

# Introduction to Moral Philosophy

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- Description** This course is an introduction to moral philosophy. In Part I, we will learn about the ambitions and the methods of ethics. In Part II, we will examine two major ethical theories: consequentialism and deontology. In Part III, we will consider whether free will is possible in a deterministic universe and whether moral ignorance exculpates. In Part IV we will examine four contemporary moral issues: abortion, animals, privacy, and global warming.
- Level** Introductory undergraduate course.
- Prerequisites** No previous work in philosophy is required or assumed.
- Requirements** This course will be held in a lecture format. You will review the assigned materials in advance of each lecture, and then discuss them in your weekly seminar.
- Student grades are determined by five components:
- First paper (1000 words): 20%
  - Second paper (1500 words): 25%
  - Final exam: 30%
  - Participation: 25%
- Class participation is very important in this course. I am asking you do two things:
- Post a reaction to at least one of the assigned materials on the course discussion board by midnight on the day before the seminar. You can clarify a tricky aspect of the paper, raise an objection, ask a pertinent question, bring attention to an interesting case study, or simply identify an issue that you would like to talk about during the seminar. Your TA will read your comments and do their best take them up during the seminar.
  - Actively participate in the discussions during the seminar. Please bear in mind that the topics covered in this course can be controversial. At the same time, do not hesitate to present arguments in support of unpopular positions or objections to those that are widely held.
- Blind grading** Please submit your work with no identifying information other than your student number.
- Office hours** I hold weekly office hours. I welcome you to use this opportunity. You don't need to come with a specific question about the readings or an assignment. We can just grab a cup of coffee and talk about philosophy.
- Resources** Don't be discouraged if you have difficulty following an argument in an assigned reading or if you misunderstand something. Philosophy is challenging and many philosophers are not gifted stylists. I often read philosophical articles twice and encourage you to do the same. You can find many helpful tips about reading philosophical texts, participating in seminars, and writing essays in this [Pink Guide to Philosophy](#) by Helena de Bres. Another excellent resource, regularly used by students and professors alike, is the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#).

## I. WHAT ETHICS IS ABOUT

### Week 1: What ethics is about

Singer argues that if we can prevent something bad from happening without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance then we ought to do so, and applies this to the problem of world hunger. Shafer-Landau explains the ambitions, the limits, and the tools of ethics.

- Peter Singer. (1972). *Famine, Affluence, and Morality*. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*. (16 pages)
- Russ Shafer-Landau. (2012). Introduction. In his *Fundamentals of Ethics*. (17 pages)
- *Bonus*: Peter Singer. (2013). [The Why and How of Effective Altruism](#). TED Talk. (17 minutes)
- *Bonus*: [80,000 Hours: How to Use Your Career for Good](#)

## II. ETHICAL THEORIES

### Week 2: Utilitarianism and Consequentialism

Driver explains the roots and the core elements of the ethical theory of utilitarianism, as developed by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Hooker outlines different forms that a consequentialist theory of ethics can take.

- Julia Driver. (2007). Classical Utilitarianism. In her *Ethics: The Fundamentals*. (21 pages)
- Brad Hooker. (2010). Consequentialism. In *The Routledge Companion to Ethics*. (12 pages)

### Week 3: Theory of Value

Parfit explains the merits and pitfalls of three main theories about what constitutes well-being. Nozick presents a famous challenge to the view that what should matter to us are only our experiences. Parfit interrogates the common sentiment that equality is a valuable ideal and proposes an alternative reason to be concerned about those who are worse-off.

- Derek Parfit. (1984). What Makes Someone's Life Go Best. In his *Reasons and Persons*. (6 pages)
- Robert Nozick. (1974). The Experience Machine. In his *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. (2 pages)
- Derek Parfit. (1997). Equality and Priority. *Ratio*. (20 pages)
- *Bonus*: [Excerpt from The Matrix](#); and Kurt Vonnegut. (1961). *Harrison Bergeron*. Short story. (6 pages)

### Week 4: The demands of consequentialism

Stocker argues that consequentialism makes it impossible for us to have valuable relationships or else leads to 'moral schizophrenia'. Williams argues that consequentialism prevents us from having genuine commitments.

