

# Introduction to Ethics (PHIL 0300)

Fall 2024

**INSTRUCTOR:** Larkin Philpot (ls.philpot@pitt.edu)

**LECTURE:** Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11-11:50am in Benedum Hall 157

**OFFICE HOURS:** Mondays and Wednesdays, 3:30-4:30pm; or by appointment

Office hours will be held remotely; Zoom link and passcode available on Canvas

**RECITATIONS AND TEACHING ASSISTANTS (NON-WRITING-INTENSIVE RECITATIONS):**

Mondays at 9am, 10am, or 12pm: Mengyuan Qi (meq15@pitt.edu)

Wednesdays at 9am, 10am, or 11am: Anwar ul Haq (anwarulhaq@pitt.edu)

Thursdays at 1pm, 2pm, or 3pm: Asher Shang (ashershong@pitt.edu)

## COURSE DESCRIPTION

We must constantly make decisions about what to do. Many of these are trivial (like whether to tie the right shoe or left shoe first). But some of them we recognize as having a special kind of importance—*moral* or *ethical* importance. These kinds of actions can be *right* or *wrong*. In this course, we'll examine some of the main views about what makes an action morally good.

You might think that the moral action is the *best* action and that the best action is the one with the best *consequences*. So we'll first examine UTILITARIANISM, which holds, roughly, that we should perform the action that maximizes utility. But this view comes up against the thought that some actions—like murder—are simply *wrong*, regardless of the consequences. So we'll turn to DEONTOLOGY and look at the way that Kant justifies and identifies our moral *duties*.

But you might think that the expansiveness of utilitarianism and the rigidity of deontology both fail to capture something important about ethical action: Individual actions occur within the larger context of a *human life*. We'll ask what kind of *meaning* a life might have and consider Aristotle's account of the good life as the life of VIRTUE.

Ethical matters are so pressing for us and our lives have the shape that they do because of the fact of our mortality. So we'll conclude by considering whether death is a harm, whether immortality might be preferable, and whether humans should have a measure of control over their death through euthanasia.

## **COURSE OBJECTIVES**

This course aims to introduce students to the three most prominent families of ethical theories: utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics. We'll consider both historical and contemporary discussions of ethics in order to become familiar with different ethical approaches and different styles of philosophical text. We'll especially think about general differences between ancient and modern approaches to ethics and how considerations about the meaning of life and the good life fit into ethics. Throughout the course, students will be encouraged to think about the practical application of ethical theories to difficult moral problems. This course aims to develop the critical and analytical reading, writing, and speaking skills central to philosophy and to facilitate future study in other areas of philosophy. This course fulfills the Dietrich School General Education Requirements in Philosophy and Philosophical Thinking or Ethics. By the end of this course, a successful student will be able to:

- explain the main competing ethical theories.
- apply these theories to pressing contemporary moral issues.
- read analytically and engage with difficult philosophical texts.
- reconstruct, explain, and critically assess philosophical arguments in writing.
- discuss difficult philosophical issues in a clear, articulate, and respectful way.

The keys to success in this course are to keep up with assigned readings, to attend and participate regularly in class, and to seek out additional help, either from your TA, me, or other students, if needed. *If you do these things, you will not be assigned anything for which you are unprepared.*

## **COURSE READINGS**

All required readings for this course will be made available on Canvas. Additional optional readings may be posted on Canvas, and students looking for further reading on a particular topic are also encouraged to consult the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy ([plato.stanford.edu](http://plato.stanford.edu)).

Philosophical texts can be dense and difficult to read, so I suggest that you print out the assigned readings and read them slowly and carefully—and you might even need to read them more than once!

## **EVALUATION**

The assessments in this course are aimed at helping students to achieve the knowledge- and skills-based objectives of this course, particularly the philosophical skills of carefully reading difficult

texts, reconstructing and critically assessing arguments in writing, and presenting and discussing complex issues with others. (Note: Students in the writing intensive recitation should consult that syllabus for their course assessments.)

| Assignment                 | Weight | Dates                             |
|----------------------------|--------|-----------------------------------|
| Quizzes                    | 10%    |                                   |
| Short Writing Assignment 1 | 10%    | Assigned: Sept. 12; Due: Sept. 19 |
| Short Writing Assignment 2 | 10%    | Assigned: Oct. 17; Due: Oct. 24   |
| Paper                      | 20%    | Assigned: Nov. 7; Due: Nov. 21    |
| Midterm Exam               | 20%    | Oct. 10                           |
| Final Exam                 | 20%    | TBA                               |
| Recitation Participation   | 10%    |                                   |

**Quizzes:** Succeeding in this course requires doing the readings in a careful, thorough, and critical way. During the semester there will be six short in-class quizzes covering the assigned reading *for that class*. Your lowest quiz grade will be dropped, and the remaining five will together count for 10% of your final grade. The date of the first quiz will be announced beforehand, but the remaining five quizzes will be unannounced. Make-up arrangements will only be made for absences due to serious and documented circumstances (about which consult your TA).

