

1889-  
1951



“If a [person] could write a book on Ethics which really *was* a book on Ethics, this book would, with an explosion, destroy all the other books in the world.”

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Lecture on Ethics”

## Honors 394B: ETHICS MATTERS...OR DOES IT?

Fall 2023

### Professor:

Mark Purcell  
mpurcell@uw.edu

### Office Hours:

By appointment—just schedule something with me!

### Course website:

<https://canvas.uw.edu/courses/1666647>

### Introduction to the Course

There are two main aims in this course. The first is to help you develop your *critical literacy* in major debates about ethics and morality. This means really understanding and critically evaluating the various arguments that people make about ethics and morality. The second aim is to help you gain experience formulating, articulating, and applying your own ethical arguments as a member of a larger community.

### Course Goals

- Develop critical literacy in key arguments about ethics and morality.
- Gain experience articulating and applying those arguments and negotiating them with other people.
- Develop a better understanding of how those arguments work in everyday practice.
- Improve academic communication, reading, writing, and analytical skills.

## **Student Responsibilities**

In Honors, students have significant responsibilities, and the success of the course ultimately depends upon how well those responsibilities are met. Your first responsibility is to one another and to one another's education. In this class you and your classmates will generate knowledge together, through discussion. In order for the class to be successful, you must be an active participant in both teaching and learning. In class, each of you will participate by discussing, listening, questioning, and analyzing the material. Outside of class, each of you will participate by carefully reading the material, thinking through it, and writing discussion questions so you are ready for class discussion.

In order to meet the above requirements, of course, you must attend. I expect each student to attend and participate fully in every class. Your participation in class discussion will be evaluated for every class. To be successful in this respect, of course, you must arrive on time. This means *at or before* 10:30. Not *around* 10:30.

## **Instructor Responsibilities**

I am responsible for setting the learning context for the course. That means establishing much of the structure of the course – readings, assignments, and so on – so that you are best able to develop your critical literacy in ethics. I will also work to make sure that the learning environment is a safe, respectful, and productive environment for all of us. If you are concerned that these standards are not being met, please don't hesitate to speak to me so that we can find ways to resolve the problem.

I am also responsible for providing timely and considered feedback on course assignments. I will also be available to answer questions about the material, provide advice and information, and otherwise aid students in their learning beyond our class sessions.

Lastly, I am responsible for assigning final credit for the course, as well as for assigning your final course grade.

## **Assessment**

Your final assessment in this course will be based on your performance on the following:

<i>Item</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Date Due</i>
Participation	30	Every class
Writing about the Reading	25	Every class
Discussion Questions	15	Every class
Midterm Essay	15	November 13 at noon
Final Essay	15	December 13 at noon
Total	100	

## **Course Readings**

Readings are available in a PDF document on the course canvas site.

## Academic Integrity

The University takes academic misconduct – cheating and plagiarism – very seriously. So do I. Both are violations of the University’s Student Conduct Code, and so I am required to report them immediately to the University’s Office of Community Standards & Student Conduct. Such violations *do* happen in Honors, and it is my responsibility to report them when they do. So: do not cheat or plagiarize.

This may seem obvious, but just so we are clear: **cheating** is using the work or ideas of others to complete your assignments instead of doing the work yourself. **Plagiarism** is representing the work of others as your own without giving appropriate credit.

At this point in human history, one issue needs special mention. Artificial intelligence tools based on generative large language models (e.g. ChatGPT, among others) pose a grave threat to academic integrity. These tools have only been available to us for a short time, and currently not even their creators understand their power – for good and for evil. And so, for this course, you should not use them in any capacity.

If you have any questions about academic integrity, if you are at all unsure what is OK or not OK, don’t hesitate to ask! I am happy to talk about it.

