVA Honor System, please visit <https://honor.virginia.edu/course/honor-code>.
2. **Assignment Submission:** Please upload all assignments onto Canvas as Word documents or Pages documents. Due dates for assignments are firm, and I will dock 5% off your assignment grade for every 24-hour period it is overdue. I am, however, very generous about granting extensions so long as you request them in advance of the

deadline. Students are entitled to an unlimited number of ‘no questions asked’ 48-hour extensions in this class, so long as they’re requested in advance.

3. Grading Scale:

‘A’ range: 90-93=A-, 94-96=A, 97-100=A+

‘B’ range: 80-83=B-, 84-86=B, 87-89=B+

‘C’ range: 70-73=C-, 74-76=C, 77-79=C+

‘D’ range: 60-63=D-, 64-66=D, 67-69=D+

Note: I don’t round grades. All grade cut-offs are arbitrary—rounding grades up just creates new, arbitrary cut-offs.

4. **AI Policy:** ChatGPT may sometimes be useful for brainstorming, but it is frequently inaccurate and typically operating at a level of sophistication that falls below the expectations for a B- assignment in this course. As such, while you are permitted to use it while *developing your ideas*, you are prohibited from turning in assignments that have been generated by it, either in whole or in part.

Assignments

| Assignment | Deadline | Weight |
|------------------------------|--|---------------|
| Meet-and-Greet | Sept 5, 5:00 pm | 1% bonus mark |
| Attendance and Participation | Ongoing | 10% |
| Short Papers | Paper 1: Aug 29 to Sept 12 (before class) | 10% |
| | Paper 2: Sept 17 to Oct 8 (before class) | 15% |
| | Paper 3: Oct 10 to Oct 31 (before class) | 15% |
| | Paper 4: Nov 5 to Dec 5 (before class) | 10% |
| Term Paper | Preliminary Meeting: Between Oct 16 at 9:30 am and Oct 30, 5:00 pm | 2% |
| | Draft: Nov 20, 11:59 pm | 10% |
| | Commentary: Dec 2, 11:59 pm | 3% |
| | Workshop Participation: Dec 3 | 2% |

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| | Final Draft: Dec 12, 11:59 pm | 23% |
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1. **Meet-and-Greet (1% Bonus):** This is an optional bonus assignment. To complete it, sign up for a 15-minute appointment to meet with me in the first two weeks of class. Come prepared to talk about: your philosophical interests and your goals for the semester.

If you would like to meet with me, but can't make any of the assigned appointment times, send me an email and we'll figure out something that works.

2. **Attendance and Participation:** Do the readings, show up for class regularly, and be an active, thoughtful, and respectful participant in class discussions.

Note: if you struggle with in-class attendance, please contact me at the beginning of the semester.

3. **Short Papers:** You will be responsible for writing four short papers (2-4 pages, double-spaced) over the course of the semester.

Papers must address a specific reading and must be handed in *before* the class in which that reading is discussed. You must submit papers during the following time blocks:

Paper 1: August 29 to September 12

Paper 2: September 17 to October 8

Paper 3: October 10 to October 31

Paper 4: November 5 to December 5

A successful short paper will be narrow in scope. Don't summarize the whole article. Instead, select some component of the article (an argument, a definition, an assumption etc.), reconstruct it briefly, and critically evaluate it. Usually this will involve raising an objection, outlining an ambiguity, critiquing an assumption, applying the concept/argument to a novel cases etc., and (ideally) considering a response on behalf of the author. I have included a few sample short papers on Canvas.

4. **Term Paper:** You will develop this paper in stages.

- I. **First**, you must set up a meeting with me (at some point between **October 16th** and **October 30th**) to discuss potential term paper topics. Although these meetings will take place fairly early in the semester, I want you to treat the entire syllabus as fair game.