**Short Writing Assignments:** The ability to clearly articulate a view or argument and critically assess it in writing is a central skill in philosophy (and one that transfers across disciplines and professions). In order to help develop this skill, you will be asked to complete two short writing assignments (350-500 words each). The first will focus on *explaining* an argument, and the second will focus on *objecting* to an argument. These short writing assignments are each worth 10% of your final grade. The first will be assigned on Sept. 12 and due on Sept. 19, and the second will be assigned on Oct. 17 and due on Oct. 24. Short writing assignments are to be submitted on Canvas by 11:59pm on the due date.

**Paper:** You will also be asked to write one longer paper that *combines* these skills of explanation and critical evaluation. This paper (5-6 pages, standard formatting) will account for 20% of your final grade, and it will be assigned on Nov. 7 and due on Nov. 21. The paper is to be submitted on Canvas by 11:59pm on the due date.

**Exams:** There will be a midterm exam and a final exam each worth 20% of your final grade. The format of the exams and the date of the final exam will be announced later in the semester.

**Recitation Participation:** Civil discussion—asking and answering questions, making sug-

gestions, raising problems, etc.—is not just a key skill in philosophy, it is one of the primary ways of *doing* philosophy. You will work on developing this skill in recitation, and your recitation grade, as assessed by your TA, will account for 10% of your final grade.

### **LATE POLICY**

Late assignments will be penalized one-third of a letter grade (e.g., from A to A-) per day. However, exceptions may be made for serious circumstances: Get in touch with your TA or me, if you encounter difficulties. *If you are seeking an extension on an assignment, contact your TA first.*

### **INCLUSIVITY & ACCESSIBILITY**

Philosophy asks difficult and fundamental questions about being human. As such, philosophy is relevant to everyone, and everyone has the resources to contribute meaningfully. Our collective inquiry is further enhanced by the diversity of perspectives we bring, and I am committed to making this classroom a welcoming and inclusive environment in which we can learn from each other. I hope that everyone feels comfortable contributing their questions, ideas, and opinions, and I expect everyone to advance this aim by treating each other with respect and bringing an attitude of open-minded curiosity. Please feel free to get in touch with me concerning ways to improve your academic success in this course. If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both me and the Office of Disability Resources and Services, 140 William Pitt Union, (412) 648-7890, as early as possible in the term. Disability Resources and Services will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course.

### **ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

Cheating/plagiarism is a serious offense and directly contradicts the aims of this course in developing *your own* critical and analytical skills: It will not be tolerated. Students suspected of violating the University of Pittsburgh Policy on Academic Integrity, noted below, will be required to participate in the outlined procedural process as initiated by the instructor. A minimum sanction of a zero score for the quiz, exam or paper will be imposed. (For the full Academic Integrity policy, go to [www.provost.pitt.edu/info/ai1.html](http://www.provost.pitt.edu/info/ai1.html).)

### **EMAIL**

I will do my best to respond to emails within 48 hours. However, please consult this syllabus before asking questions concerning course policy, and please come see me in office hours to

discuss questions of philosophical substance—I'm more than happy to discuss these things with you, but it can be difficult to do so by email!

*University Policy:* Each student is issued a University e-mail address (username@pitt.edu) upon admittance. This e-mail address may be used by the University for official communication with students. Students are expected to read e-mail sent to this account on a regular basis. Failure to read and react to University communications in a timely manner does not absolve the student from knowing and complying with the content of the communications. The University provides an e-mail forwarding service that allows students to read their e-mail via other service providers (e.g., Hotmail, AOL, Yahoo). Students that choose to forward their e-mail from their pitt.edu address to another address do so at their own risk. If e-mail is lost as a result of forwarding, it does not absolve the student from responding to official communications sent to their University e-mail address. To forward e-mail sent to your University account, go to <http://accounts.pitt.edu>, log into your account, click on Edit Forwarding Addresses, and follow the instructions on the page. Be sure to log out of your account when you have finished. (For the full E-mail Communication Policy, go to [www.bc.pitt.edu/policies/policy/09/09-10-01.html](http://www.bc.pitt.edu/policies/policy/09/09-10-01.html).)