## Course Schedule

Week 0:	
Thursday, September 28	Introduction to Course
Week 1:	
Tuesday, October 3	<p><b>Topic:</b> Introduction to Consequentialist Approaches</p> <p><b>At-home reading:</b> Almeder, R. (2000) <i>Human Happiness And Morality: A Brief Introduction to Ethics</i>, Amherst, NY, Prometheus Books., pp. 23-49</p> <p><b>At-home assignment:</b> Read the reading, and Discussion Question #1</p> <p><b>In-class work:</b> Writing about the Reading #1</p>
Thursday, October 5	<p><b>Topic:</b> Introduction to Deontological Approaches</p> <p><b>At-home reading:</b> Almeder, pp. 49-89</p> <p><b>At-home assignment:</b> Read the reading, and Discussion Question #2</p> <p><b>In-class work:</b> Writing about the Reading #2</p>
Week 2:	
Tuesday, October 10	<p><b>Topic:</b> Platonic (Absolutist) Ethics</p> <p><b>At-home reading:</b> Plato, selections from <i>Gorgias</i> (the introduction is included and recommended)</p> <p><b>At-home assignment:</b> Read the reading, and Discussion Question #3</p> <p><b>In-class work:</b> Writing about the Reading #3</p>
Thursday, October 12	<p><b>Topic:</b> Platonic (Absolutist) Ethics</p> <p><b>At-home reading:</b> Plato, <i>Euthyphro</i> (the introduction is included and recommended)</p> <p><b>At-home assignment:</b> Read the reading, and Discussion Question #4</p> <p><b>In-class work:</b> Writing about the Reading #4</p>
Week 3:	
Tuesday, October 17	<p><b>Topic:</b> Virtue Ethics</p> <p><b>At-home reading:</b> Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>, Book I (the Crisp introduction to Aristotle is included and recommended (but be aware that it is long, so if you are at all pressed for time, save it for Aristotle himself))</p> <p><b>At-home assignment:</b> Read the reading, and Discussion Question #5</p> <p><b>In-class work:</b> Writing about the Reading #5</p>

Thursday, October 19	<p><b>Topic:</b> Virtue Ethics  <b>At-home reading:</b> Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>, Book II  <b>At-home assignment:</b> Read the reading, and Discussion Question #6  <b>In-class work:</b> Writing about the Reading #6</p>
<b>Week 4:</b>	
Tuesday, October 24	<p><b>Topic:</b> Natural Law  <b>At-home reading:</b> St. Thomas Aquinas, <i>Summa Theologica</i>, First Part of the Second Part, Questions 90-108 (the McDermott introduction is included and recommended)  <b>At-home assignment:</b> Read the reading, and Discussion Question #7  <b>In-class work:</b> Writing about the Reading #7</p>
Thursday, October 26	<p><b>Topic:</b> Consequentialist Ethics  <b>At-home reading:</b> Mill, <i>Utilitarianism</i>, Chapters 1-2 (the Pojman introduction to Mill is included and recommended)  <b>At-home assignment:</b> Read the reading, and Discussion Question #8  <b>In-class work:</b> Writing about the Reading #8</p>
<b>Week 5:</b>	
Tuesday, October 31	<p><b>Topic:</b> Deontological Ethics  <b>At-home reading:</b> Kant, <i>Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals</i>, Preface; Chapter 1; Chapter 2, pp. 74-80 (the Pojman introduction to Kant is included and recommended)  <b>At-home assignment:</b> Read the reading, and Discussion Question #9  <b>In-class work:</b> Writing about the Reading #9</p>
Thursday, November 2	<p><b>Topic:</b> Deontological Ethics  <b>At-home reading:</b> Kant, <i>Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals</i>, Chapter 2, pp. 80-102  <b>At-home assignment:</b> Read the reading, and Discussion Question #10  <b>In-class work:</b> Writing about the Reading #10</p>
<b>Week 6:</b>	
Tuesday, November 7	<p><b>Topic:</b> Emotivist Ethics  <b>At-home reading:</b> Hume, <i>Treatise of Human Nature</i>, Book 3, Part 1, Sections 1 &amp; 2 (both the Pojman and Rachels introductions to Hume are included and recommended)  <b>At-home assignment:</b> Read the reading, and Discussion Question #11  <b>In-class work:</b> Writing about the Reading #11</p>