- Michael Stocker. (1976). The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories. *Journal of Philosophy*. (14 pages)
- Bernard Williams. (1988). Consequentialism and Integrity. In *Consequentialism and Its Critics*. (16 pages)
- *Bonus*: Nakul Krishna. (2016). [Add Your Own Egg: Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline](#). *The Point Magazine*. (On the life and philosophy of Bernard Williams.)

### Week 5: Deontological Distinctions

Quinn contends that consequentialism overlooks the significance of whether the effects of an action are intended or merely foreseen. Thomson presents the famous Trolley Problem and argues that there is an important distinction between killing and letting die.

- Warren Quinn. (1989). Actions, Intentions, and Consequences: The Doctrine of Double Effect. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. (18 pages)
- Judith Thomson. (1986). Killing, Letting Die, and the Trolley Problem. In her *Rights, Restitution, and Risk*. (16 pages)

### Week 6: Kantian Ethics

Driver explains the fundamentals of Kantian ethics. Kant develops his influential ethical system.

- Julia Driver. (2007). Kantian Ethics. In her *Ethics: The Fundamentals*. (22 pages)
- Immanuel Kant. (1785/1997). *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. (selections)

### III. FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY

#### Week 7: Freedom of the will

Sider outlines three main views on whether freedom of the will is possible in a deterministic world. Frankfurt presents an objection to the view that one is morally responsible for something only if they were able to act otherwise.

- Theodore Sider. (2005). Free Will and Determinism. In *Riddles of Existence*. (23 pages)
- Harry Frankfurt. (1969). Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility. *Journal of Philosophy*. (11 pages)
- *Bonus*: Frankfurt appears on [The Daily Show with Jon Stewart](#) to discuss his book *On Bullshit*.

#### Week 8: Culpability and Ignorance

Rosen argues that a person is not culpable for their actions if they are not culpable for their factual or moral ignorance from which they act. Harman disagrees.

- Gideon Rosen. (2003). Culpability and Ignorance. *Proc. of the Aristotelian Society*. (24 pages)
- Elizabeth Harman. (2011). Does Moral Ignorance Exculpate? *Ratio*. (26 pages)

### IV. CONTEMPORARY MORAL ISSUES

#### Week 9: Abortion

Marquis argue that abortion is wrong because it deprives the fetus of a valuable future. Thomson argues that abortion is generally permissible even if we grant that the fetus has a right to life.

- Don Marquis. (1989). Why Abortion is Immoral. *Journal of Philosophy*. (20 pages)
- Judith Thomson. (1971). A Defense of Abortion. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. (20 pages)
- *Bonus*: Selections from *Roe v. Wade* (read the highlighted passages only).

#### Week 10: Animal Ethics

Singer presents the basic case for giving equal consideration to humans and non-human animals. McMahan considers the moral permissibility of 'benign carnivorousism'.

- Peter Singer. (1975/2009). All Animals are Equal. In his *Animal Liberation*. (30 pages)
- Jeff McMahan. (2008). Eating Animals the Nice Way. *Deadalus*. (20 pages)
- *Bonus*: [Interview with Jeff McMahan](#) on animal ethics.

#### Week 11: Privacy

Marmor argues that there is a distinctive right to privacy grounded in people's interest in having control over the ways they can present themselves to others. Veliz describes the extent to which corporations and governments collect data on us.

- Andrei Marmor. (2015). What is the Right to Privacy? *Philosophy & Public Affairs*. (20 pages)
- Carissa Veliz. (2020). Introduction, Chapter 1, and Chapter 2. In her *Privacy is Power: Why and How You Should Take Back Control of Your Data*. (24 pages)
- *Bonus*: Edward Snowden. [How Your Cell Phone Spies On You](#). JRE Podcast. (24 minutes)

#### Week 12: Global Warming

Sinnott-Armstrong argues that individuals have no moral obligation to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. Morgan-Knapp and Goodman argue that they do.

- Walter Sinnott-Armstrong. (2005). It's Not My Fault: Global Warming and Individual Moral Obligations. *Perspectives on Climate Change*. (23 pages)
- Christopher Morgan-Knapp and Charles Goodman (2015). Consequentialism, Climate Harm, and Individual Obligations. (14 pages)
- *Bonus*: Toby Ord. (2020). [The Precipice: existential risk and the future of humanity](#). Narrated presentation summarising his new book by the same title.