## SCHEDULE OF TOPICS & READINGS

*Schedule, topics, and assignment due dates are subject to change.*

| WK.                                 | DATE     | TOPIC & READING                                                                                          | ASSIGNMENTS           |
|-------------------------------------|----------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>PART I: Challenges to Ethics</b> |          |                                                                                                          |                       |
| 1                                   | Aug. 27  | Introduction                                                                                             |                       |
|                                     | Aug. 29  | <i>Self-interest &amp; motivation:</i> Feinberg, "Psychological Egoism"                                  |                       |
| 2                                   | Sept. 3  | <i>Self-interest &amp; ethics:</i> Rachels, "Ethical Egoism"                                             |                       |
|                                     | Sept. 5  | <i>Culture &amp; universal ethical principles:</i> Rachels, "The Challenge of Cultural Relativism"       |                       |
| <b>PART II: Utilitarianism</b>      |          |                                                                                                          |                       |
| 3                                   | Sept. 10 | <i>Utilitarianism I:</i> Mill, <i>Utilitarianism</i> (Selections)                                        |                       |
|                                     | Sept. 12 | <i>Utilitarianism II:</i> Hare, "What is Wrong with Slavery"                                             | <b>SWA 1 Assigned</b> |
| 4                                   | Sept. 17 | <i>Applying utilitarianism - non-human animals:</i> Norcross, "Puppies, Pigs, and People"                |                       |
|                                     | Sept. 19 | <i>Applying utilitarianism - famine relief:</i> Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality"                | <b>SWA 1 Due</b>      |
| <b>PART III: Deontology</b>         |          |                                                                                                          |                       |
| 5                                   | Sept. 24 | <i>Challenging utilitarianism - murder:</i> Anscombe, "Mr. Truman's Degree"                              |                       |
|                                     | Sept. 26 | <i>Ethical action &amp; intention:</i> Foot, "The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect" |                       |
| 6                                   | Oct. 1   | <i>Deontology I - a good will:</i> Kant, <i>Groundwork</i> , Section I (selections)                      |                       |
|                                     | Oct. 3   | <i>Deontology II - the categorical imperative:</i> Kant, <i>Groundwork</i> , Section II (selections)     |                       |
| 7                                   | Oct. 8   | <i>Applying deontology:</i> Korsgaard, "The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil"                     |                       |
|                                     | Oct. 10  | <b>MIDTERM EXAM</b>                                                                                      |                       |

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| 7 | Oct. 15 | FALL BREAK: NO CLASS |
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**PART IV: The Good Life & Virtue Ethics**

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|    | Oct. 17 | <i>Moral perfection &amp; the good life:</i> Wolf, "Moral Saints"                                             | <b>SWA 2 Assigned</b> |
| 9  | Oct. 22 | <i>The meaning of life I - absurdity:</i> Nagel, "The Absurd"                                                 |                       |
|    | Oct. 24 | <i>The meaning of life II - meaningful activity:</i> Wolf, "Happiness and Meaning"                            | <b>SWA 2 Due</b>      |
| 10 | Oct. 29 | <i>Virtue ethics I - the virtues:</i> Aristotle, <i>NE</i> I-II (selections)                                  |                       |
|    | Oct. 31 | <i>Virtue ethics II - happiness:</i> Aristotle, <i>NE</i> X (selections)                                      |                       |
| 11 | Nov. 5  | ELECTION DAY: REMOTE CLASS (TBA)                                                                              |                       |
|    | Nov. 7  | <i>Happiness &amp; pleasure:</i> Epicurus, <i>Letter to Menoeceus</i> ; Cicero, <i>On Ends</i> I (selections) | <b>Paper Assigned</b> |

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**PART V: Death**

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| 12 | Nov. 12 | <i>Death is not bad:</i> Lucretius, <i>On the Nature of Things</i> (selections)           |                  |
|    | Nov. 14 | <i>Death is bad:</i> Nagel, "Death"                                                       |                  |
| 13 | Nov. 19 | <i>Against immortality:</i> Williams, "The Makropulos Case"                               |                  |
|    | Nov. 21 | <i>Caring about what happens after death:</i> Scheffler, <i>The Afterlife</i> , Lecture I | <b>Paper Due</b> |
| —  | Nov. 26 | THANKSGIVING BREAK: NO CLASS                                                              |                  |
|    | Nov. 28 | THANKSGIVING BREAK: NO CLASS                                                              |                  |
| 14 | Dec. 3  | <i>Euthanasia I:</i> Foot, "Euthanasia"                                                   |                  |
|    | Dec. 5  | <i>Euthanasia II:</i> Velleman, "A Right to Self-termination?" (606-620)                  |                  |
| 15 | Dec. 10 | Wrap-up                                                                                   |                  |
|    | TBD     | <b>FINAL EXAM</b>                                                                         |                  |

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