Thursday, November 9	<p><b>Topic:</b> Nietzschean Ethics</p> <p><b>At-home reading:</b> <i>Beyond Good and Evil</i>, Preface and Part 1 (the Welchman introduction to Nietzsche is included and recommended)</p> <p><b>At-home assignment:</b> Read the reading, and Discussion Question #12</p> <p><b>In-class work:</b> Writing about the Reading #12</p>
<b>Week 7:</b>	
Monday November 13	Midterm Essay due at noon!
Tuesday, November 14	<p><b>Topic:</b> Nietzschean Ethics</p> <p><b>At-home reading:</b> Nietzsche, from <i>On the Genealogy of Morals</i>, Preface and First Essay (the Ansell-Pearson introduction to <i>On the Genealogy of Morals</i> is included and recommended)</p> <p><b>At-home assignment:</b> Read the reading, and Discussion Question #13</p> <p><b>In-class work:</b> Writing about the Reading #13</p>
Thursday, November 16	<p><b>Topic:</b> Ethics of Care</p> <p><b>At-home reading:</b> Noddings, <i>Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics</i>, Introduction and Chapter 4 [Optional Reading: Tong, <i>Feminist Ethics</i> (a good intro to the many approaches in FE)]</p> <p><b>At-home assignment:</b> Read the reading, and Discussion Question #14</p> <p><b>In-class work:</b> Writing about the Reading #14</p>
<b>Week 8:</b>	
Tuesday, November 21	<p><b>Topic:</b> Gender in Moral Evaluation</p> <p><b>At-home reading:</b> Gilligan, <i>In a Different Voice</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction and Chapter 1, pp. 1-23</li> <li>• Selections from Chapter 2, pp. 312-319</li> </ul> <p><b>At-home assignment:</b> Read the reading, and Discussion Question #15</p> <p><b>In-class work:</b> Writing about the Reading #15</p>
Thursday, November 23 and 24	No Class: Thanksgiving and Native American Heritage Day
<b>Week 9:</b>	

Tuesday, November 28	<p><b>Topic:</b> Feminist...Ethics?</p> <p><b>At-home reading:</b> Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa”</p> <p><b>At-home assignment:</b> Read the reading, and Discussion Question #16</p> <p><b>In-class work:</b> Writing about the Reading #16</p>
Thursday, November 30	<p><b>Topic:</b> Intersectional Ethics</p> <p><b>At-home reading:</b> Crenshaw, “Intersectionality and Identity Politics”</p> <p><b>At-home assignment:</b> Read the reading, and Discussion Question #17</p> <p><b>In-class work:</b> Writing about the Reading #17</p>
<b>Week 10:</b>	
Tuesday, December 5	<p><b>Topic:</b> Feminist/Queer/Trans Ethics</p> <p><b>At-home reading:</b> Butler, “Bodily Vulnerability, Coalitional Politics”</p> <p><b>At-home assignment:</b> Read the reading, and Discussion Question #18</p> <p><b>In-class work:</b> Writing about the Reading #18</p>
Thursday December 7	<p><b>Topic:</b> Feminist/Mestiza/Queer Ethics</p> <p><b>At-home reading:</b> Anzaldua, “<i>La Conciencia de la Mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness</i>”</p> <p><b>At-home assignment:</b> Read the reading, and Discussion Question #19</p> <p><b>In-class work:</b> Writing about the Reading #19</p>
<b>Exam Week</b>	
Monday, December 11 10:30a-12:20p	<p><b>Topic:</b> Retrospective</p> <p><b>At-home reading:</b> None</p> <p>Note: we do not have an exam during this period. We do, however, have <i>class</i>, probably our most important class, in which we make sense of the overall lessons we have learned about ethics.</p>
Wednesday, December 13	Final Essay is due at noon!

## **Participation**

As the “student responsibilities” section above makes clear, participation makes up a significant portion of your course grade. It is important. And there is no way around participating. As the syllabus lays out, in this class we will generate knowledge together by reading the reading and then discussing it in class. Each of you has a *responsibility* to others to share your ideas and insights. That means you need to read the reading thoroughly and participate actively in class discussion. If you do not actively listen and share your questions and ideas with everyone, they can’t benefit from what you have to offer. Each of you has important questions and ideas to share that we can all learn from. Therefore, since you all have something important to contribute, you all have a responsibility to contribute it.

So, the strategy for participation is this: do not hesitate to share your thoughts. Do not think that they have to be fully formed and 100% defensible before you offer them. Do not think that they have to be brilliant or dazzling. Do not think you should remain quiet because you have different ideas about a topic than most others in the class (that’s when we need you most). And, most importantly, do not think that you have to *know* before you speak. *Honest questions and true struggles within yourself that you have not yet resolved are an excellent way to contribute.*

Remember also that *listening* is as important as talking. Asking *genuine* questions – for which you have not already decided on an answer – is a good way to listen. If you ask a question you do not already have an answer for, you will genuinely want to *hear* what others have to say. The best thing for discussion is for us to develop true *dialogues* in which you engage in depth with the comments and questions of others. We want to avoid class discussions that consist of a series of unrelated monologues. So, be *curious* about what others have to say.

You will be graded on participation class-by-class. Effective participation in a given class period is not measured by how much you talk. If you consistently share your ideas, questions, arguments, and doubts in an honest effort to explore the material in the spirit of intellectual curiosity, you will receive a good grade for participation.

