



Introduction to Moral Philosophy

Short Course Description

In one sense, we are all moral philosophers. Every single one of us is concerned with, and believe we have answers to, questions concerning what is *right* and *wrong*. Indeed, ethical issues abound in our everyday lives and are hot topics of cultural, political, and religious discourse. It is personally and socially imperative to us that we do actions for the right reasons or with the right motivations; that we do our best not to do wrong to others and to prevent others from doing wrong; that we instinctively praise and blame certain deeds; and that we propose ethical and legal codes that permit and prohibit specific doings. In this course, we will look at several famous moral theories proposed in the history of philosophy for understanding right and wrong: divide commandment theory, virtue ethics, social contract theory, deontology, utilitarianism, and existentialist ethics.

Thematic Course Description

What *makes* something right or wrong? The fundamental problem is that ethical issues are completely unlike other issues. For instance, scientific debates (e.g., “Does the earth revolve around the sun?”) center on how to accurately comprehend the world around us. Answers to these debates are either *true* or *false* because there are empirically verifiable facts that can clearly prove or disprove the claims being argued for (the earth *does* revolve around the sun as shown by our measurements of its orbit). However, ethical debates (e.g., “Is euthanasia right or wrong?”) seem to lack such black-and-white answers. There is no obvious fact of the matter, *out there in the world*, that we can point to. So, how can we establish that something is right or wrong when there are often conflicting opinions (euthanasia is wrong *as such*, it is right when someone is *terminally ill*, anyone should be able to decide *by themselves*, and so on)?

Moral philosophy seeks to resolve these kinds of problems by providing a framework that permits us to meaningfully answer questions of precisely this sort. In this course, we will examine various moral theories proposed in the history of philosophy for what makes something right or wrong in figures such as Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Kant, Mill, Sartre, and Beauvoir. We will also use these theories to look at a number of concrete ethical issues (abortion, if it is ever justifiable to lie, and animal rights, amongst others). The goal of doing so is to show how moral theories can help us better understand real-life ethical issues and also how our intuitions about right and wrong can be difficult to argue for consistently. We shall ask questions including but not limited to:

- Is right and wrong decreed by God?
- What role does a person’s character play in thinking they did right or wrong?
- Is right and wrong culturally relative?
- Is right and wrong universal like the laws of physics are?
- Can the ends justify the means when we consider what is right and wrong?

Course Content and Schedule

Week 1: What is Moral Philosophy?

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Week 2: Divine Commandment Theory

- Plato, *Euthyphro*. We will investigate the theory that what is right or wrong is what God commands, Plato's critique of this position, and whether Plato's critique can be used against certain ethical positions argued for by religious fundamentalists (e.g., abortion is wrong because God says so).

Week 2-3: Virtue Ethics

- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, excerpts. We explore the idea that what makes something right or wrong is not, say, the consequences of an action or the mere following of duties, but the character of the person performing the action, and the limits of this model (e.g., how can it help us solve *this* or *that* ethical issue?).

Week 4-5: Social Contract Theory

- Hobbes, *Leviathan*, excerpts. We will analyze Hobbes' argument that what is right and wrong is established by social rules we agree to in order to make life better – in particular, the idea that we consent to them because, without them, the weak would be overpowered by the strong. We will determine the possible shortcomings of this model (e.g., does it mean right and wrong vary from society to society?).

Week 6-7: Deontology

- Kant, *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. We will examine Kant's famous thesis that there are universal duties dictating what is right and wrong and that we must follow these duties (such as "Do not lie!") without exception and only for their own sake. We will take into consideration some problematic cases for this model (e.g., whether lying can be the right thing to do if it saves lives).

Week 8-9: Utilitarianism

- Mill, *Utilitarianism*. We will discuss Mill's claim that the best way to determine whether something is right or wrong is to determine its effect on the happiness and well-being of people. An action is good when it is "of utility," more precisely when it leads to the benefit of the most, and bad when it does the opposite. We will look at how this has potentially devastating effects (e.g., for animal rights), but also how it might provide a convincing argument for avoiding existential threats.

Week 10-12: Existentialist Ethics

- Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, excerpts and Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, excerpts. We will look at how, for the existentialists, it is not enough to do the right thing *just* because it is what one should do (inasmuch as it is what God wills, it is in our character to do so, it is a universal duty, what society tells us to do, etc.). Any such a moral act is inauthentic. Instead, we must actively *commit* ourselves to do what's right, make it authentically our own, for it to have true moral meaning. Put differently, we will discuss the complexities of the moral psychology of right and wrong.

Week 13: Review

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Assessment

The final grade will consist of four components:

- Participation (10%)
- In-Class Midterm Exam (20%)
- Term Paper of 2500-3000 words (40%)
- Take-Home Final Exam (30%)

Learning Outcomes

At the end of the course, students will become acquainted with some of the major positions in moral philosophy (divine commandment theory, virtue ethics, demonology, utilitarianism, and existentialist ethics) and important figures in the history of moral philosophy from Plato to Beauvoir. They will also learn how to use moral philosophy as a way to think through various concrete ethical issues, thereby gaining critical skills that can be used to think through others. The two exams, in which students are asked to summarize key concepts from different texts, are meant to assure that they have sufficiently internalized this knowledge for their future studies. Students will also improve their critical reading and writing skills by analyzing texts and creatively putting them to use in order to explore their own philosophical interests and existential concerns through course material. The term paper, the topic of which can be freely decided by each student in consultation with the instructor, is to promote the development of such skills. Philosophy is not just a body of knowledge, but also a distinctive methodology of critical thinking best learned in practicing it.