Come prepared to this meeting with several potential paper topics. Ideally, you want to be selecting a paper topic that:

- Plays to your strengths and interests. If you're a metaphysician at heart, then perhaps take a look at the moral responsibility readings. If you love a good philosophical puzzle, then consider doing some 'Trolleyology'. If you're into moral psychology, then consider writing on reactive attitudes etc.
 - Raises a philosophically interesting question or puzzle. You are not writing a book report—you're producing a piece of independent philosophical research. To do this, you need a *hook*—some philosophical issue that you aim to resolve in your paper. We'll talk more about how to do this throughout the course.
- II. **Second**, you must submit a draft term paper (10 pages max, double-spaced) to both me and a peer reviewer by November 20th. Even though this is a draft, you should take it seriously—I want full sentences, citations, and reasonable formatting.
- III. **Third**, you will review a peer's draft paper and provide two sorts of feedback by December 2nd:
- a. In-text stylistic feedback (e.g. correcting grammar mistakes, flagging passages that are hard to follow, making note of where your partner needs more signposting etc.
 - b. A short, written-commentary (approx. 2 pages) that briefly summarizes your partner's argument, and raises substantive objections to it
- IV. **Fourth**, you will participate in an essay workshop. In this workshop, you and your partner will discuss the feedback that you've received on your draft paper, and strategize about how to complete the final draft.
- V. **Finally**, you will hand in a final draft by December 12th (12 pages max, double-spaced).

Course Schedule

*note: this schedule may be updated throughout the semester

| Date | Readings/Assignments |
|---|---|
| Aug 27 | None |
| Module 1: Act Utilitarianism and the Alienation Critique | |
| Aug 29 | Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence and Morality" |
| Sept 3 | Bernard Williams "Consequentialism and Integrity" |

Sept 5 Elizabeth Ashford, "Utilitarianism, Integrity, and Partiality"
Assignment: final date to complete Meet and Greet bonus assignment

Module 2: Sophisticated (Rule) Consequentialism

Sept 10 John Rawls "Two Concepts of Rules"

Sept 12 Peter Railton, "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality"

Assignment: final date to submit Paper 1

Module 3: From Utilitarianism to Deontology

Sept 17 Judith Jarvis Thomson, "The Trolley Problem"

Sept 19 Nagel, "Deontology" (read carefully) and "War and Massacre" (skim)

Sept 24 W. D. Ross, "What Makes Right Actions Right?"

Module 4: Contractualism

Sept 26 T. M. Scanlon, "Contractualism and Utilitarianism"

Oct 1 Rahul Kumar, "Who Can Be Wronged?"

Module 5: Duties to Self

Oct 3 Connie Rosati, "The Importance of Self-Promises"

Oct 8 Bernard Boxill, "Self-Respect and Protest"

Assignment: final date to submit Paper 2

Module 6: Deontology—Also Alienating?

Oct 10 Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality"

Oct 15 *Reading Day: No Class*

Module 7: The Virtue Ethical Turn

- Oct 17 Philippa Foot, "Virtues and Vices"
- Oct 22 John McDowell, "Virtue and Reason"
- Oct 24 Martha Nussbaum, "Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?"

Module 8: Virtue and Anger

- Oct 24 Martha Nussbaum, "Anger: Weakness, Payback, Downranking"
- Oct 29 Amia Srinivasan, "The Aptness of Anger"
- Oct 30 **Assignment: final date to meet with me re: term paper**

Module 9: The Limits of Morality

- Oct 31 Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints"
- Assignment: final date to submit Paper 3**
- Nov 5 Thomas Nagel, "Moral Luck"

Module 10: Moral Responsibility and Guilt

- Nov 7 Galen Strawson "The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility"
- Nov 12 P. F. Strawson "Freedom and Resentment"
- Nov 14 **Class Cancelled**
- Nov 19 Susan Wolf, "The Moral of Moral Luck"
- Nov 20 **Assignment: term paper draft due by 11:59 pm**
- Nov 21 Basu, "The Wrongs of Racist Beliefs"
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Module 11: Course Wrap-Up

- Nov 26 Ryan Preston-Roedder, "Faith in Humanity"
- Nov 28 *Thanksgiving Break: No Class*
- Dec 2 **Assignment: peer commentary due by 11:59 pm**
- Dec 3 **Assignment: essay workshop**
- Dec 5 Kathryn Norlock, "Perpetual Struggle"
Assignment: final date to submit Paper 4
- Dec 16 **Assignment: term paper due by 11:59 pm**
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