I understand that oral participation in class is a struggle for some. I am willing to explore any and all ways to help you participate. If you feel uncomfortable with speaking in class, for whatever reason, you should come talk to me so we can think of ways to make it more comfortable. I stand ready to help you find ways to speak, but the responsibility for participating is yours.



## **Writing about the Reading**

### **Overview**

The idea of this assignment is to help you develop your own critical understanding of the reading so that you are more prepared to discuss it with others.

### **In-Class Writing**

In the first 15 minutes of class, you will write an answer to a specific question I pose about the reading. Each reading is different, and so each question is tailored to its reading. In general, your answer to the question should not be more than 150 words. You are welcome to consult the reading (and *only* the reading) as you formulate your answer. Write your answer on the same page as your discussion question assignment.

In the last 10 minutes of class, having discussed the reading deeply with others, you will write a *revised* answer to the question. As with your initial answer, your revised answer should not be more than 150 words. You are welcome to consult the reading and your notes from discussion as you formulate your answer. Write your revised answer on the same page as your discussion question assignment.

### **Grading**

Both your initial answer and your revision will be taken into account when I grade the assignment. In your initial answer, I am looking for you to effectively communicate a solid understanding of the reading based on your close examination of that reading. In the second answer, I am interested in how your understanding of the reading has developed as a result of our discussion in class.

The entire assignment will be graded on a scale of 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest).

## **Discussion Questions**

For each class discussion, you will write a discussion question about the reading that prompts others to discuss something you feel is a pressing issue in the reading. Your question should be written in a way that generates lively discussion.

Good discussion questions are “open-ended.” They have a complex answer and/or a range of possible answers. They are not “closed-ended,” meaning that there is a particular, discrete answer. Good discussion questions are also genuine. That means you have not already made up your mind what the answer is. For example if you ask, “Is rational thought the best way to do ethics?” and you really have not made up your mind whether rational thought is the best way, your question is genuine. You are really *asking*, and so you are likely to generate really good discussion among others who are similarly unsure of the answer. If, on the other hand, you ask, “Kant can't really believe rational thought is the best way to do ethics, can he?!” you have made up your mind that rational thought is *not* the best way to do ethics. You are really *telling*, not asking. People are less likely to respond and discuss the issue. So, for the purposes of these discussion questions, *ask*, don't tell. Moreover, your discussion question can be either descriptive or normative. *Descriptive* questions ask about what actually is happening in the reading, or in the world. Examples: “What role does reason play in Hume's ethics?” or “What does Mill mean by higher pleasure?” *Normative* questions, on the other hand, ask what *should* be going on in the reading, or in the world. For example, the genuine question above, about whether we should use reason to do ethics, is normative. Normative questions open up the issue of values, of what people think the world should be like.

## **Format**

Your question should be typed and fit on one page, with your name, the date, and the number of the discussion question. Print this page and bring it to class, so you can refer to it during discussion. Turn it in at the end of class.

## **Grading**

In grading your question, I will be looking for two things:

- whether your question is *effective*, that is, whether it is likely to generate productive discussion in class
- whether your question is *on point*, that is, whether it gets at an issue that is central to the argument in the reading

The assignment will be graded on a scale of 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest).

## **Late Policy**

Since these are questions that are designed to help you effectively discuss the reading in class, and they are due at the end of that class, they cannot serve their purpose if they are late. Therefore, I cannot accept late discussion questions for credit. However, I am always happy to read and give feedback on work done after the fact to help you develop your critical literacy, so don't hesitate to turn an assignment in if you have completed it, but it is after the deadline.

## **Midterm Essay**

Throughout the quarter you will have lots of *short* engagements with ethical ideas and ethical cases. The purpose of this assignment is produce a more *sustained* work – an essay – that makes an argument for a particular way to approach ethics.

The essay should address this question: among the approaches to ethics we have examined in the first part of the course – Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Mill, Kant, Hume – which is, in your estimation, the best way to think about ethics? *Why* is that way the best? In making your case, use concrete examples to show how your chosen idea effectively addresses actual ethical decisions that matter in the world today.

### *Format*

The word maximum is 2000 words. Please use a sane 12pt font, double-space, one-inch margins, number the pages, put your name on it, have a title, and upload a digital version to the course canvas site.

The essay is due Monday, November 13 at noon.

### *Grading*

In grading your essay, I will focus particularly on:

- the quality and depth of your analysis of the ethical idea you are advocating
- how convincing your argument is for that ethical idea
- how effectively you use concrete examples

## **Final Essay**

In the second part of the course we read a series of authors (Nietzsche, Noddings, Gilligan, Cixous, Crenshaw, Butler, Anzaldua) who both draw on and call into question the ethical ideas we read in the first part of the course. Among those authors in the second part of the course, whose approach is, in your estimation, the best way to think about ethics? *Why* is that approach the best? Is this second-part idea better than the first-part idea you advocated in your midterm essay? *Why* or *why not*? As you did in your midterm essay, use examples to show how your chosen ethical idea effectively addresses actual ethical decisions that matter in the world today.

### *Format*

The word maximum is 2000 words. Please use a sane 12pt font, double-space, one-inch margins, number the pages, put your name on it, have a title, and upload a digital version to the course canvas site.

Due Wednesday, December 13 at noon.

### *Grading*

In grading your essay, I will focus particularly on:

- the quality and depth of your analysis of the ethical idea you are advocating
- how convincing your argument is for that ethical idea
- how convincing is your argument comparing this ethical idea to the idea you chose for the midterm essay
- how effectively you use concrete examples

## **Some Concrete Ethical Cases**

Here are some examples of ethical issues that are currently being debated in the world today. These might help prompt some ideas for discussion in class and for your essay. There are, of course, many other cases we might discuss as well.

### **Cities and Urban Planning**

What rules should govern how police use violence against citizens?

Is gentrification OK if it is generating economic growth? Why/not?

<https://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2014/12/27/373284989/icymi-2014-soccer-field-standoff-highlights-gentrification-tension>

Is it OK for planners to tell people how to act by setting planning rules, if it is for their own good?

Are autonomous cars a good idea?

Should the City expand space for bicycles and pedestrians even if it reduces space for cars and worsens traffic?

### **International Relations**

Should the government use torture if it will help thwart terrorist plots?

Should the government spy on personal communications to thwart terrorist plots?

Is it right for one government to hack another?

Should the government pay to get hostages back?

[http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/28/world/middleeast/the-cost-of-the-us-ban-on-paying-for-hostages.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/28/world/middleeast/the-cost-of-the-us-ban-on-paying-for-hostages.html?_r=0)

Should the U.S. government re-intervene in Afghanistan as women's rights are curtailed?

Should the U.S. government use drones to summarily execute other (probable) enemies?

Should less-developed countries be asked to restrict their carbon emissions?

### **Science/Technology**

Should we manipulate the genes of non-human species?

Do non-human species have rights?

Should we try to use gene therapy to cure diseases in humans?

Should we aim to eradicate cancer? Disease in general? What if we need them somehow?

Should we give large tech corporations access to our data in exchange for the conveniences their services provide?

Is hacking OK? When?

Should we regulate social media?

Should we regulate the use of artificial intelligence?

Should we prevent mis/disinformation online?

Should we regulate how large tech companies gather data on users?

### **Social**

Should the government (or other authorities, like the University of Washington) mandate that people get vaccinated?

Is health care a right?

Should parents have liberty to discipline their children as they see fit?

Should others intervene in cases of domestic violence? If so, how and why?

Is affirmative action needed?

Is abortion ethical?

Is the death penalty ethical?

## Appendix

### **Health Information: COVID-19**

As you know, UW is continuing its status as a fully in-person campus. Obviously, everyone wants to do this as safely as possible. The UW has a plan for ensuring the safety of all students, faculty, and staff this quarter. The main hub for information about this plan is <https://www.washington.edu/coronavirus/>.

The primary points of this plan are:

- UW does not require **vaccinations** for either students or faculty. It does very highly encourage you to stay up to date on your vaccines.
- **Masks** are optional inside most UW buildings. The University asks that you respect individuals' choices regarding mask wearing.
- **Testing** is available on campus (<https://www.washington.edu/coronavirus/testing/>). You are encouraged to get tested if you have been exposed to COVID-19 or are experiencing symptoms.
- As with any infectious disease, you should not come to campus if you are experiencing symptoms of COVID-19.

Everyone in the class is expected to participate fully in this plan so that we can keep each other safe.

### **Religious Accommodation**

Washington state law requires that UW develop a policy for accommodation of student absences or significant hardship due to reasons of faith or conscience, or for organized religious activities. The UW's policy, including more information about how to request an accommodation, is available at Religious Accommodations Policy (<https://registrar.washington.edu/staffandfaculty/religious-accommodations-policy/>). Accommodations must be requested within the first two weeks of this course using the Religious Accommodations Request Form (<https://registrar.washington.edu/students/religious-accommodations-request/>).